Podlediad 57

00:12 – 01:13

Today, Jim and I are going to visit one of Farming Connect’s red meat demonstration farms near Bala. It’s a real traditional family farm, and I only hope that the sat nav is taking me to the right place. It’s supposed to be on the left here somewhere. Here we are, and the sign at the end of the road says ‘Rhiwaedog’, and that’s where we are going today – Rhiwaedog farm, which is home to Emyr Jones and family. Emyr farms with his sons, Aled and Dylan, and they are about to start lambing and calving, so it is a very busy time for them on the farm, but they have agreed to meet me today, and I am really looking forward to meeting them. Welcome to episode 57 of Ear to the Ground podcast.

01:19 - 01:21

Hello. How are you?

01:25 – 01:37

My name is Aled Jones, and I farm here in Rhiwaedog with my brother and father. Welcome to you here this morning. Hello. I am Dylan Jones, the younger brother.

01:38 – 01:54

Thank you, Aled and Dylan, for the warm welcome. We are in the cattle shed, and the cattle are quiet; they have just been fed, so they are very happy. It’s wonderful to be here in Rhiwaedog. Tell us a bit more about the farm’s history and its background.

01:55 – 02:36

Rhiwaedog is a 300-acre farm. It is an upland farm. We are stood here at about 750 feet, and it rises to about a 1,000 on top of the moorland. In the last seven year, we have been renting another farm nearby. That’s more of an upland farm that rises to about 1,400 feet on top of the moorland. We keep about 1,400 ewes, and about 80 cows – Welsh Black cattle.

02:37 – 02:45

And the cattle are in here in Rhiwaedog, and the sheep shed where you lamb is on the other farm you rent?

02:46 – 03:45

Yes. There’s plenty of room to lamb about 500 ewes there. We lamb all the crossbred ewes in the shed, and then we lamb the Welsh ewes outside *(later)* in April. We’ll probably start in about three weeks with the crossbreds, and then the others.

03:08 – 03:11

What breeds do you have among the crossbred ewes?

03:12 – 03:48

In the past, three quarters of them were Welsh ewes, but as time has gone by (and to try and produce more of what the market demands), we’ve had to keep more crossbreds. By now, two thirds of the ewes are crossbreds – Texel x Mules and Aberfields, and Cheviot x Welsh ewes. We have to have the Welsh ewe, as it’s the foundation of the flock. We have to get that right, because it’s the kind that sells.

03:48 – 03:55

And the crossbreds are lambing fairly early here, and of course, you are aiming for that early market then with the lambs, in the hope of getting the best prices?

03:56 – 04:24

We try to lamb a lot during late February and the first week of March, so we can get rid of many lambs early, or before the end of June, which then enables us to collect more silage, because it is quite full here, and it’s difficult to close enough fields for silage without having to sell some of the first lambs.

04:25 – 04:34

And Dylan, tell us a bit more about the cattle, because it’s a herd of Welsh Black cattle you have here, and that’s what is traditional to this area, as well.

04:35 – 05:14

There are about 80 cows here, most of which are pedigree Welsh Blacks. For some years now, we’ve gone to cross about half of them with a Charolais bull to produce faster-growing stores that are marketable and come to greater weight, if you like. We also continue to use a Welsh Black bull on the better half of the herd, to produce heifers for our own keeping.

05:15 – 05:30

You select the best ones and rear from those, and then you cross with a Charolais bull. I was looking at the Charolais calves eating in front of me over there, and they are strong calves, and there’s always a good market for crossbred calves like these, the same with store cattle.

05:31 – 05:48

They are. We do like the Charolais crossbreds from a Welsh Black cow. A Welsh Black cow is a good suckler cow, and then with the Charolais calves, there’s good growth in them – they come to greater weight at a young age.

05:49 – 06:08

With all the work you do here, both of you, of course, are working hard, and your father has gone to hide somewhere! We are all familiar with Emyr Jones, of course. He’s a familiar face to us in the agricultural sector, and a past president of the Farmers’ Union of Wales. Does he leave you to get on with your work? What do you say, Aled?

06:09 – 06:29

Yes! He did leave us be while he was with the Union, but it’s good to have him back. I think he loves it. He loves being back; that’s where he’s at his best – home *(to share some wisdom).* We are often having to listen to him, even though he says we are the boss.

06:30 – 06:46

You said earlier that you don’t listen to him at all! Fantastic! What prompted you to go to Farming Connect and agree to be a Farming Connect demonstration farm? What motivated you to do that and take part in the programme?

06:47 – 07:47

We were persuaded, basically, but we also felt that we had benefited a lot through Farming Connect in the past. I think we are very lucky in Wales to have Farming Connect – we are fortunate with them. I saw an opportunity to look at different options to reduce costs and increase grass utilisation. In the last couple of years, our single farm payment has halved to what it used to be. We don’t receive any Glastir payment at all, and with the rental farm we have, there’s no payment coming from that to us. It’s important to find a way to make sure the business is able to stand on its own two feet. It makes somebody more determined, perhaps, to work harder and succeed, and we saw this as a way forward in trying to find a way to cut costs.

07:48 – 08:06

Is that part of the mindset you have while farming here? You need to come up with new ideas and improve what you do all the time to secure the future of the farm. You can’t sit back and do the same thing you have done over the years. There is a need to innovate and experiment with new ideas from time to time.

08:07 – 08:28

Yes. I don’t think we need to stand still – we always need to look forward to the future. Everyone has areas of their business that they need improving, and there’s no point in continuing to do the same thing because it’s what you’ve always done – we need to be open to trying new things.

08:29 – 08:31

And how long have you been a demonstration farm?

08:32 – 08:36

It’s now approaching the end of its third year.

08:37 – 08:56

And much of that time has been under restrictions due to the virus, and that has prevented the open days you would normally have had held in Rhiwaedog, but there will come an opportunity, I’m sure. But are neighbours in the area interested in what you’ve been doing?

08:57 – 09:22

Yes, certainly. Some do ask about what we are doing and why do we bother, but we may have been quite lucky with the lockdown in not having to do open days, but Lisa, our technical officer, says there may be one next September.

09:23 – 09:51

I very much look forward to that. You mentioned earlier, Aled, about the fact that subsidies have been halved, and who knows what the future path will be. A new sustainable farming scheme has been developed, and there may be changes in funding, but what is the focus now? What projects did you decide you wanted to look at specifically in the hope of making the farm more profitable in the future?

09:52 – 10:36

One project we wanted to do was try to improve the fertility of the cows. Dylan will probably talk more about that. The second trial was to try and make better use of our grassland, and try to find different ways of finishing lambs without having to use creep. We’ve sown two fields with multi-species leys, which included chicory, plantain and red clover, so we’re trying to look at different ways of reducing costs, and to utilise our grassland a bit better.

10:37 – 10:57

Those resources - excellent! Of course, making the most of pasture, the cheapest source of forage you can get, is good on any farm. Looking at the landscape, growing grass is something you obviously do well. If I remember well, you won a grassland competition across Britain some years ago?

10:58 – 11:03

Yes. That was back in 2008. It’s quite possible that things have gone downhill since then!

11:04 – 11:06

I wouldn’t say that – not at all!

11:07 – 11:25

But that’s probably all we know! That is what we’ve been taught by our father and grandfather; they loved producing grassland – that was their world! They have passed that on to us, and then it’s only natural that we try to make the most of what we’ve got here.

11:24 – 11:42

And Dylan, looking at the cattle in front of us, you are keen to improve herd fertility, but before we go on to discuss the technology you adopted, what was the problem originally? Why did you decide that you needed to tackle the problem, because the calving interval had gone quite long, hadn’t it?

11:43 – 13:00

That was the biggest problem. We were calving more or less throughout the year. In 2020, we had some calving for ten months of the year. The reason was, in the past, we had bulls that weren’t fertile, and we hadn’t noticed soon enough. Traditionally, we liked to calve quite a few cows, about a third of them, in early spring – February, March and April, and the other two-thirds in May and June, but a lot of the cows were going on to calve at the end of the summer and early autumn. That made it difficult to manage the calves, the weaning and so on, and we had no batches of even calves to sell. Cows are easier to control if the calving interval is tight, and it’s easier to keep an eye on them.

13:01 – 13:12

The aim was to reduce the index, and tighten the calving interval. How did you then try to improve the situation?

13:13 – 14:24

Our vet, Joe Angell, has been working a lot with us. The project we had chosen was the MooCall HEAT collars to monitor cows in heat. There is a collar that goes on the bull’s neck, and then all the cows have tags with a special electronic chip inside, and then the collar recognises each time a cow is in heat. We receive this information on an app on our phone that tells us every time a cow is in heat. We can then keep a record of every single cow that has been served. If we find that a cow is not bulling when it should, then we call the vet to investigate the problem.

14:25 – 14:31

Had you heard of the this MoocCall technology before becoming a demonstration farm?

14:32 – 14:48

I had heard about them, but I didn’t know much; it’s something quite new. It was something new that we fancied doing here.

14:48 - 15:03

Then practically, the collar, of course, goes on the bull, and you need to get these special tags to go on the cattle, but was it expensive to invest in the equipment, and is there a lot of work involved with charging the batteries on the collar every now and then, and things like that?

15:04 - 16:20

It’s a system that costs £1,200/collar to buy at first. Then you have the annual fee that needs to be paid to the company, which costs about £200/year. It does work out quite expensive, but having been with the technology for two years, I find that it has huge advantages. There are also disadvantages. Some cows lose their tag, and then the collar on the bull is not going to recognise that cow. Also, the collar needs to be charged every six weeks to two months, especially if the bull is far from the house. If it’s not possible to get hold of its ring in the field, he needs to be brought in and take the collar off and charge it for a day or so before he goes back out.

16:21 - 16:27

Do you need phone signal for all the data to work and for the data to be sent through to the app?

16:28 – 16:48

It does require some kind of phone signal, but it does work on very little signal. The phone goes off quite often during the bulling period, because there’s something with the bull quite often.

16:49 – 16:59

Yes, and it’s a way for you to monitor the bull’s performance, and if somethings wrong, that you don’t find out too late, like the trouble you were having before.

17:00 - 17:21

It is very advantageous, especially if you’ve got a new bull. After the bull has been with them for the first three weeks, after that, if a lot of the cows are repeating, one immediately knows that there is a problem with the bull.

17:22 - 17:34

Also, it allows you to keep an eye on the cattle, and to call in the vet sometimes, if further investigation is required to see if there’s a reason why the cow is not in-calf.

17:34 – 17:52

We’ve found a few cows that aren’t cycling as they should, and then the vet has either given them PRIDS and injected them to get them bulling, so that the cows don’t lose two or three months. As it was before, we wouldn’t have found that out until maybe three months later when the vet would have been here scanning.

17:51 - 18:12

Do you feel that you know have a closer relationship with your vet, now that you are using more of him as a result of the project?

18:13 - 18:32

The vet is on the phone and we phone him quite often for advice, and that is what’s beneficial with Farming Connect – experts in the field on the other end of the phone.

18:33 - 18:50

And what are the results so far? I know you are still in the early stages of using the technology, but what are the results? You have managed to reduce the calving index to the ideal figure of exactly one year, but where are you at?

18:51 – 20:15

Back in 2020, the calving interval was over 10 months. It has come down now. Last year, we had some calving into the summer, more than what we wanted. It’s a difficult job – pulling a bull. I know that’s what we should be doing, but with pedigree cattle, it’s slightly different, especially if there are years of breeding behind a few cows and if she slips. But we’ve come closer to where we want to be. That said, the index was not far off at the beginning, just that the calving interval *(had gone out of sync),* and it’s difficult to pull the ones that have been calving in August and September - it’s difficult to gain enough on those. With the furthest ones, if they are pretty good cows, we’ve been leaving some empty over the winter, and get them to stand to the bull straight away in the spring when they go out.

20:16 - 20:21

With the heifers, you’ve been using a Saler bull, which is easier to calve, maybe?

20:22 - 20:49

Yes. We did use a Saler bull for a while, but that bull is no longer here – we’ve had a Welsh Black bull that produces a calf that’s easy to calve, and it’s a Welsh Black bull that the heifers received last summer. But it’s important to have a bull that produces a calf that’s easy to calve, especially in the first year, so that the heifers get back in-calf quickly.

20:50 - 20:52

And at what age are you aiming for the heifers to get in-calf?

20:53 - 21:14

As they are Welsh Black cattle, we want them to calve when they are three-years-old. Welsh Black is a slower-maturing breed, and we felt that calving them at two years of age would be too young, as they would not have grown enough.

21:15 - 21:22

And Aled, what do you think of the technology? Do the messages that comes through to the phone bother you, or something you look forward to?

21:23 – 21:47

The messages do come quite often at certain times of the year, but I do think this is the way forward. In the past, a bull was turned out in the summer or spring to the cows, and you would just hope for the best that it would work. But now, you have that certainty in your phone, and you know which ones are bulling and when, and if they don’t, then something needs to be done about it.

21:48 – 21:58

Have you been contacted by other farmers asking about you experience with these MooCall collars, farmers who may be considering using similar technology? Do they ask about you experiences?

21:59 – 22:22

Some have been asking, but it’s still very much a new thing, but the cost of it may be putting people off. But possibly, if more and more people buy it, the cost may go down *(and over time, the technology may become much more affordable*). It would be difficult to go back now to what we used to do and not use it.

22:23 – 22:31

You have started to get used to the technology, and you see the benefits in terms of management and having batches that are consistent in terms of size, but also, there is that financial impact.

22:32 - 23:01

Exactly. It’s easier to have batches of store cattle to sell if they are all of the same age. If we can get many of the cows to not calve after the end of June – that is the biggest target, or not to have cows calving in July or August. As things go, I don’t think we are far from achieving that.

23:02 – 23:06

And of course, you’ll start calving now, and the first ones are on the verge of arriving.

23:07 – 23:09

Yes. In about two or three weeks, the calves and lambs will come.

23:10 – 23:12

And the lambing! It will be all-go here.

23:13 – 23:17

We won’t have much rest then, for at least two months.

23:16 – 23:21

And with the sheep, do you finish all the lambs, or do you sell some as store lambs?

23:22 – 23:37

We finish the lambs. We sell about 250 Mule ewe lambs as breeding lambs. Other than that, we finish all the lambs and sell them through the live market.

23:38 – 24:06

And Aled, tell us about the second project you were also involved in. As well as looking at technology to improve herd fertility, you also wanted to improve grass management. As I mentioned earlier, as past winners of Britain’s leading grass growing competition, you did set the bar high, and I’m sure that experts, and people like Chris Duller, who worked with you, have said that you can only do so much, in terms of improvement, as you are starting at a high standard in the first place.

24:07 – 25:25

The biggest advantage of being a demonstration farm is being able to work with experts like Chris Duller. He is very good – he’s quite straightforward in the way he speaks, but that’s how people like it to be, because you know where you stand – he’s honest, and that’s how I like someone to be. We’ve done a few trials, but the main one was sowing both of these fields with multi-species leys. That’s not black and white, either. We’ve done one field, and that looks very good – that has been a success. But with the other field, rather than using a lot of ryegrass, we used a lot of legumes, herbs, plantain, chicory and red clover, and it looked excellent, and the crop had established well, and it looked good in the lead up to winter, but maybe the cold weather we had in April and May last year has left its toll on them – they don’t like the winters we get around here.

25:26 – 25:37

One of the fields you planted is not far from this shed. We’ll go over quickly; we’ll walk over quickly to see what it looks like. It looks nice from here.

25:38 – 25:50

Yes. This one has been a success. It looks good. We’ve had two crops of good-quality silage from it. Also, the lambs perform well on it.

25:51 – 25:54

What exactly was in this mix, then?

25:55 - 26:19

There was more ryegrass in this than the other field. There is a lot of red clover in it, plantain and chicory. Plantain and chicory tend to not survive more than two years, but so far, it looks quite promising, but we’ll see how it goes.

26:20 - 26:30

And the risk is, you’re not going to know how it’s going to perform until you try it out. How long is a ley like this supposed to last, compared to a traditional grass ley?

26:31 - 27:04

Well, we’ll see. With the other field, it hasn’t lasted a year, but that field receives little sunshine. The soil here is warmer – it’s quite difficult to look after. They don’t want to see any sheep during the winter. Chris Duller came over last April, and asked, “what are those fluffy things in the field? Get them off!”, and there were only ten dozen ewes there!

27:05 - 27:06

But resting is key?

27:07 - 27:14

They are difficult to look after – they are not easy to grow, and they have to be grazed using electric fences to make the most of them.

27:15 – 27:21

But this is a win-win situation during the summer when you need it to help with the finishing, or good quality silage as well?

27:22 - 27:48

Maybe we won’t be able to harvest everywhere - all the silage crops. You need the ‘bulk’, but you also need a lot of high-quality silage land to give to the youngstock.

27:49 - 27:56

Is it expensive to establish something like this? I would think that the cost of the seeds is more expensive?

27:57 - 28:25

Yes, the seeds do cost more. I don’t remember exactly, but I think the seeds cost about £90/acre. It’s definitely worth the cost of what we get out of it. There was a good crop of plantain and chicory in this field, and it was full of red clover. We’ll see how it turns out this year.

28:26 - 28:29

Did you test the soil before sowing?

28:30 - 28:47

Yes. It’s important to make sure that the lime is right, and a lot of potassium is needed. We’ve had to fertilise it heavily during the summer with potassium and phosphate, to make sure the soil is in the best condition.

28:48 - 28:58

Tell us about this project. One of the elements of the project was to look at fertiliser and experiment with different varieties. How has that worked?

28:59 – 30:37

The trial we did last year was to compare ordinary urea with protected urea on two different fields. Protected urea is supposed to be better at reducing ammonia losses. With urea, if it’s warm, they say about 40% of ammonia gas is lost to the atmosphere, and that’s pointless, isn’t it? That needs to be avoided. We applied fertiliser in April, and I think the results worked well the first time (the protected urea against the ordinary urea), and I think we’ve grown 30% more grass with the protected one. But when we used the protected urea against the ammonium nitrate when we were closing fields off for silage, because it had been such a long dry period, the layer that protected the urea had broken down and hadn’t worked as it should, but the nitrate worked. I think the nitrate has grown 20% more grass than the protected urea. It very much depends on the weather and the situation.

30:38 - 30:43

Yes – the conditions do have an effect.

30:44 - 30:54

It makes sense to use it, although it costs 10-15% more than ordinary urea. There is a place for it, I’m sure.

30:55 - 31:00

Will you be doing that from now on – adjusting the way you use your fertiliser?

31:01 – 31:36

There is probably room to use more of it, although fertiliser prices have gone through the roof recently. The truth is, we cannot go without using fertiliser. I know the price has trebled to what it used to be, but the reality is, on a farm like this, it’s pretty full, and we need nitrogen to grow. It’s possible to keep an eye on the lime, make the most of the manure and rotational grazing too, but you can’t go without fertiliser – that would be a step back – the ground needs to be fed.

31:37 – 31:43

But it needs to be done in an efficient way because it’s so expensive, as you’ve mentioned, and you have to make sure you are getting your money’s worth.

31:44 – 31:49

And make sure there are no losses, and make sure nothing goes to waste.

31:50 – 32:03

And what are the next steps in terms of these trials? Is there more trial work, or more research to do, and gather all this information you have learned over the last three years?

32:04 – 32:57

In the final year of being a demonstration farm, collect more data, see how this turns out and see how long they will last – see how much life are in these multi-species leys. It’s easy to think they’re a ‘no-brainer’, but they don’t work in every situation. They are difficult to look after, but I don’t think the whole farm needs to be brought down to just grass – different things are needed. With the current pricing of creep feed for lambs, it is still cheaper to fertilise the land and get fields down to multi-species leys, and get more benefit out of pasture, rather than using creep.

32:58 - 33:00

Have you reduced your reliance on concentrates?

33:01 - 33:53

Yes. It does take time, but that’s the goal, which is to refrain from using concentrates.

33:54 - 33:56

And finish all from grass?

33:57 - 33:37

I don’t know. Because we lamb a lot and try to sell quite a few lambs early, I can’t see us doing without creep to get those first ones off, but trying to increase grass utilisation during the summer maybe, to get more lambs off, before they need to be fed in the lead-up to winter.

33:38 – 34:08

So you still have plenty to focus on. But looking to the future, you are a family farm farming together as brothers – and of course, your father (and I can see him on the yard there, watching us talk!) – but what is the future of the family farm from your point of view? Of course, you want to improve efficiency and performance, but there are many elements involved with a family farm – there’s history, tradition and community, but what’s important to you in terms of the future of the family farm?

34:09 – 34:48

I think it’s important that we keep going and keep doing what we are doing. There’s no point in all of us diversifying into dairy, poultry and whatever; it’s important for us to stick to what we know and make the most of what we have. I think the red meat sector has a very bright future. We’ve got a good story to tell. People want to eat foods now that are produced locally, and we should pull through, I think.

34:49 – 34:50

And Dylan, what do you think?

34:51 – 35:16

It’s important to be positive, look forward to the future, and be prepared for the challenge that’s ahead of us, and not to worry too much. It’s hard work, but we need to persevere, and I think we’ll be alright.

35:17 – 35:40

That’s a good message, and I agree with you 100%. Obviously, you are persevering, and obviously you are putting the effort in, and it’s wonderful to see the achievements you’ve had, and the place looks amazing. Hopefully now, you can have a successful lambing and a tight calving, and thank you on behalf of Jim, myself and everybody in Farming Connect. Thank you very much for your time on this podcast today.

35:41 – 35:43

Thank you very much.

35:47 – 36:22

If you would like more information about the support available through Farming Connect, then please contact your local development officer or the Service Centre on 08456 000 813. And there we are, we have reached the end of yet another episode. We’ll be back in two weeks’ time, with plenty more to talk about, but in the meantime, don’t forget to hit ‘subscribe’ on whichever platform you use, to keep notified of all new episodes of Ear to the Ground. On behalf of the team in Farming Connect and myself, Aled Jones, thank you for listening, and goodbye for now.