

ABOUT SHETLAND MONITOR FARM

Farm name **Bigton Farm, Bigton, Shetland, ZE2 9JA**

Meeting Number **18th**

Meeting Date **Saturday 8th February 2020**

Report date **Wednesday 12th February 2020**

Kirsty and Aimee Budge are our Shetland Monitor Farmers, at Bigton farm on the south west of the Shetland mainland.

Land: Two units are run together, covering 305 ha of in by and rough grazing.

Crops: Around 25 ha of spring barley is grown, 4ha of forage rape and about 40ha of silage cut.

Cattle: 82 Shorthorn x Saler cows producing Saler or Charolais x calves which are sold store or finished.

Sheep: 350 Shetland x Cheviot breeding ewes which are put to a Suffolk tup. Replacements are bought in.

Management Group:

Jamie Leslie (Chairman): Graham Fraser, Kirsty Budge, Aimee Budge, Lauraine Manson, Hilary Burgess, Eric Graham, Jim Tait, John Abernethy, Johnina Henderson, John Sandison, Aaron Sinclair, Ronnie Eunson and Matthew Westmoreland

This was the final meeting of the 3 year programme and it was decided to look back on changes made at Bigton and by other members of the Community Group as a result of the monitor farm programme



FARMERS UPDATE

Bigton Farm Update:

Kirsty and Aimee gave a presentation about the changes that had occurred on the monitor farm since the start of the project. They said that the monitor farm project has been an excellent opportunity for them to gain knowledge and experience which under different circumstance they would have got naturally from their dad. The project came at a good time for them, giving a direction and focus at a time initially when we were still very emotional. To put themselves forward for the project was a hard decision at the time but they knew it was a great opportunity both for them and for Shetland as a whole,. They felt we had nothing to lose so only saw it as a positive and they it would be easier to take criticism at this stage since we were just starting to run the farm.

Cattle

The weaning percentage from the suckler cows has risen from 81% in 2016 to a current 93% which is just. Cow numbers have increased from 68 to the bull in 2016 to the current herd of 92 that went to the bull to calf in 2020.

The limiting factor in terms of expanding the suckler herd is the available shed capacity for young cattle. In future they might have to consider selling some of the best calves as weaned calves.

Sheep

Changes have been made regarding where and when ewes are grazed during the year which has helped reduced the loss of both ewes and lambs. Lamb losses are down from 25% in 2016 to 13% in 2019.

The flock has increased from 240 ewes in 2016 to the current 554 ewes and gimmers. A significant part of the increase is down to additional seasonal grazing taken on in 2019. With hill grazing as part of the seasonal grazing the farm has introduced a flock of Shetland ewes that will be used to produce replacements for the flock of cross ewes. The flock consists of 140 Shetland ewes to Shetland tups, 63 Shetland ewes to Cheviot tups and 351 cross ewes to Suffolk tups.

In 2019 261 store lambs averaging 30kg lwt at the time were shipped south for finishing at a cost of 60p/lamb /week. This did not work very well with the lambs failing to grow as expected. A visit to the unit found that there was insufficient grass for the number of lambs being kept (from Bigton and other farms). The lambs were moved to another unit where they have performed better and returns have probably been helped by the improvement in the price/kg as the season has progressed. After costs (keep and 3 deaths) these lambs achieved an average price of £43.79. The 160 lambs retained at home were grazed on silage aftermath, neeps and rape and some were fed some concentrates. So far 132 have been sold and they have achieved an average value of £54.85 after the cost of fodder crops and concentrate feeding.

The significantly better margin left by those kept at home was partly due to the poor performance of those shipped south which failed to grow as expected and then when moved to a different farm the lambs finished quickly at lighter than hoped for weights. The removal of 261 lambs however left a lot of good quality grazing and fodder crops available at home relative to the number of lambs retained. With the additional seasonal land now available a decision will have to be made in future about how many lambs can be retained for finishing and what scope there now is to grow more fodder crops such as neeps and rape. Consideration will also have to be given to selling the strongest lambs in the store ring if the price is strong.

Arable

This year they have sold 37 tonnes of barley compared to 100 tonnes in 2019. The excellent season in 2018 meant that a good yield was harvested early in good condition. The attempt to push for higher yields in 2019 went a bit wrong. The combination of a poorer wet growing season with missing critical times to apply a growth regulators meant that 10 acres of the 60 acres grown lodged badly and had to be harvested as arable silage. From what was combined there was an excellent yield of straw this year.

The plan going forward is to:

- slightly reduce the area of barley being grow
- apply a bit less fertiliser
- Focus on apply a plant growth regulator at the correct time

Hay

In 2019 they cured 1300 small bales of hay but so far there has not been much interest in it meaning they are left with a considerable stock. Things may improve but it has not been helped by the bumper year for grass meaning there have been record quantities of hay and silage made in Shetland in 2019.

Diversification

The monitor farm introduce Shetland Pony tours in 2019 and these went so well that they are considering expanding in to farm tours. In 2019 they had a total of 1659 on the tours and were paid 1.55p per person which has now been increased to £1.60 for 2020. It is providing a good income for a fairly modest commitment in time in a period of the year when they do have the time to spare.

They also participated in Open Farm Sunday in 2019 with 200 people attending over the weekend and people are already signing up to attend in 2020. This is a great way to help educate the public and their families about farming in general and in Shetland in particular.

Work Experience

Bigton have been offering work experience to young people who might be interested in a career in agriculture. Kirsty and Aimee have found this very rewarding watching their confidence grow during their time on the farm.

Beef Boxes

In 2019 the farm started selling beef in boxes by advertising via Facebook generally selling quarters but offering eighths. This worked well and later Derek Hanton compared the margins achieved compared to selling direct to the butcher. They are also thinking of expanding in to boxed lamb in future.

Future Targets

- Cattle
 - 96% calf weaning
 - Extend time in-calf heifers are out by 1 month
 - Increase beef box sales
- Ewes
 - 150% lamb weaning
 - Target light lamb market with Shetland lambs
 - 175% scanning for cross ewes
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- Develop rotational grazing
 - Water infrastructure
 - Improve newly rented land (lime, reseeding, grazing)

Derek Hanton

Derek Hanton went over the Gross Output Analysis for the monitor farm for 2015 to 2018.

The variable cost averaged 26% of Gross Output which is well below the recommended 35% maximum. This suggests that the business is using its inputs such as fertiliser, feed etc. very efficiently.

Labour costs are also very low being almost entirely family labour, averaging 3% of Gross Output compared to a recommended 18% maximum.

The one area of cost that is well above the recommended maximum of 18% of Gross Output is Power and Machinery which averaged 45% of Gross Output over the 4 years. Property and General Overheads are also high at an average of 13% compared to a target of 7-8% but it is the machinery and power costs that are most significantly out of line. Going forward is output can be improved without significantly increasing power and machinery costs than that will help reduce the % and improve the Gross Profit.

The Gross Profit was quite variable over the 4 years ranging from 0% to 24% averaging 13% and falling well short of the 30% target. Efforts will be made to improve the farm output and to reduce the Power and Machinery costs

Sheep

Derek went on to look at the improvement of the sheep flock over the 3 years of the MF programme with a significant reduction in the number of lambs being lost mainly due to changes in management and the way St. Ninian's Isle is used avoiding grazing it heavily with young lambs at foot that are prone to being lost over the cliffs.

Next up for discussion was the finishing of purchased store lambs in 2018 which left an overall margin of £13.10 per lamb for 166 lambs. If spare grazing is available or a fodder crop such as forage rape can be grown this enterprise might easily be worth repeating in future.

Cattle

The weaning percentage for calves from the suckler herd has improved from 81% in 2016 to 93% in 2019 which is a significant improvement and now meets QMS targets.

The growth rate of store cattle over the winter was also discussed and the reason for the dip in growth rates in February has now been realised. As the animals grew their potential silage intake increased but rations were not adjusted quickly enough and as a result the intake of animals which should have been on ad lib silage was being restricted resulting in the drop in growth rates from well over 1 kg/day from weaning through November to just over 0.5kg/day in January recovering back up to over 0.9kg/day in March once the rations had been adjusted. If growth rates can be sustained over the winter there is certainly scope to sell heavier cattle and improve margins. Derek went on to compare the margins for selling store cattle compared to keeping them on for finishing and it looked like a margin of £47 per head in favour of selling store. However as part of the discussion it became clear that this was not comparing like with like. It is generally the larger Charolais cross cattle that are sold store and the animals retained for finishing would not have sold nearly as well in the store ring.

Direct Selling of Boxed Beef

A look at the margins for selling boxed beef revealed that it does give a better return than selling finished cattle to the butcher. To achieve the same return the direct sold beef must gross £1,465 and were generally being sold for £400/qtr. i.e. £1,600 leaving an additional margin of £135. There would appear to be scope to increase the sale price for the boxes of beef which will improve that margin further and give a better return for the time and effort involved in direct marketing.

Kate Rowell, QMS Board Chair

Kate Rowell is a fifth generation farmer running the 750 hectare Hundleshope farm on the Haystoun Estate, where the family have been tenants for 150 years. She runs the hill unit near Peebles with her husband Ed and their four children. Kate and her husband were part of the 2012-2015 monitor farm programme and Kate shared her experiences with the meeting.

For example they successfully worked hard to improve the quality of the silage they made and their success including coming 2nd in an AgriScot silage competition and this success inspired other community group members to do the same one of whom went on to win the same competition a year or two later. The average quality of silage analysed in Peeblesshire improved significantly over the period of the monitor farm programme and the years immediately following the programme.

Not everything tried on their farm worked as well but there were still lessons for the community group members as a whole even when things didn't go as planned. They tried subsoiling but in hindsight they used the wrong type of subsoiler at the wrong time of year in the wrong field with the wrong type of soil. It still provided useful lessons for the Community Group as a whole.

Kate went on from the monitor farm programme to take part in the Scottish Enterprise Rural Leadership Programme and thinks it is one of the best things she ever did and in particular it greatly boosted her confidence.

She warned to watch out for a few things after the monitor farm programme comes to an end. It is very easy to stop or reduce the amount of on farm recording. Your mind-set can change over time and it is important for the community group to stick together and to keep challenging each other. She thinks that this programme benefited from having 9 farms all starting and finishing the programme at the same time.

Kate thinks there will be funding for another monitor farm programme that will have a focus on climate change. Farmers have a great opportunity to make changes that will benefit both climate change and their own farm business.

John Abernethy, Virdahill and Clousta

John runs several crofts on the west side of Shetland and has been a member of both the Community Group and the Management Group for the Shetland monitor farm. John has been an enthusiastic participant in the Monitor farm programme.

John Abernethy picked up on several issues discussed at monitor farm meetings including rotational grazing, soil management, weed control, early weaning of lambs, assessing feed costs and losses from scanning to weaning and then implemented numerous changes in his own business.

In particular due to assessing the costs associated with his flock of cross ewes and considering the commitment they required particularly in terms of labour at lambing time he made the decision to replace all his cross ewes with Shetland ewes. He will strip significant costs from the business by cutting down dramatically the quantity of expensive big bale silage made each year. John calculated that when taking contracting, fertiliser, grass seed etc. into account his silage was costing almost £40 per 750kg bale.

He has also started rotational grazing and feels this has made a big difference to the quality of his available grazing. While so far he has avoided the use of electric fencing he already has sufficient sub-division of his pasture to allow him to frequently move his sheep from one park to another. It improved the grassland without being detrimental to ewe performance and going into the winter of 2017/18 his ewes were in better body condition than normal.

He also adopted early weaning of his lambs which allowed the ewes (no longer lactating) to be used as a tool to eat down rougher pasture in Sept/Oct. Putting them onto this rougher grazing rested the better pasture on the unit and at the same time improved the rougher grazing by encouraging fresh growth.

Looking ahead John feels that there is a good demand for Shetland ewe lambs as breeding replacements and as long as hogg lambs continue to sell well it should make the business financially better off having stripped out significant costs re making silage plus savings in protein supplementation and veterinary treatment of the cross ewes to more than make up for the drop in output value. If it works John will consider switching entirely to Shetland ewes to Shetland tups which would avoid most of the need for labour at lambing releasing up to 6 weeks of John's time. John is a self-employed joiner/builder and freeing up time in the spring will allow him to take on more paid work further improving his overall financial position.

John has been used as a case study and written up as a more detailed themed report "Focus on Crofting" which is available on the QMS website Monitor Farm Hub and can be reached using the following link:
https://www.monitorfarms.co.uk/sites/default/files/a_focus_on_crofting_themed_report_ls.pdf

Eric Graham, Gemista Farm

Eric went over some of the aspects he had taken from the Shetland monitor farm meetings and applied to his own business. He said that the monitor farm had come at a good time for his business for both himself and his son Sean. Eric had moved into farming from a sports retail business around 30 years ago and has built up his business over that time to where it is today. He said it would have been very easy to have continued running his business in the same way he had been but with his son Sean coming into the business the monitor farm programme had given them the impetus to look very carefully and what they were doing and to make changes to improve.

They have adopted some of the rotational grazing aspects and have also gone for earlier weaning of their lambs.

Eric had been aware that from some of the hills he worked that lambs that had looked well in August were much poorer by the time they were weaned in October. Knowing this and hearing about the benefits of early weaning gave them the impetus to give it a go.

Some of these hill lambs were brought in and put onto forage rape and these lambs grew very well. Similar lambs housed and fed concentrates also thrived. A third group put on to excellent silage aftermath did much less well. Initially it was thought that this was down to the grazing being too “rich” for the hill lambs but after further discussion the suspicion is that these hill lambs were being exposed to coccidia oocysts for the first time and were in fact suffering from coccidiosis. This ties up with the fact that some were scouring so bad that they all had to be removed from the aftermath to prevent deaths.

Eric has also tried alternative forages such as Plantain following its discussion at the monitor farm.

Eric also took on to chair the monitor farm sub group Shetland Hill Lamb set up to try and promote and market pure bred Shetland hill lambs. He developed a joint marketing relationships with Farmstock and helps carry out live grading of lambs at the Shetland Mart prior to shipping batches of around 500 lambs south direct to slaughter. Below are the combined weights and grades for two batches of lambs shipped out in time for the Christmas market in 2019:

Very few of the lambs fell outwith the desired specification and after levies and inspection charges averaged just over £40 per lamb. The other deductions for shipping and insurance that came to around £5.40 per lamb leaving a net value of just over £34 per lamb. Many of these lambs would have been worth around £12 or less if sold as stores directly from their mothers. Costs would have varied considerably depending on how they were finished. Concentrate finishing would have been the most expensive at around £12 per lamb. So there is a margin to be made by finishing Shetland Hill Lambs for the Christmas market and if possible cheaper forage crops should be grown to help maximise margins.

No of lambs	Grade	Carcase Weight (kg)
50	O2	10.4
8	O3H	14.9
59	O3L	13.0
52	R2	8.6
11	R3H	14.0
928	R3L	9.8
4	R4L	14.8
1	U3L	10.0

ACTIONS FROM MEETING

QMS offered to explore the possibility for a legacy group to continue, possibly in collaboration with the Young Farmers or other partners. Sarah Millar will look at this and report back.

FACILITATOR CONTACT DETAILS

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