

# Focus on Developing a Sustainable Business

Keeping costs under control is the main focus for Jason and Victoria Ballantyne at Clynelish, the Sutherland Monitor Farm near Brora.

The 125-hectare farm is rented from Diageo, which owns the neighbouring Clynelish Distillery. The couple, who farm in partnership with Jason's dad, Murdo, also have 32 hectares of seasonal grazing locally and contract farm 230 North Country Cheviot ewes - at a sheep stock club two miles away - which graze on 34 hectares of in-bye and hill.

Stock clubs are based on the communal benefits of managing sheep collectively via common grazings. They have existed for many decades and are traditionally most widely found in Skye and Lochalsh, as well as Sutherland.

The family have 670 ewes of their own and 75 suckler cows, including 11 heifers, and both enterprises are operated on low-cost forage systems. "It is essential to keep costs under control. We may not have the biggest and shapeliest lambs and calves, but we are keen that they return a profit," said Victoria.

Jason pointed out that they are particularly conscious of the fixed costs involved with cattle and are considering different wintering options, such as brassicas. He said: "We feel there is scope to reduce inputs by making changes to genetics and the management of the herd, and the Monitor Farm Programme should help us with that."

At the moment, the native cross cows are overwintered on straw and silage and calve over a nine-week period starting at the beginning of May, once lambing is well through. A Charolais and, more recently, a Stabiliser bull have been used and the plan is to retain some Stabiliser cross heifers. Jason said: "I like the commercial focus of the Stabiliser breed and the fact it promotes production from forage-based systems."

Recently, Jason and Victoria have been concentrating on bringing down the size of their cows, which now average 670 kg at maturity. They feel there is potential to reduce this further without any detrimental effect on the weaning weight of calves.

Calves have not been creep fed for three years, with no difference to their weaning weight of around 245 kg at five-and-a-half months. The couple are keen to reduce the check-in weight they see in their calves at weaning, so have taken some advice from both the monitor farm community and management groups to try a gentler weaning technique of forward-grazing calves this year.

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Up until now, calves have been sold at nine-and-a-half months at Thainstone where, this year, they averaged 343 kg and 256p/kg. They are overwintered inside on silage, draff from the distillery and a little beet pulp and soya.

Victoria described this diet as "pretty affordable" and said that the average liveweight gain was 1.1 kg per day. However, they are open to suggestions from the monitor farm group and willing to try other options, including selling some calves at weaning.

The couple feel that cattle are an essential part of the business. Jason commented: "While we are aware of the fixed costs involved with cattle compared with sheep - such as housing, machinery for silage-making and so on - we are confident there will always be a demand for beef."

They are very aware that farming could be forced to adapt to different circumstances in the next few years. Victoria said: "We spend a lot of time round the kitchen table planning for the future. We are worried about losing the lamb export trade but also feel there could be opportunities, and for the last five or six years our focus has been on how we can change the business to weather the storm which could now be Brexit."

When they moved into the farmhouse in 2012, Victoria took over the running of the bed and breakfast from her mother-in-law, Jane. Clynelish farmhouse can take up to nine guests per night and bookings have rocketed since the promotion of the North Coast 500 route, which passes very close to the farm.

As maintaining a work-life balance is a crucial part of their business planning, for the last two years Jason and Victoria have taken on a couple for the summer to work both on the farm and in the house. This was how Victoria, who hails from Australia, originally met Jason - she came to help with the lambing in 2006 - and stayed!

The sheep at Clynelish are Lleyn cross North Country Cheviot ewes, and they are also on a low-cost, forage-based system. These are crossed with Aberfield, New Zealand Suffolk and Meatlinc rams to produce both replacements and store lambs, which are sold at Dingwall. They use a Shetland tup over the ewe lambs, which gives them an easy lambing, and Jason described the result as a "bonus lamb".

Their target scanning percentage for the ewes is 170% - this year it was 151%. Their first step in improving this is to push ewe lambs onto the best grass to achieve a 40 kg lamb by puberty. Following a suggestion from the monitor farm meeting, they are also going to test for Toxoplasmosis and leave the tups in for 25 days instead of 21.



They use Trevor Cook, a vet and sheep and beef production consultant from New Zealand, as a consultant for the sheep and plan to trial rotational wintering for the ewes this year, splitting much of the farm into 36 paddocks averaging two hectares, each of which they hope will last 100 days.

As far as they know, this will be the furthest north this approach has been tried, so it will be interesting for them and the Monitor Farm Programme to follow the trial and see the results.

Jason and Victoria already record and monitor everything they are doing on the farm. Unusually, they also cost their own time for each enterprise, so they have good knowledge of their costs.

However, they hope that being part of the Monitor Farm Programme over the next three years will enable them to see better what they are doing right and wrong, try out a few changes, draw comparisons and make their own business sustainable in the long-term.+

## Cattle Management at Clynelish

- 75 Simmental cross native cows
- Cows weigh around **670 kg** at maturity
- Cows are **outwintered** on straw and silage
- Calve in May** over a nine-week period
- Calves receive **no creep feed**
- Calves weaned at five-and-a-half months with average weight of **245 kg**
- Calves sold at nine-and-a-half months at Thainstone at **343 kg** and 256p/kg



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