

COMMITMENT TO IMPROVING EFFICIENCY

Key to Success on Award-Winning Farm

A north-east cattle enterprise, which has grown steadily over the years through careful reinvestment of profits, has won the prestigious Scotch Beef Farm of the Year award run by Quality Meat Scotland and AgriScot.



From left - David Watson, Aynsley Watson (holding baby Vivienne) with husband Adam Watson and father Peter Watson. Lynne Watson is kneeling with young Xander Watson.

The Watson family farm 1,350 acres at Darnford, Banchory, with the main enterprises being 700 acres of spring barley and 426 suckler cows. The two enterprises complement each other, especially on some of the lighter soils which benefit from a grass rotation and the application of dung, while straw is essential for the cattle side. The family also takes seasonal grazing on some hill land locally.

Unusually for the area, the herd consists of Salers cows and Peter Watson explained the background to their breed choice.

"A particularly bad calving with our continental crosses in 2008 led us to buy 23 Salers heifers at Castle Douglas. We then bought a few more the following year and have stuck with them since, as they are hard working cows and easy calving. We have not had a caesarean section for five years!"

Peter and his two sons, David and Adam, work full-time on the farm and they are all prepared to try something different to find a breed and system which suits their business. The most important aspect of the business, however, is that they keep a close eye on finances and the herd has to be self-sufficient.

"Although the cattle enterprise complements the arable, all the dung and straw are costed out to each part of the business, as is our time," said Peter. "We do not allow the arable side to subsidise the livestock or vice versa, which means we have a true picture of how profitable each enterprise is."

This business acumen is key to delivering an efficient farming system which makes a living for three families. "The herd is purely commercial; everything has to work and make money," said Peter. "We are proud of the fact that the herd has been built up through reinvestment of its own profits."



Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead presented the award to the Watsons at Agriscot 2015.

"The judges were particularly impressed with the Watson family's commitment to continually improving the efficiency of their farm."



David (left) and Adam (right) with father Peter Watson (centre).



The herd is split into 140 autumn calving and the remainder spring calving. The autumn cows are put to Salers bulls to breed replacements, while the spring herd is put to Charolais. Since the Watsons switched to Salers, the herd has been closed and monitored for John's every two years through SRUC's Premium Cattle Health Scheme. David and his wife, Lynne, also have a small herd of pedigree Salers.

The cows start calving outside from 20th September and come in when the weather deteriorates, while 200 of the spring calving cows are out-wintered on sandy soils next to the River Dee. They are all housed for calving, however, which starts at the beginning of March. Heifers calve down at two-and-a-half years old, which the Watsons are happy with.

Peter said: "We have quite big cows here, averaging about 720kg. By calving them at two we could reduce the size, but we are happy with what we've got. They are easily kept and get on with the job and I believe there is no point in having smaller cows."

Always prepared to try something different, Peter added they are planning to try a Hereford bull in the autumn in order to maintain hybrid vigour. "Every farm and farmer is different. You just try your best to find a breed that suits your farm," he said.

In order to spread the risk and help with cash flow, 50 of the top calves are sold store in February at Aberdeen and Northern Marts, where in 2015 they averaged 299p/kg or £1,265 per head. The remainder are finished and sold deadweight to McIntosh Donald.

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The Salers bull calves from the autumn herd are kept entire and finished at 14 to 15 months when they average 375kg, while the steers from the spring herd average about 400kg and the heifers 350kg at 18 to 20 months. They are finished on a fairly intensive ration of barley, oats and brewers dark grains plus minerals, and bedded on straw.

The family were absolutely delighted to win the Scotch Beef Farm of the Year award and said the feedback they have received from the industry has been fantastic.

This was the second accolade the farm won in 2015, as earlier in the year they also won the McIntosh Donald award for the highest percentage of heifers within the specification of E, U and R up to 4L.

The representatives from AgriScot and QMS who judged the Scotch Beef Farm of the Year award, Robert Neill and Douglas Bell, who visited Darnford as part of the judging process, were particularly impressed with the Watson family's commitment to continually improving the efficiency of their farm.

AgriScot board member Robert Neill, a former Scotch Beef Farm of the Year Winner, said: "Our congratulations go to the Watsons for their commercial skills and forward-thinking approach."

"It was a pleasure to visit the Watsons, who rightly have a real pride in the way they run their businesses," added Douglas Bell, Head of Industry Development with QMS. +

Inset image: Robert Neill, a former Scotch Beef Farm of the Year Winner.



Darnford Farm, Banchory: At A Glance.

Farmed by the Watson family, Peter and his two sons David and Adam.

1,350 acres (546 ha)

700 acres Spring Barley

426 Suckler Cows

720kg Average cow weight

Autumn cows are put to Salers bulls to breed. Spring herd is put to Charolais.