



FARMER LED, FARMER DRIVEN

ROXBURGHSHIRE

Launch Open Meeting Article

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Livestock, arable and work-life balance focus at Roxburghshire Monitor Farm



Tightening the calving period, an even greater focus on outwintering cattle, work-life balance and looking at changes in the arable enterprise came to the fore in the first meeting of the Roxburghshire Monitor Farm at Cowbog Farm, Morbattle near Kelso.

More than 50 farmers and members of the agricultural community gathered for the event at Cowbog, a mixed tenanted farm in the Scottish Borders. It is run by Robert Wilson, along with his parents Ron and Joan, and Robert's wife Lucy, who runs the agritourism side of the business, Wilson's Farm and Kitchen.

At the meeting, Robert gave attendees an introduction to the farm and discussed his outwintering strategy, the arable enterprise and the future of the farm.

Currently farming 182ha, split across two units, the Wilsons run a closed herd of 100 pure-bred Hereford sucklers and followers producing pedigree stock, some finished cattle and stores, alongside a small flock of sheep. Crops grown in 2022 included winter wheat, spring barley, kale/stubble turnips, peas grown for silage, forage rye as a cover crop and winter barley, with an additional 60ha of arable land contract farmed.

The farm has good reason for choosing Herefords, as Ron explained. "They're easy to look after, suit a system with minimal help, and good to work with. We've tried other breeds over the years, but stuck with Herefords as they suited us best."

The breed has also adapted well as the farm has changed its overwintering strategy, said Robert. "Over the last few years we've expanded how many cattle we have outwintered as we learn more and confidence grows."

"This year we have two groups of cattle on Interval hybrid kale, one group with hay that has been left outside since July, and the other with straw. We have a further group bale-grazing a forage rye-based mix with the ring feeder moved over bales and with a run-back to permanent grassland on light land. We also have some autumn calvers, with calves at foot, that are bale-grazing but with a run back to a shed, mainly for the young calves."

The meeting discussed priorities for the cattle enterprise, which focused on tightening the calving period. Currently, the farm is calving autumn and spring - 1st September and 1st April. "By admission the bulls can be left in a bit long and this means the odd calf is born out with what could be considered a sensible timescale for a calving period!" said Robert.

Attendees also discussed the possibility of incorporating more rotational grazing, greater use of outwintering on strip-grazed kale, and gaining a deeper understanding of the soil types on the farm to optimise them. Improving work-life balance was also identified as a key priority for Robert and his family.

The visit also included a brief overview of the agritourism venture, Wilson's Farm and Kitchen, which was praised by the attendees and seen as a great success. They suggested expanding the agritourism side of the business if possible as it combined Lucy's cooking skills and using a farm building which would otherwise lie empty.

The Monitor Farm project at Cowbog will now focus on collecting and collating data and information for its next phase, establishing a Management Group of 10-12 supportive farming businesses, plus forming a wider Community Group for support and knowledge sharing. It will also be working with two other Monitor Farms in the South cluster, Barnbackle in Dumfriesshire and Castleton in East Lothian, with all three taking part in an online spring meeting which all Monitor Farm attendees will be invited to take part in.

Robert is enthusiastic about Cowbog's involvement in the Monitor Farm initiative. "We've seen how beneficial it was to the previous Monitor Farms and the wider community involved, and we could benefit from sharing our issues and learning from others who could be facing similar challenges."

Besides the cattle enterprise, Robert hopes to learn more about changes to the arable side of farming, and is interested in reducing tillage as well as introducing cover crops to improve productivity and benefit the environment.

For more information about future meetings and to join the Management Group or Community Group, visit www.monitorfarms.co.uk or contact Monitor Farm regional adviser Maura Wilson at mwilson@qmscotland.co.uk or monitorfarm@qmscotland.co.uk.



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