

ABOUT NITHSDALE MONITOR FARM

Farm name - Clonhie Farm, Penpont, Thornhill, DG3 4NB

Meeting Number - 12 Farm business and enterprise mixes Sion Williams, Clonhie -Looking to the future

Meeting Date -Thursday 7th Feb 2019

Next Monitor Farm Meeting – May 2019

Clonhie is a tenanted farm on Buccleuch Estates run by Andrew and Aileen Marchant, new entrants to farming in 2012. Neighbouring Glengar was added to the farm business in 2016 taking the total farmed area to 303ha (800ac) running from 100m to 300m above sea level in the Marrburn valley, in Nithsdale.

Sheep - 900 lambing ewes in 2017 + 240 ewe hogs [not lambed]. The main breeds are North Country Cheviots, Lley cross and Texel X Beltex. 130 Texel crosses lamb from early March inside, with the remaining 770 lambing outside in April. From 2018 all 900 ewes and half the hogs were lambed outside from 1st April

Cattle – a small herd of Luings is being established with the first calves being born in 2017. However, summer grazing cows and calves are taken in and store cattle are wintered in the sheds as well.

Red Deer – Deer fencing was completed, and 60 red deer hinds introduced to Clonhie in February 2018. This enterprise is a joint venture with Buccleuch Estate. The plan is to increase breeding hind numbers to 200 and are currently at 150 hinds.

Management Group is chaired by local farmer Colin Forsyth, Bennan, and includes Nithsdale Vet Alistair Padkin, David Wilson, Marwhirn; Robert Osborne, Castlehill; John Wildman, Glenkiln; Alisdair Davidson, Poldean; Colin Cuthbertson, Thripland and Andrew Best of Watsons Seeds.



There's plenty of grass in the 1 ha paddocks, but we will run out and need to use silage to get to lambing time. Come on Andrew, we can smell the mince and tatties . . .

KEY MESSAGES

- Winter grazing plans have worked out as expected. Andrew will have a gap of ~ 4 weeks to fill before lambing time but have enough good silage available to do the job.
- Sheep KPIs demonstrate effects of weather in spring & summer 2018 and fluke challenge on flock
- Sheep Gross Margin reflects above challenges but indicates potential once output rises and soil management and forage utilisation are optimised
- Sion Williams, Bowhill Farming Ltd - Enterprise gross & net margin data, benchmarking with others and your own previous performance records is key to driving performance, profit and resilience

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

- September's winter grazing plan has worked out pretty much as Rhidian anticipated. Andrew rotationally grazed all the ewes from weaning right through tugging as grass was so short during & after the summer drought. Since tugging time 590 ewes have been on 1 ha paddocks every 2 days on deferred grass which has been working well on Clonhie. The rest of the ewes are over on Glengar. There will be a gap to fill and the decision was to feed extra silage, which is available on farm, plus some concentrates to keep their nutrition right. Fodder beet may also be an option this year to see the ewes through lambing. Have really missed having a forage crop this winter so definitely want to grow one this year. It makes a real difference to winter feeding and seeing us through to March.
- Andrew discussed their decision to go into red deer. The main points being:-
 - The figures stacked up – good gross margins with a secure and growing demand for venison
 - Contract available to supply venison through First Venison Ltd
 - Fits in well with their interest in grazing animals [in preference to hens or rearing calves]
 - Andrew's previous experience working with deer [he knows what he is getting into and enjoys working with them]
 - Speaking with Buccleuch Estate they discovered that they were looking to establish a herd in the Borders and were keen on investing on the Thornhill side too
 - Found he could be open and work with the estate and all were keen to make it work. Win- win situation where each were bringing important resources to the enterprise making it a good fit.
 - Gut feeling – "Once we knew all the figures, pros and cons we still wanted to do it . . ."

FARMER'S UPDATE

Just when you think you're recovering from a dreadful 2018 and beginning to look forward to a new year, last year comes back to bite you in the bum - AGAIN!

Sheep

- This year's scanning results are disappointing at 145% [down 25% on last year] but with very few yield, indicating that basic fertility was there but they were not in good enough condition. We realise that the effects of the drought lasted into the back end as our grass didn't recover/regrow until late autumn. Ewes were not in great condition at the end of last summer and we continued to lose the odd one right through, which is unusual for us. Just before tugging time we discovered that we have a triclabendazole resistance problem in the ewes. So they were re-dosed as the tups went out. The ewes did improve after that, but it was too late to improve fertility for this season
- Lambs were 2kg lighter at weaning in 2018 than in 2017. After weaning we paddock grazed all the lambs giving them 2- day shifts, which worked really well. Most of them did however need a bit of hard feed just to get that last bit of condition onto them for finishing. We did sell 330 store lambs in August to relieve grazing pressure and another 50, furthest away from finishing, in the New Year
- The cows are all scanned in calf and we got the all clear on the health scheme tests for Johnes We have 12 heifers to put to the bull this year, which will mean a big jump in herd numbers.

Soils & grass/forage crop management

- We are continuing with the liming programme to bring soil pH to 6 or above.
- The 2018 reseed, after 2017/18 kale & swede crop [behind the silage pit] was re-drilled with the same mix including chicory & plantain in August. Costly, but it's much improved and will be OK

- The other 2018 reseed [grass to grass] hasn't done so well and is very patchy. We will need to look at this and decide the best way forward – maybe spray before silage and re-drill?
- Would like to do a forage crop for next winter – discussion and decision for next meeting
- Might also consider rejuvenating/slot seeding a field after silage – to discuss in May too

Red Deer

- 150 hinds went to the stag last year
- We bought another 24 yearling hinds and youngsters in December
- We altered one side of the store cattle shed for the 50 young deer calves, which have settled down very well on haylage and 1kg of 16% cattle cake [they need the copper in cattle cake]
- Red deer metabolism slows down during the winter so it is important to have stags Hinds and youngsters at the right body condition by the end of November, so they are fit to see the winter through. In the second half of February their metabolism begins to speed up again and extra feed will mean they begin to grow and put on weight again, when young males will also begin to grow their first antlers.

FACTS & FIGURES DISCUSSED

Judith discussed figures for:-

- Cattle Key Performance Indicators [KPIs]
 - Compared Clonhie KPIs with QMS Upland suckler herd Average & Top 1/3 data
 - Calving and weaning % are good
 - Weaning weights – if comparison herds are creep feeding calves before sale they can be expected to be a bit heavier than Clonhie calves which are not fed
 - Calf/Cow liveweight ratio is an indicator of cow efficiency. Smaller lighter cows are more likely to be more efficient on this KPI, however be aware if you want a heifer to calve at 2 years old you can select them too small . . .
- Sheep Key Performance Indicators
 - Clonhie weaning % is considerably lower [128% and 119%] than QMS 2017 Average [144%] and top 1/3 [155%]. This is indicative of both the changes needing to be made at Clonhie and the dreadful weather when Andrew was lambing outside in early April last year.
 - Proportions of lambs sold both prime and store are on the low side, again indicative of the grazing season challenges encountered. The £/head received compares well with QMS data
 - The proportion of replacement lambs kept at Clonhie is particularly high, but is indicative of the flock changes underway at present and will settle to more usual levels in a year or two.
 - There is a need to be aware that many of the flocks in the QMS data will not be running a similar system to Clonhie and that Andrew & Aileen are running a numbers system where high %s from intensive indoor lambing systems won't necessarily be comparable . . .
 - These figures indicate the need to improve scanning and marking %s to get output up.
 - If pasture production and utilisation can be improved to target levels lamb growth will reach targets and outputs will be much improved
 - Need to be aware of red deer enterprise using more and more of the better grazing ground and

- consider where sheep numbers should be in future
- Sheep Gross Margins [GM]
 - Pretty much reflect all the comments and discussions already made on the Sheep KPIs
 - Other livestock Expenses and Vet & Med are pretty similar to QMS £/head data. Once the new system is properly in place, and nutrition & health improved, output should rise considerably,
 - while purchased feed and forage & fertiliser costs should also reduce and even out.
 - The QMS figures indicate the opportunity this enterprise has for improving gross margin.
 - Given the Marchant's low fixed costs and determination to keep things this way, they could increase profitability significantly by getting their sheep GM figures above average or top 1/3.

OPPORTUNITIES/CHALLENGES

Sion Williams, Farm Manager at Bowhill Farming Ltd did a presentation on enterprise selection, management and integration at Buccleuch:-

- Business objectives set by the board are 1] to maintain and exceed 10% return on capital employed [including depreciation, but not rent]. A tough ask when you have to pay for every hour of labour on farm – is this a target family farms could aspire to? 2] Improve all enterprises to perform in top 1/3 for the industry – again a challenge for such a large and diversified farm business
- Monitor and compare [benchmark] enterprise performance against QMS industry figures. Monitor overall business performance through Planning to Succeed and Graze plus groups. Learn an enormous amount about how and why group members do what they do from in depth group questions & discussions and have used and adapted so many things on our farms over the years.
- Have taken time to trial and select different sheep breeds to fulfil different roles with in the overall business e.g. Aberdale and Aberfield crosses have different qualities which we are exploiting and managing differently to make best use of the forage growing pattern on farm. Also different tups
- Staff are critical to our success. We pay for every hour of labour and need to make it possible for them to perform well. So we develop systems with their input and have a bonus scheme which is challenging and depends on overall enterprise profitability (compared to QMS data). It's a numbers game for us and we need to continually look for and discuss ways of improving everything.
- Bringing the Anaerobic Digester into the enterprise mix has been a really good way of generating extra income from all of these enterprises. The digestate produced is still excellent fertiliser for the farms so we aren't losing out there either. Just a pity we didn't move a bit quicker before the feed in tariff dropped. Having said that the support has completely gone now.

ACTIONS FOR NEXT MEETING

During Breakout sessions attendees discussed :-

1. Priorities for the Marchants at Clonhie for the next 12 months;
2. Trials that could be carried out at Clonhie this next year and
3. Suggested topics that would be of value and interest to their own businesses at home.

Ideas and suggestions put forward included :-

1. Fluke control, Lambing success, Forage crop, enterprise balance - FARMAX?, lamb marketing options
2. Reseed & rejuvenation trials, Forage crop comparisons, Lamb finishing options & comparisons
3. Fluke, environmental options, Succession & Tax topics, FARMAX scenarios, more on Paddock Grazing

FACILITATOR CONTACT DETAILS

Judith Hutchison: - judith.agridigm@icloud.com ; 07718 919 055
Rhidian Jones: - rjlivestocksystems@btinternet.com ; 07889 182 364

