

# MONITOR FARM LEGACY

– Reaping Rewards of Changes Made



When Brian and Janet Hill of Plan Farm on the Isle of Bute became monitor farmers in May 2006, they had three main objectives.

These were: more grass of better quality; a fertile, productive, easily managed, three-way cross herd of foraging cows, which would out-winter and produce quality heifers suitable for breeding, plus marketable steers; and more lambs from fewer ewes.

Nine years on and the Hills, the first island monitor farmers in the QMS network of monitor farms throughout Scotland, have made great improvements in all three areas.



## Improvements Made

1. Grassland is much improved on the lower and some of the higher ground, facilitating an increase in cow numbers from 100 to 120.
2. The bracken crushing and foraging talents of the out-wintered herd – now a blend of Luining and South Devon, have helped to improve the higher grazing. Herd replacements are home-bred, and some Luining X steers are finished on forage at 18–20 months.
3. What was a 1,000 ewe flock lambing at under 135% is now an outside lambing flock of 650 Lleyens which achieve around 180%, with most of the ewes now weaning more than their own body weight.

In the south of the island, the 1,600 acre (650ha) Plan Farm has sea on three sides, with 210 acres of in-bye, of which 70 acres are suitable for silaging. Land peaks at 500 feet. Annual rainfall on this Gulf Stream-kissed island is approximately 60 inches, with grass growing almost all year round.

“Grass underpins everything we produce,” explained Brian Hill. “Before the monitor farm, in our quest to grow grass, we simply slapped on compound. By the time we’d done that, we reckoned we couldn’t afford lime.”

“But the monitor farm taught us how crucial it is to prioritise soil pH. Ever since, we’ve applied calcium lime annually, which has significantly lifted pH levels. Pre-monitor farm, the soil-tested areas averaged 5.05. In 2014 all these areas were at least 5.6, with a peak of 6.4.



“We can clearly see the overall improvement and are convinced that grass is now growing earlier in spring and lasting longer into the winter.”

Livestock duties at Plan are split equally, with Brian in charge of the cattle and the sheep enterprise being Janet’s domain.

When the Hills began their three-year monitor farm term, both enterprises had fertility issues.

“In 2006, just 87% of females to the bull were in calf,” recalled Brian.

“My sheep were also disappointing pre-2006, with around 13 to 14% of the ewes empty at scanning,” added Janet.

“Thanks to the monitor farm programme, we were able to sort this major problem, with one of the solutions for cattle as well as sheep being twice-yearly trace element boluses.

“Disease was also causing infertility, and some sheep tested positive for toxoplasmosis.

“The sheep are now routinely vaccinated as gimmers for toxoplasmosis, which has been a major turning point. The cattle are BVD-accredited and vaccinated for ongoing protection.”

Brian added: “The group also recommended regularly semen testing bulls, which has resulted in a couple getting their marching orders.”

Six years after the monitor farm programme ended at Plan farm, the Hills are continuing to see the benefits of the advice and guidance they received from specialists and fellow farmers who supported them at the time.

Brian commented: “Back in 2006, the group suggested reducing the bulling period from twelve to nine weeks. This year, of the 115 females calved, 84 had calved by day 21. By day 42, there were only 4 left.”

“It’s almost 10 years since our first meeting, and looking back has made us realise just what the monitor farm experience helped us to achieve!”

He added: “Before becoming monitor farmers, if some of the cows weren’t in calf, we might have given them a second chance. I was told to stop doing that. I did and won’t ever do it again!”

Sheep fertility has also increased as a result of the changes Janet has put in place. “Just one ewe scanned empty ahead of this year’s lambing,” she explained. “And my rams, which now get 80 ewes each thanks to monitor farm advice, all get a pre-tupping MOT.”

## Monitor Farm Legacy Events

**Wednesday 11 November**  
Kenny Adams hosts at Torhousekie Farm, Wigtown, DG8 9BJ

**Thursday 26 November**  
Janet and Brian Hill host at Plan Farm, Kingarth, Isle of Bute, PA20 9LX

**Thursday 3 December**  
Robert and Ian Chapman host at Tophead Farm, Lonmay, Fraserburgh, AB43 8UY

**Wednesday 9 December**  
Robbie and Kirsty Newlands host at Cluny Farm, Rafford, Forres, IV36 2SJ

**Thursday 10 December**  
John Scott hosts at Fearn Farm, Tain, IV20 1TL

For further information about these events and to register your place, visit [www.qmscotland.co.uk/events](http://www.qmscotland.co.uk/events)



Electronic Identification offered the potential of a host of useful sheep performance information, and the group encouraged Janet to EID her sheep to improve productivity. By easily identifying the better and poorer performing lines, Janet could ensure that only ewe lambs from the good lines were kept, and all passengers were culled.

Ask the Hills to summarise what their monitor farm experience did for them, and you get double-barrelled enthusiasm at full blast.

“It’s almost 10 years since our first meeting, and looking back has made us realise just what the monitor farm experience helped us to achieve,” said Brian.

“Throughout the three-year term, we needed to make sure that everything we did was done right and that we could justify why we did it at the next meeting. We admit some of the things we were advised to do, did challenge us and push us outside our comfort zone.”+