



FARMER LED, FARMER DRIVEN

The Suckler Cow

Deeside Monitor Farm Open Meeting

Meikle Maldron, Torphins

22nd July 2025



Aberdeen Angus Cows and Calves at Meikle Maldron

INTRODUCTION

Deeside Monitor Farm Overview

- 770 ac of **mainly grassland**, 110 owned, 430 tenanted and 230 seasonal
- **Four units**, one at Inverurie, one at Kintore, and two, including a new secure tenancy of 164 acres at Torphins.
- Around 260 cows & heifers will be bulled this summer (Pure AA and Stabilisers plus a commercial herd)
- 3 homebred bulls are running with heifers
- Bulling period consists of **2 cycles over 6-7 weeks**
- All cows and in-calf heifers are wintered outside on deferred grass, kale and bales and will calve at grass in Spring 2026.
- Enterprise outputs consist of store and finishing cattle, bulling heifers and breeding bulls.

Achievements over the year:

- 21% of cows calved on or before due date, **75% & 76% calved in the first cycle** at Kintore and Torphins. 5% calving assists and no C-sections.
- Grass growth is 10% lower than last year due to dryness
- Duncan has completed an AI course to allow more flexibility than a fixed-time artificial insemination (FTAI) synchronisation.
- **Plans to expand the flock of 100 mainly Lleyn ewes, to near-300**; low-input per head and high output/ha.
- Claire who works part-time off farm has recently joined Duncan as a business partner.



THE SCOTTISH SUCKLER HERD

The perspective from Gavin Hill, SAC Consulting

Scottish cow numbers have dropped by 12% since 2015.

- Beef sired calves from the dairy herd have increased to around **20% of registrations** (QMS figures).
- **56% of cows are kept on only 16% of Scottish holdings** with some herds holding 600-900 breeding cows.
- Some farms have increased cow numbers due to market positivity.
- The average herd rears only **86 calves per 100 cows** due to fertility and calf deaths

ADAPTATION

- Selection of cows with common strong maternal traits - **fertility, fat cover, milk, easier calf, easier fleshed**.
- Mated to continental bulls for performance and output.
- An overall increase in outwintering, totally or in-part has occurred with forage crops on good draining soil.
- The aim is to reduce costs of sheds and other capital investment.
- **Data use and interpretation is vital** and can highlight both successes and low performance early.



FUTURE THOUGHTS FROM GAVIN

- We should be ensuring we keep the critical mass needed for home consumption and production.
- The Scottish Red Meat Resilience Group are inviting Scottish producers to help meet forecast demand by producing, by 2030, an additional **22,000 tonnes of beef, equivalent to 79,000 additional breeding cows.**
- Our current and future, predicted climate suits livestock production.
- Without sufficient cattle numbers the industry must work harder to clearly differentiate Scotch Beef.
- Its presence in butchers, specialist outlets and exports could lead larger retailers to fill their stores with dairy beef, Irish beef and beef from trade deals.
- Gavin asked if we should criticise imports while we seek and secure export opportunities for our own product?

Price and processing

- With multiple breeds there are challenges with uniformity at the abattoirs.
- Price stability and market forces have an influence on enterprise profitability.
- Options are available to navigate fluctuations and should be considered.
- Example: Deadweight price received in April 2025 – 720ppkg. Whereas July 2024, this was 640ppk = **£300+ reduction on a 380kg carcase.** (In these cases, finished prices may be similar to purchase stores).
- Price received typically falls in summer as 12-16 month old bulls come on the market coupled with a lack of demand for top value cuts.
- Cow trade remains strong as they provide products for the BBQ – burgers and sausages.
- **Gavin argues that keeping cows is dependent upon farmer confidence.** And that this can only come from processors' commitment to the suckler cow producer.

EXPANSION OF THE HERD

Gavin Hill continued his discussions on farm by asking the question:

'How do the Monitor Farmers, Claire and Duncan Morrison, expand their herd?

- They are not millionaires to start!
- The Morrisons want to increase cattle numbers by 60 to create a 320 suckler herd.
- Good cull values mean it is cost effective to put off older less productive cows.

'Why not go and buy 60 cows?'

- **The future should be in youthful cows**—therefore the focus should be on heifer replacements.
- The Morrisons breed for maternal traits and have a short bulling period of 6-7 weeks
- This is important as the replacements are similar ages and come from the most fertile females in the herd.
- Buying from out with the herd comes at a large capital and potential health cost.

'Should the farm carry stock through and become breeders and finishers?'

- The issue, common to many, is cash flow. Sales of steers at the Morrisons in April helps with this.



THE ULTIMATE COW

Neil McGowan from Incheoch Farm, Glenisla was tasked to describe **The Ultimate Cow**. She needs to be:

- Fertile – able to calve at 2 years old
- Then able to calve at 3 – a challenge for many as the heifer is still growing while rearing a first calf.
- Producing calves regularly, ideally at around 365 days.
- Able to calve without assistance.
- Fun to be around with good feet, good teats and udder.

'Recording these cow performance indicators and selecting from them is critical', says Neil. In addition, the ultimate cow needs to:

- Fit into the environment of the farm
- Be low management (in the case of the Morrisons, a cow that calves easily, keeps condition through winter and thrives in a low input system).
- Deliver what the market demands.

THE ULTIMATE BULL

Selecting a maternal bull is critical for Neil's herd, improving traits that hopefully maintain profitability and sustainability over many years.

Neil's focus on maternal traits, including ease of calving and lower birth weight is seen in the EBV chart for his bull, below.

EBV Percentiles for INCHEOCH PATRICK 23 (PP)

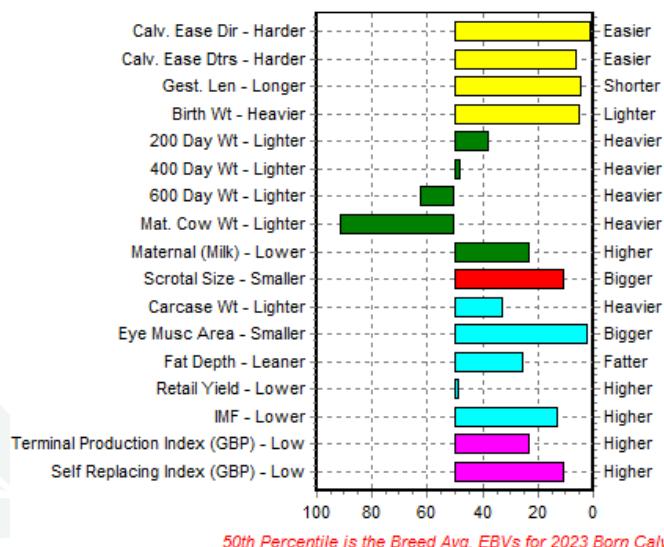
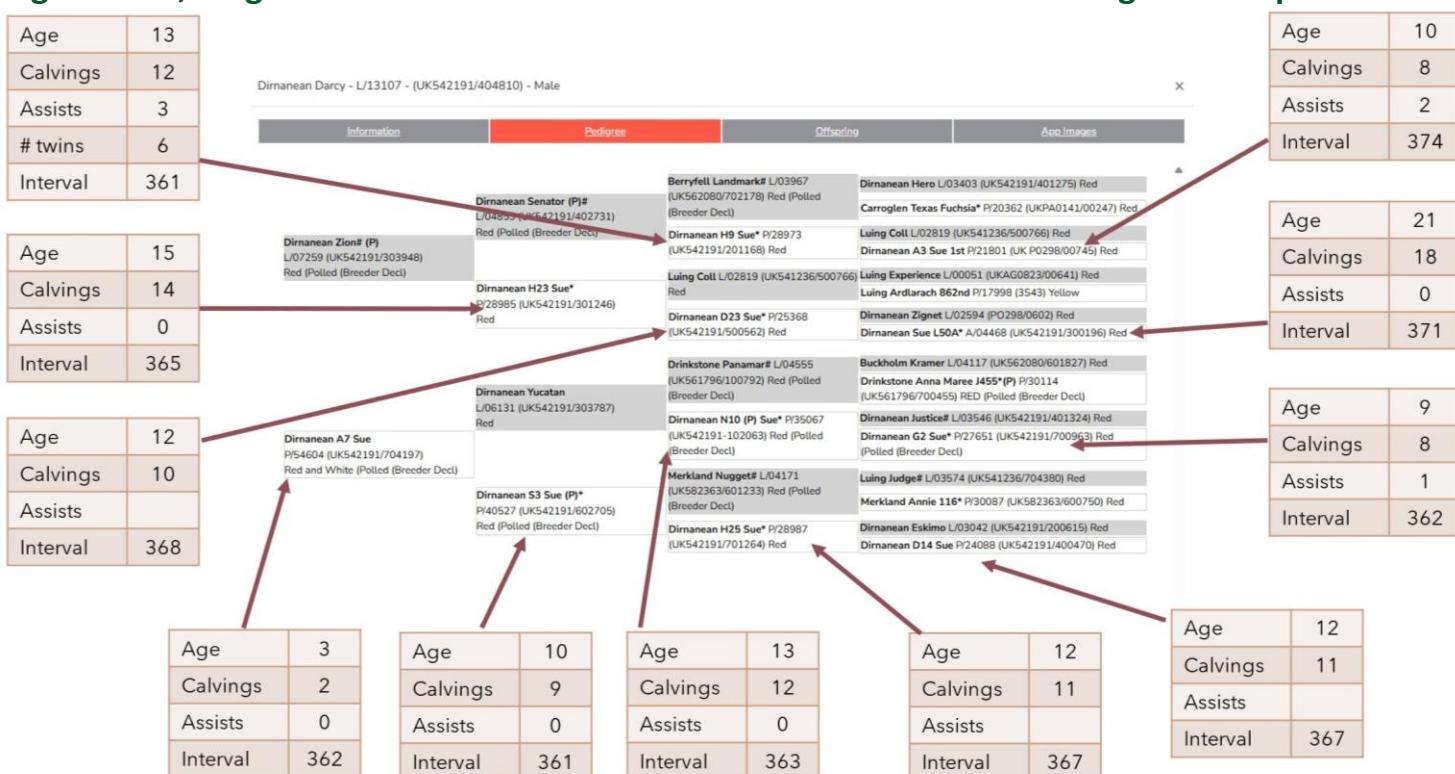


Fig 1. Good, long-term dam records allow easier decisions when selecting heifer replacements



CHOOSING REPLACEMENTS

Tim Geraghty, large animal vet and cattle specialist, spoke on heifer selection as part of a farmer's health planning.

The Morrisons have some excellent practices:

- They retain efficiency of the suckler herd through selection pressure.
- The 6-week breeding window means any heifer born has come from a highly fertile dam.
- **Duncan selects through growth rates**, so that his first pick coincides around housing time (November). A heifer that isn't making 1kg/day DLWG is moved to the fattening pen.
- As heifers go back to grass, they are pelvic measured, removing narrow hips to avoid future caesareans.

However, expansion of the herd puts pressure on selection:

- A farmer may need to hold back heifers for replacements that are sub optimal.
- The choice between retaining the best heifers versus selling these for the most money is a **cash flow pressure** known to all farmers!



IT TAKES TIME!

Tim highlighted the challenge of increasing a herd quickly, using a scenario with 130 cows put to a bull with maternal traits to produce breeding heifers.

The aim here is to increase the herd size to 190 in four years using only home-bred replacements.

	%	Number
Cows to a maternal bull	100	130
In-calf rate	90	117
Ration of heifer calves	50	58
Selection pressure	65	38
Replacement rate	18	23
Expansion	11	15

18% replacements (replacing cows at approximately 8 years old) means that only 15 suitable heifers are available to increase herd size each year. It'll take 4 years to increase the herd by 60 cattle.

OPTIONS

- Sexed semen – Duncan's now qualified to practice AI on the herd
- Buy in heifers – can Duncan buy those which improve his genetics without buying in disease?





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To find out more or to sign up, please contact:

Regional Adviser – Peter Beattie

07769 366614

pbeattie@qmscotland.co.uk

monitorfarms.co.uk

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