

ABOUT NORTH AYRSHIRE MONITOR FARM

Farm name **Girtridge Farm, Drybridge Road, Dundonald, Kilmarnock, KA2 9BX**
Meeting **Business Group Open Meeting - 21 people in attendance**
Meeting Date **Thursday 28th November 2019 at Kirkstyle Inn & Montalt Farm**
Next Meeting **Wednesday 18th December 2019 at 7pm Auchincruive**
Report date **Wednesday 13th December 2019**

INTRODUCTION

Visit: Montalt Farm, Perth, by kind permission of the Ritchie family. Montalt farm consists of 146 ha of owned improved pasture and a further 100 ha of rough hill rented on a 5-year agreement from a local estate. The ground rises from 850-1,000 feet above sea level, with a projected rainfall of more than 50 inches for 2019. John Ritchie runs a flock of crossbred ewes and a suckler herd that are put to Saler bulls. Both the cattle and the sheep are run on a rotational grazing system. Performance of the system is monitored through membership of groups such as North Graze+ benchmarking and Grasscheck GB.

MONTALT VISIT

In the past at Montalt, the cattle were Simmental cows at around 850 kg put to a Charolais bull, with an 80-85% calving rate. The sheep flock consisted of 500 bought-in mules averaging 78 kg. 1,000 bales of straw were used each year and pot ale was bought in. In 2012/13, after a meeting with Trevor Cook, John's perspective was changed and he joined a grazing group. John decided to change the breeds used in both the sheep flock and cattle herd to those that were more suited to a grass-based system, with an aim of improving output with lower inputs. The labour at Montalt is John, his father George and his wife Alix (who also works at QMS part-time). When George retires there are no plans to replace that labour unit so the farm is becoming more streamlined to reduce labour requirements.

The Breeding Sheep Enterprise:

There are now 750 crossbred ewes, a mixture of Texel, Aberfield, Logie Durno and Cheviot crosses, with an average mature weight of 68.5 kg. Tups are put in with the ewes for 28 days at a ratio of 1 per 75 ewes. Scanning would usually be around 190% with a 1.8% barren rate, but in 2019, following a year of poor weather including "The Beast from The East", the scanning rate was 175%, with 148% lamb survival at marking time. John's target is for lamb losses to be below 15% from scanning to weaning. All ewes are lambed outside from 12 April, except the triplet-bearing ewes which are lambed inside. A small number of triplet lambs are twinned on to ewes and the rest are reared on a milk machine. Lambs are weaned at 90 days, finished on grass and forage rape and sold deadweight to Scotbeef. The target weight is 19 kg

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deadweight at a grade R3L. 81% of lambs sold to Scotbeef were on target with over 50% being U grades. Ewes are body condition scored (BCS) throughout the year. Ewes above a BCS of 3 at weaning are used to tidy up paddocks and those below are put on to rotation. Any not up to a BCS of 3 after 5 weeks are culled; in 2019 this was 22 ewes. From mid-January to mid-March ewes are put on rocky fields and fed silage in ring feeders. One ring feeder is allocated per 40 ewes to allow shyer ewes to get good intakes. In 2019 only 7 tonnes of feed was fed to twin and triplet-bearing ewes. As the sheep numbers have increased by 250 ewes, John has adapted his handling and weighing facilities to accommodate larger numbers. A Prattley 3-way auto-drafter was purchased with the help of grant funding for £10 k, allowing large numbers of lambs to be weighed and sorted in very little time. John said that having used the auto-drafter he would be more than willing to pay for it when factoring in how much time has been saved. Recently John also made a bulk handler for working with sheep, allowing them to be dosed from the outside of the race whilst being held secure.



Figure 1 & 2: Sheep bulk handler demonstration & sheep on rotational grazing system

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The Suckler Herd Enterprise:

At Montalt there is a herd of 85 spring-calving suckler cows comprised of Simmental crosses and Saler crosses all put to Saler bulls. Calving starts the last week in April with all cows calved outside, at an average calving percentage of 96% over the past 5 years. Heifers are run with the bull for 6 weeks at 15 months (to calve at 2 years) if they have reached the target of 380+ kg and have passed a pelvic measurement examination by the vet. John commented that he hasn't had many fail the pelvis examination, as Salers seem to have a naturally larger pelvis. Calves are weaned at 300-320 kg; the bullocks are kept over the winter and sold in March at around 440-450 kg and smaller heifers are grown until 17 months and sold to a repeat customer for autumn bulling. Calves are fed silage plus 1.9 kg of blend, achieving a DLWG of 1 kg. Calves all have EID tags allowing weights to be monitored using a water trough weigh crate that John made, enabling calves to be weighed regularly without any labour requirement. The remaining heifers are bulled; the best are retained and surplus are sold either in-calf or with calves at foot. At weaning, the calf's weight is compared to the weight of the dam. John has a target of 45% efficiency; any cows not achieving this are culled, with John aiming to cull out the bottom 10% of cows each year. Cows are out-wintered on the rough hill and fed silage with a bale un-winder.



Figure 3: Cows out-wintered on hill ground

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Rotational Grazing:

There is now a rotational grazing system in place at Montalt with the original fields split into paddocks of 1-1.3 ha. John uses a Rappa system on a home-made quad trailer to put up fences. This allows mobs of 250 ewes plus their lambs and 35 cows plus their calves to be grazed on 3 day shifts. Sheep are grazed first followed by the cattle in a leader-follower type system. As part of the Grasscheck group, the grass is measured weekly from the beginning of March until November. The budget is for a target average cover of 2,700 kg DM/ha, leaving a residual of 1,300 kg DM/ha mid-January and allowing 120 days of growth before sheep go back on mid-March. The ewes are set stocked at 4-5 ewes per acre from 5 April-10 May for lambing and then the fences are put back up when all lambs have been born. 5.5 tonnes of CAN fertiliser was used in 2019 in split applications to help develop cover, without encouraging too much growth at once, and 75 units of Nitrogen was used on the ground set aside for silage. 180 tonnes of lime was also used to correct pH levels. Through rotational grazing the output at Montalt farm has increased from 380 kg to 540 kg of live weight sold per hectare.



Figure 4: John Ritchie explaining how he set up his electric fencing and split fields into paddocks.

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Conclusion:

The visit to Montalt provoked a lot of discussion between John and the group. As many of the attendees have sheep and suckler cows at home it will have been very interesting for them to hear how production had been increased at Montalt through simple changes that can be implemented on almost any livestock farm. However, there were also honest and frank discussions about mistakes that were made along the way; for example, how John found that in his first grass measuring year he focussed slightly too much on the grass, which negatively impacted the performance of his livestock. John has learnt along the way how far he can push his farm in terms of stocking levels and how the rotational system works best at Montalt. Both the members of the group and John will have taken away useful information that may help inform decisions made in the future.



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