

September 2022

Visit 1 - Robert Parker- Drumdow Farm, 13th Sept.

Farm purchased 1987 and is 570 acres in one block, this is a grassland farm some of which is good 'ploughable' land.

At present running 235 cows to the bull (inc heifers) and 200 (Easycare type) ewes.

Growing 40 acres grain/barley for feeding then stubble turnips go in as catch crop. Wind turbine on the farm also. An area described as 'moor'- bog/hill/rock is used for the outwintering area.

Using replacements from the dairy herd originally

Now – AA x Hereford (otherwise known as Black Baldies) operating a closed herd with all cows bred on farm. Criss crossing system of 2 breeds of similar size and characteristics works well. AA passport goes to Hereford bull and Hereford passport goes to AA bull. Allows exploitation of hybrid vigour, growth and maternal characteristics.

Targets are <5% interventions at calving and <5% not in calf. Calving and calving pattern are the 2 most important things. Having a cow that has a calf itself with minimal fuss is of utmost importance. We need a cow that is fertile, quiet, good on feet and with a good udder.

Breeding for maternal traits is essential as a large part of the business is selling surplus heifers. Used to buy cows with calves at foot but ceased for disease purposes. Vet and med bill is concerned with retaining high herd health status – BVD and Johnes accredited. With most heifers being sold as breeders they need to be Johnes accredited. Marketed as high health status heifers ready to go (BVD and Johnes acc, BVD and Lepto vacc). Biosecurity is extremely important.

Everything calves at 2 and all within the same period. Weight at bulling = 400-420kg – calving down at 550kg – mature weight of 650kg. Creep feed is used to help take the pressure off the cows and to promote DLWG to achieve weight for age targets for 15-month bulling. Weaned end Nov, beginning of Dec. Fed 2kgs (home) mix from weaning and are offered 1st cut silage. Weaned efficiency is buoyed by the fact that calves receive creep feed.

Calving begins 8th April and is completed within 7 weeks. 90% calving within this timeframe with approx. 4% of the herd not in calf in 2022. Require 15% replacements to retain the herd – 35 in this year so there is flexibility in this system. Good fleshy cows within the herd and 1st calvers are strong when they go to the bull and I can get them back in calf again because of genetics and the ability to thrive on grass.

The herd is entirely outwintered. Cows are condition scored and grouped into 30's. The rough ground is split with an electric fence and silage is offered in a feed trailer. Depending on BCS it will either be a maintenance minus or maintenance plus diet. Going from a maintenance to minus diet over the outwintering period. Want to drop 100kgs off liveweight to ensure target BCS is achieved at calving. Need an easy-care cow that can summer herself on grass and winter on silage rations outside.

Bull selection:

No buying at market.

Prefer to pick a bull out of a batch on farm.

Must have milk figures.

Do not want them too big – approx. 1 tonne weight.

Do not want extremes with bulls and bulls are semen tested before they go out. The young bulls stay separate. Bulls are bought on maternal traits. Good milk figures and the more feminine traits to breed the replacement females. Must focus on milk.

Surplus heifers are sold privately and at Stirling all steers sold on the same day. Steers are sold at around 400kg at around 12 months of age. When selling steers stand in the middle of the ring with them – proud of my stock, they are quiet and it shows the buyer that you have confidence in their ability to grow on and thrive.

Newly calved heifers are offered preferential grazing and at PD time cows receive liver fluke dose and bolus with a full MOT completed at the end of Nov.

At calving use the calf catcher trailer to rubber ring steers, tag, and ID for registrations.

Run an old and young bull with 50 cows. Rotationally grazed. Field size is around 15 acres – cattle moved every week to 10 days. Not a proper paddock grazing system but certainly not set-stocked either.

A simple system is important – have adapted the breeding and genetics to suit a grass-based system.

Visit 2 John Elliot – Rawburn, 14th September (morning)

This has been a very testing year – soil moisture levels low hampering grass production, subsequently calves have moved onto creep feed quicker.

30 years on this farm which lies 300 ft above sea level. Farm relies on a big team of staff.

700 acres in total split 2/3 grass and 1/3 arable – feed everything that is grown, and all straw is utilized. Cows are maintained on stubble ground. Calving 280 cows and have accommodation available for 200.

120 bulls sold per year for breeding. May-July is main bull selling period. Biggest growth has been into N.I – 12/13 bulls sold this year. This is mainly due to the work being carried out on feed efficiency. AA has taken a big share of the market from other breeds.

The stock heifers have been running with the bull for 9 weeks – only 4 not in calf to 1st two cycles. Expect all cows to go in calf within first two cycles and if not they are culled. This year we had 97 calves on the ground before an assisted birth.

Winter feeding ration is 4kg of own home-grown ration plus ad-lib silage. Scanned to obtain data to drive performance. Weigh 450kg going to bull. Before 1st calving (6 weeks out) moved onto straw diet. Over winter period they need to drop 100kgs. Mature cow size -750-800kg. 1st calvers get come concentrate up until the bull goes out to bridge energy gap.

Using a proven bull on maiden heifers with low birth weights. Need to be vigilant with bull selection for heifers. EBV's are important and it is usually the second generation before you see the impact. Cattle are weighed every 100 days, scanned, data checked and visually assessed. Sourcing embryos from North America in the top 1% of the breed.

Aim to breed terminal and maternal index. Sell nothing at store sales. Bulls are assessed at 11 months of age and if they don't make the grade they are pushed on and finished as bull beef.

Vaccination protocol is BVD, Lepto, Rotavec corona to cows pre-calving. Bravoxin to calves and Rispoval.

All cows are AI'd (80% conception rate) repeats picked up by bull. 10th March to 1st April calving. On creep 2 weeks earlier this year due to lack of grass growth. Weaned 1st week Nov. Oldest bull calves go to shed in to feed efficiency system. Must be treated identically. All heifers are synchronized. Achieving an 80% conception rate. Not afraid to line breed if necessary to retain the breeding programme. We are limited on how much we can use some bulls now.

Cull policy:

Must get in calf.

Have good feet and be structurally correct.

Not selected for culling by age. We can move older cows on, and we have a good market for this.

Don't want high birth wt., av 42kg. Calves are too heavy at 50kg.

Cows are grouped in batches of 40 and are rotationally grazed. Hit with drought conditions this year which impacted growth significantly. Sheep graze in front of cattle and then cows clean up.

Acres of land is the biggest restrictor for the business. Current fertilizer price has changed the attitude to land. Do we get more land? Dictated by how many cattle we can sell or as we are very intensive with fertilizer do we reduce cattle?

Influential bulls – 'Rawburn Loaded his calves' vigour at birth is outstanding. Sold 2 crops of bulls from him. Transformer data is still strong and is still being used within the herd. Nichols Expectation sourced from American, in top 1% for RADG.

1st calved heifers receive preferential treatment, cows with twins also run in this group. At present they receive 2kgs of a ration/day due to lack of grass. Heifers are weaned end of Nov; they get built back up and then move onto the same management as the cows. They are kept outside. Cows are scanned very early, and this helps pick up if the bull isn't working properly. Also run 120 recipients sourced from high health status herds, Tb 4 and Johnes 1. Scanned at 5 weeks – may see a loss of up to 10% pregnancies.

Bull calves are EID tagged. A grass pellet is included in ration to get roughage intake. For feed efficiency trials the 'Grow safe system' is used. Can measure the weight of the feed accurately to within 3g. Animal is weighed by the amount of feed consumed and data is sent to America, this is recording 24hours/day. Bulls on average will visit the feed bunker 6x/day. Water intake is also measured and on average will come forward to drink 7x/day. Remain on feed efficiency trial for 80 days. Can detect if an animal is not behaving normally. On average can pick up sick animals 2 days before symptoms are seen. Need to fill the bunkers twice daily. No significant correlation between bull weight, feed intake and feed efficiency.

Limousins as a breed do not feature much in the farm business. Have a small herd of Shorthorns but they require a bit more labour and do not wean calves as heavy as the AA.

With regard to myostatin every cow is DNA'd. Very selective on how myostatin is used/controlled within the herd. Reports of increase in meat yield but not eating quality. The line in the Gordon herd all carried myostatin – 1 copy of the gene allowed only in AA. 1 copy of the gene doesn't give any calving difficulties. There is a correlation between myostatin and feed efficiency, no drop in performance and cows don't seem to produce less milk.

Main concerns for the sector:

Number of cows reduced long term.

Land planted in trees at the expense of the livestock sector.

Land price.

Sheep enterprise consists of 140 Suffolk ewes (NZ influence genetics) and 180 Texel ewes to breed shearlings for the commercial market. Av 1200gns for 120 sold at Kelso 22.

Visit 3 Andrew McNee, Woodend Farm, Armadale – 14th September (afternoon)

On heavy land type which doesn't like rain however great grass growth late summer this year.

1800 acres;

1200 woodland

250 grass

Rent the remainder, plus 100 ha of nature reserve for Naturescot.

Split between good ploughable silage ground, permanent pasture and the rest is rough, hill grazing.

Stocked with 700 ewes (400 SBF, 70 Cheviot, 30 BFL and Texel to produce shearling rams and the rest is made up of crossbreds).

Sim Luing cows make up much of the breeding herd. A third of the herd are pedigree Luings and a third of the herd are pedigree Simmental.

Winter is normally 7 months – used to outwinter on a woodchip corral but no longer due to pollution issues and the cost to re-chip. Have a slatted shed available which holds 150 cows.

150 cows calf in March – bulling the strongest heifers to calve at 2 years old. 120 cows calf in July with the smaller heifers calving at 3 years of age. Selling the heifers calving at 3 years of age – these are the smaller summer calvers. Spring calving starts 1st March and ends start of May.

Best Luing cows are bred pure with the second-class cows bred to a Simmental bull. Keep enough for replacements. Sim Luing males are bull beefed approx. 14 months of age at 400kg deadweight to ABP. Sim Luing cows bred to a Charolais bull to produce quality weanlings. Top weanlings at the Autumn sales 1k for best at approx. 350kg receiving 3-4kgs creep feed.

Easy to be strict now with cull price high. Most cows are calving unassisted outside. Most C-sections in the 2-year-old heifers. Need to be mindful of the bull influence for easier calving in the heifers and need to control diet. Not pelvic scoring but heifers are a minimum of 440-450kgs at bulling. No routine weighing of calves taking place. Approx £20/head vet and med costs inc BVD vaccine. Calves get Rispoval vaccine covers them for 11 weeks.

Aiming to reduce cow size. Age at first calving, remember that there is a plus and minus to each system. Must suit the land type and the system in place and marketing is crucial.

Good display of stratification ;

Top quality ped Luing cows bred pure. Bulls and heifers sold from this herd at pedigree sales.

2nd quality Luing cows are bred to Simmental bull to generate Sim Luing herd.

Sim Luing herd bred to Charolais to produce top quality weanlings.

Visit 4 Michael Walker, Drumbuie, Dumfries 15th Sept.

Family farm of 2500 acres from hill down. Land is all owned and currently houses 9 turbines on the hill and a commercial quarry. 50 proposed turbines are currently with planning.

6 full-time labour units on the farm.

2500 ewes ranging from SBF to Scotch mule.

800 beef cows with some pedigree Charolais and AA.

Imported some Australian ideas – data and performance driven. Looking at weight gains and feeding efficiency. 'I spend more time driving a laptop than a tractor'

Av herd weight is 680kg – used to be 750kgs 5 years ago. Mature weight down and weaning efficiency is up. Buy in top 5% of any breed and this is based purely on performance.

Look first at calving ease, then 200- and 400-day weights

Use of AI allows us to exploit genetics. Synchronised 500 cows on CIDr sync programme achieving conception rates between 55&60%. Believe that fertility breeds fertility. Get one shot of AI, 2 cycles with the bull and if not in calf after that they are gone. AI takes place 1st 2 weeks of May therefore by the time they go out to grass and high proportion of the herd are already in calf which takes the pressure off young bulls.

New unit can house 300 cows and hygiene is one of our biggest cost savings. Wash/disinfect regularly, cleanliness is huge in disease prevention.

'If we are efficient with our time then that is our biggest saving'

Housing is weather dependent on this farm. As they come in calves are weaned and vaccinated etc. 1.3 million gallons of slurry storage available which provides enough for 12 months. Feed passage is fully suspended.

Emphasis on the importance of slurry now more than ever with rise in chemical fertilizer price. Used to spread 200-220t N – this has been reduced significantly through slurry analysis, use of LESSE (dribble bar) and increase in pH of soil. Currently farm sits at pH of 5.8. Have a carbon monoxide alarm in the shed for health and safety when mixing slurry. Did not go for a bubbler system – went with mixing points as we had already spent that capital on machinery etc. Now we just need to be more organized when there is a suitable period of weather forecast for spreading.

Total shed cost was £865,000. In the shed we can empty out the water bowls – you do have to go in with the stock to do this, but it forces you to look at the stock, nipple drinkers available for calves at the front of the pens. Calving accommodation is next door to the new shed with 10 individual calving pens. Come into a straw pen to calve and stay on straw bed for max 24 hours and if this is longer then we question why. Moved into groups of 9, then 18 and then back into slatted shed before being moved eventually to grass. Good facilities are essential in calving area – have a split gate to anchor mum while calf is being tagged etc. Much safer. Pens are mucked out and disinfected weekly, labour is a big problem, so we need to be as efficient as possible.

Calf birthweight approx. 45kg. Cows are weighed 3x/year. Pre calving, scanning and at grass. Calves weighed as close to birth as possible and then again at 200 and 400 days. Always thinking about which bulls are going to drive performance. Need frame and size to get a calf out of a cow. We are trying to breed 'peas in pods' – level and consistent heifers.

Best cow weighs 520kg and weaned at calf at 500kg. Milk is essential to drive calf performance.

Culling on age and culling on feet (hoof scoring carried out) Av age is 7.5 years for 800 cows in the herd. Culling at 7.5 as beyond that each cow is losing 20 kg calf weight per extra year. Replacement rate is between 12 and 20%. Bringing >100 heifers forward but if she doesn't perform after 1st calf she is gone. Lucrative cull price helps with this at present. Calves are on creep to help take the pressure off the cow. All calved heifers are on a rotational grazing system – on silage type fields.

Started to calve heifers at 24 months 8 years ago. Heifers to the bull at av weight of 480kg. Up to bulling they receive a store ration of 2kg barley and 0.5kg protein source. (Rapeseed but used to be soya) DLWG of 1kg/day up to bulling and 1kg/day from bulling to housing and 0.8kg growing. In-calf heifers receive silage and straw.

Young bulls go through the feed efficiency shed. Best bull was 3.3kg DMI worst at 11.3kg DMI. If we can save 10% on annual feed bill by increasing feed efficiency represents a massive saving for us.

Genomic scoring everything.

Dropped clover out of the mix due to docks. Looking at soil carbon and selling carbon credits.

Motto is to 'Push yourself in front of the curve'

SUMMARY

This trip afforded suckler farmers from NI to see beef efficiency measures on a large scale.

At Parkers it was clear to see how his breeding system has evolved over several years. The ability to outwinter on 'moor' type land dramatically cut the costs associated with keeping a suckler cow.

Key messages: Flexibility, adaptation of the breeding structure in place to suit a grass-based system, importance of biosecurity and herd health status to reflect the system of selling heifers that are 'ready to go'.

The work at Rawburn on feed efficiency was very impressive, they have seen a gap in the market and moved to fill it. These considerations are going to be at the fore with the rise in costs we are experiencing across the industry coupled with the challenges of carbon/methane emissions etc.

Key messages: Must be performance driven and use data to do this and provide credibility, clear commitment to a long-term breeding programme as evidenced through an extensive amount of time sourcing genetics from America, must be market driven.

The system viewed at McNee's of Woodend farm was probably the most comparable or relatable system for the members of the group. We saw a 'stratified' breeding system there with the ability to maximise sales at every stage of that system right down to Charolais sired calves being sold at weanling sales. We were also able to debate the pros and cons of 24 months calving and saw both 2- and 3-year-old calving system in place here. Realisation that the system in place is dependent on breed, land type and system.

Finally, Walkers of Drumbuie. Very impressive set up and the group viewed brand new slatted accommodation to hold 300 cows. Attention to detail was evident all the way through this system.

Key messages here were: Must be data and performance driven all the way. This is just as essential as the work that also goes on at farm level. Feed efficiency work is also taking place here using the same system as Rawburn with the overall aim of reducing annual feed usage.

We are all facing the same challenges –

Policy change

Climate

Decline in suckler cow numbers

Rise in costs.
