

## Farming Connect Management Exchange

Josh Phillips

Winter forage management utilisation and importance of genetics in the sheep industry

England and Scotland

June and November 2019

### Background

Since leaving college in 2016, I began working off-farm as part of my father's fencing contracting business and working at home on weekends on our 300-acre family farm, of which 90 acres being rented. We are currently running 600 ewes with the aim to increase numbers to 1,000.

### Management Exchange Visits

#### **SRUC – Kirkton Farm, Scottish West Highlands**



Kirkton Farm is the SRUC hill and mountain research centre located in the Scottish West Highlands on an altitude range of 200-1,025m and an annual rainfall of 2,528mm. They are currently running 1,200 ewes consisting of performance recorded Scottish Blackface and Lleyn ewes which were added in 2006, and then run alongside the Blackface in 2013.

The Blackface ewes have been recorded since 1998 in 3 different flocks. One flock is picked on EBVs alone (Selection), the second is picked on looks alone (Industry), and the third is kept to represent an average hill flock (Control). The score of the Selection flock has risen from an index average score of 30 in 1999 to 370 in 2011, showing £4 per head better output over the Control flock and £2.50 per head over the Industry flock. The Industry flock saw an index score increase of 100 over the 12 years.

Since adding the Lleyn flock in 2013, replacing the Blackface Industry flock, the Lleyns have been outperforming the Blackface on scanning, lambing and weaning. Although, the Selection line weans at 2kg per head heavier at 36kg. In 2018, they began recording feed

intakes and time to slaughter. The Lleyns finished a week faster at 59 days eating 210g of feed per day compared to 2,750g for the Blackface.



#### **David Girvan - Corrymony Farm, Inverness-Shire**

Corrymony Farm currently runs a 1,400-ewe flock with a mix of Lleyns and shedders originally out of Wiltshire Horn ewes. They are also currently running a multiplier unit of Stabilisers and Stabiliser cross herd. Ewes are fed on fodder beet from January until March to rest the ground and to allow pasture covers to rise for lambing.



#### **John Scott – Fearn Farm, Ross-Shire**

Fearn Farm runs 6,000 ewes and 120 cows across 4 different holdings. Their stud ewes are Aberfields, Texel, Suffolk and Beltex; with a commercial flock of mostly Aberfield cross ewes. Homebred tups are reared solely on grass and sold off-farm at the 'Great from Grass Ram Sale'. All tups are performance-recorded with 3 weights and given an ultrasound back scan to give an index. Ewes are fed on fodder beet varieties; the main variety is Geronimo, and Robbos, Brigadier and Jamon are also grown. At a cost of 4p/kgDM, they are fed with high protein red clover silage from January until 2 weeks pre-lambing where they are

supplemented with fodder beet. Young stock is fed on a variety of swedes including Lomond, Gowrie and Ruta tofte.



#### **Neil and Debbie McGowan – Incheoch, Perthshire**

Neil and Debbie McGowan run 1,200 ewes on their farm with the majority being performance recorded Lleyms and pedigree Texels. 80 tups are being sold at an on-farm sale. They also have a 200-cow herd of pedigree, performance recorded cows managed in commercial conditions. Ewes are recorded on Signet along with a home lambing index score. They have a strict culling policy with heavy selection for worm resistance and tolerance.



#### **Alex Brewster – Rotmell, Perthshire**

Alex Brewster keeps Blackface ewes crossed with an Aberfield ram in order to sell ewe lambs. His aim for the future is to have a composite breed to improve eating quality. He also runs a herd of pure-bred Aberdeen Angus cows selected for performance off-grass. The whole grazing platform has been rotationally grazed with cattle clearing up sheep pastures in order to decrease the worm burden, which has led to very minimal worming within the last 4 years. He had a big emphasis on mixed species lays to further reduce worm burden and improve soil diversity.



#### **Michael Blanche – Culteuchar Farm, Perthshire**

Michael's ewes were a wool shedding composite including Easycare and shedding Texel genetics to leave a fully shedding ewe. Low inputs were needed and they perform well on a rotational grazing system.

#### **John Ritchie – Montalt Farm, Perthshire**

Montalt Farm had 720 ewes, but they are moving towards a closed flock based on Aberfields. They also had 80 head of Saler type cows. Ewes are lambed outside during mid-April on bare fields, with swedes spreaded in them. Ewes are shifted every 2-3 days post tailing to allow the fields to have a 90-day rest, with lambs being weaned at 36kg or at 95 days. Lambs are weighed every 3 weeks through EID recording. Ewes are put back onto rotation 2 weeks pre-tupping, and then all grass is wintered until the grass runs out. The ewes are then put onto swedes, and fed barley and soya 3-6 weeks before lambing, depending on their condition.



### **Yvonne Jones – Killernie Farm, Fife**

Since moving to Killernie three years ago, ewes have been changed from performance recorded Scottish Blackface (last 20 years) to performance recorded Easycare with the influence of a shedding Texel to help with conformation. The farm is currently being fenced off to increase the number of paddocks for an easier rotation of the ewes. Hoggs are tugged and kept inside through winter, while the ewes are out-wintered on silage and then brought in to lamb in mid-April.



### **James Logan – Pirntaton, Selkirkshire**

James Logan keeps 3,000 ewes, including Lleyne and Romney cross ewes; 120 sucklers, the majority being Aberdeen Angus with some Stabiliser influence; and 320 breeding hinds. The ewes are kept to a strict management policy with notches taken out of the ear to easily identify any problem sheep. These ewes are placed into the B flock where they are put to homebred Suffolk rams. Ewes are set stocked on covers of 1,200-1,400kgDM/ha and have recently reverted back to set stocking until weaning, with weights increased by 4kg. Ewes and lambs are then put on a rotational grazing system after weaning. Ewes are put into a pre-lambing rotation, with 1-2 day shifts to help clean out covers and reset for quality grazing in early spring. 9ha of fodder beet is grown for in-lamb ewes to help fill the deficit as



grass growth drops, a further 26ha of redstart is grown for hinds and dry cows, and 2ha of swedes is grown for homebred Texel, Suffolk and Abertex ram hoggets.



#### **Adrian Coombe – Dupath Farm, Cornwall**

Dupath is running a flock of 500 North Country Cheviot mules, all sourced from one farm near Skipton. All ewes are part of the RamCompare scheme. Adrian hasn't found a particular breed that stands out from the rest, as all rams are high indexed and has shown a £5 difference between the top 5% and top 25% rams. All breeds used had entirely grass-fed lambs sold in first draft at 14 weeks, with 8 being over 50kg. This year, the tups provided were Texel, Hampshire, Meatlinc and Shropshire.



#### **Tim White – Proven shedders, Wiltshire**

Tim runs an Exlana flock which he has grazing in and around on the Salisbury plains on short term let. Tim has developed the breed over the last 20 years starting with Wiltshire Horn and Lleyns with other shedding breeds. All ewes have been performance recorded since starting out. He now runs a 1,000 Exlana flock with other multiplier farms helping to breed females and rams to be sold. 100 rams were sold this year with the majority being sold at an on-farm sale near Tiverton. Lambs are selected heavily for worm and footrot resistance which are recorded using SIG. These traits mean that minimal shepherding is needed which

allows it to become easier to reduce labour costs. The cost of recording is roughly £13 per head, excluding labour cost.

### **Matt Harding - Bentley Suffolks, Warwickshire**

Bentley Suffolks run a flock of 400 ewes, which consist of a mix of pedigree Suffolks, Aberblacks and Aberfields. All ewes and lambs are performance recorded with rams being sold off-farm, with some being sold at the main NSA sale in Builth Wells. All lambs are entirely forage fed whilst being off-wintered on nearby arable ground at a cost of £91 per acre (these costs included seed drilling and fertiliser). 40 acres of turnips held 205 lambs for 16 weeks. These lambs averaged 50kg as they were turned into the crop and left at an average of 90kg which left an average DLWG of 302g/day. Ewes are also wintered off-farm on turnips, but due to the wet autumn they are now grazing neighbouring ground of oat stubble as conditions didn't allow the ground to be drilled.



### **Conclusion**

As a result of the above visits, there are plenty of ideas for me to take home. First thing I'll do is to start implementing a much stricter culling policy, as it will help reduce costs and labour. This should also make it easier to increase ewe numbers as ewes will be needing less attention, therefore, workload shouldn't increase greatly with the increased numbers. The visits have made me look a lot more into KPIs and the importance of measuring every aspect, which I hope will future-proof our business. For out-wintering, I think fodder beet will be the best option to fill the fodder gap through the winter as the costs per head are very low at 5p/day. This will work out cheaper than sending ewes off-farm to be wintered. I don't think I'll performance record as I don't feel that the costs can be justified on a commercial system without selling breeding stock from the farm, although, I've definitely seen the benefits recorded rams can offer and think they are well worth the value. I cannot

thank everyone I've met on the trip enough as the knowledge shared has been very valuable.