

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Becoming one of the new generation of QMS Monitor Farms has come at just the right time for start-up farming couple **Andrew and Aileen Marchant**, who admit they have spent the last five years with their noses to the grindstone, and only now are in a position to sit up and take stock of their position.



Clonhie is one of nine monitor farms that have been established across Scotland as part of the new Monitor Farm Programme managed jointly by QMS and AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds.

For more information about Clonhie and the other monitor farms, visit www.qmscotland.co.uk/monitorfarms

Andrew, formerly the manager of a dairy and beef unit in Castle Douglas, and his wife Aileen took the brave step of starting farming in their own right by successfully applying for the tenancy of the 93-hectare Clonhie Farm, near Thornhill, from the Buccleuch Estate.

With no single farm payment and only 12 ewes to their name when they first came to Clonhie in 2012, the young couple, who have two children, William (6) and Anna (4), have at times relied on income from Aileen's teaching career and Andrew working off-farm. However, they have worked hard to build their flock up to 900 ewes and have started a small herd of 12 Luing cows.

Andrew said: "I feel I am now ready for the next challenge, and our business will be stronger and more resilient by the end of the monitor farm process."

Clonhie is all LFA, but Andrew describes it as good upland grazing - although he said it was not in great shape when they took over, needing lime, phosphate and potash. He said: "Initially, we had to concentrate all our resources on getting stock numbers up so we could create an income and make the business viable."

Last year, Aileen and Andrew took on the tenancy of a further 134 hectares and also received their first BPS payment. The extra land has meant a continued focus on increasing stock numbers, but now with more emphasis on improving soil fertility so that stock numbers can be increased to 1,200 ewes and 40 suckler cows over the next couple of years.

A stock of Lleyne ewes provided the foundation of the sheep flock and North Country Cheviot ewes were then added, with Lleyne tups being used and all ewe lambs kept for replacements. This year, however, the Cheviot flock is lambing to an Aberfield sire, while the cross ewes were put to Texel or Beltex sires.

Andrew said: "We have had to invest heavily in the flock due to health issues (mainly feet problems and high

Clonhie Farm



mortality rates) which have arisen through keeping females which we would not normally keep. However, the home-bred ewes are doing well and the plan now is to close the flock and be more selective in our replacements."

Around 130 Texel cross ewes tugged by a Charollais, lamb in early March, with the remainder of the flock lambing outdoors in April. Scanning this year was 164%, but the target is to improve this to 175% over the whole flock.



Andrew said: "We lamb early to help the cash flow, but one of the debates at our monitor farm meeting was whether this enterprise is worthwhile, so I am recording everything from inputs to mortality, and we will make a decision in the summer about whether to lamb early again."

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Last year 85% of lambs were finished, mostly off grass. Those not away by November were fed concentrates with the last of them marketed by March. The remaining 15% were sold store in September and did well, so selling a bigger proportion store in the future is an option. Andrew is prepared to be fairly versatile about selling lambs and reckons he is lucky that the farm can grow enough grass to finish them all if necessary.

A cattle-wintering enterprise has helped improve the grassland on the farm, with one cut of silage taken from about 25 hectares providing aftermath for finishing lambs - plus the slurry and dung have helped fertility. The next steps being considered to improve grassland management are to start to rest grass over winter and to introduce rotational grazing.

Andrew said: "No one in this area has grass from January until lambing, so we need to find ways of getting ewes through the winter cheaply. We are planning to sow turnips and kale this year so we can rest the grass; we will winter one batch of ewes on this and one batch on deferred grazing, and compare the results."

Andrew feels that being a monitor farmer will be massively beneficial, especially in the face of Brexit, which he admits he is very worried about, especially for the sheep industry. He said: "We can assume another two to three years of BPS, and I believe we have to use this to get our house in order; get fertility levels and genetics right, and be in a position to survive without subsidy."

The Marchants are probably better placed than most, as they have already experienced four years of farming without payments. Andrew said: "We have had to look at farming from a different perspective, as we have had no safety net. We had to make money or we were gone. But I like a challenge; I want to know exactly how much it costs to produce a kilo of lamb, so I am able to make informed decisions leading to improved productivity and efficiency."

Andrew recently spoke at a Holyrood Parliamentary Reception, where he said: "We must develop our business in a way which is going to be best able to ride out the tough times and flourish in the good ones. There are going to be opportunities that arise from issues such as Brexit and Land Reform, and we want to put ourselves on the best possible footing to capitalise on them. We like what QMS do and believe that the 'Scotch' brand has a big part to play in our farming future."+