

FARMING CONNECT MANAGEMENT EXCHANGE.

Pwllpeiran (West Wales); Moffat (Scotland)

October 2019

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Background

My husband and his family rent ground from Penpont Estate, which is located 3 miles west of Brecon. We are a traditional upland sheep and suckler beef farm.

My Management Exchange project is split into two halves:

- 1) The Penpont Project
- 2) Increasing the resilience of our beef suckler herd.

1. The Penpont project.

After the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum in 2016, the consultation document produced by Welsh Government “Brexit and our Land” mentioned supporting farmers for providing public goods. Our landlord approached us and expressed a wish that he would like to do some environmental work on a 200-acre piece of ground which runs from the A40 up to Mynydd Illtyd. He has also included 100 acres of his own woodland to the project.

Our landlord had been inspired by Charles Burrell and the work he had done at Knepp Castle Estate and has visions of rewilding the allocated site. He also wanted to involve a group of young people from Action for Volunteers, who are researching what conservation work they would like to see done on this piece of ground. We have all signed a Memorandum of Understanding which is a formal agreement between ourselves (the tenants), the landlords and Action for Volunteers to work together towards a common vision. It is not a legally binding contract; it is a serious pledge of commitment. We have formally expressed our willingness to commit knowledge, skills, energy and resources to the project. The statement below states the aim of the project.

“Our vision is that the Penpont Project acts as an exemplar of collaborative youth-led nature restoration and sustainable food production for Government, NGOs, farmers and land managers across the UK, whilst catalysing a movement of young people empowered to protect the natural world.”

As far as our input is concerned, we have no idea what would be the best way forward, therefore, I applied for Management Exchange funding so that Dr Mariecia Fraser could visit the site and so that we could visit her, at Pwllpeiran. We wanted to gain knowledge from her in order to put together a proposal. This proposal would include what we consider might be the best way forward to enable an improvement in biodiversity, but also enables us as farmers to carry on farming without too much disruption.

Dr Mariecia Fraser has a background in animal science and grazing ecology and specialise in developing and testing management strategies for upland systems. Her research interests include: species and breed differences in diet selection and ingestive behaviour, conservation grazing, nutrient supply from forages, greenhouse gas emissions from grazing animals and the bio-energy potential of semi-natural grasslands.

2. Increasing the resilience of our beef suckler herd

At the moment, we buy in heifer calves from the dairy industry as replacements to our suckler herd. These calves have a lot more Holstein influence in them than what we would like. We have problems with maintaining condition, mastitis and longevity. There is also the added risk to biosecurity when you are buying in calves.

We would like to become a closed herd and would like to do this by changing to Saler cows. A few years ago, we bought a few Saler heifers, which seem to thrive within our system. They calve relatively easily to a Charolais bull, their calves are thrifty and they have a short calving index. We decided that we would like to visit established Saler herds to learn more about the breed.

Our itinerary

We left home on Tuesday 1 October and arrived at Pwllpeiran Upland Research Station to meet with Dr Fraser and visit her experimental plots.

When we arrived, we had a discussion about the Penpont Project. We discussed our interest in doing environmental work on the allocated site, and how the work could be in line with the Public Goods section of the next agricultural policy while enabling us to carry on farming commercially and profitable.

We then went to look at the experimental plots.

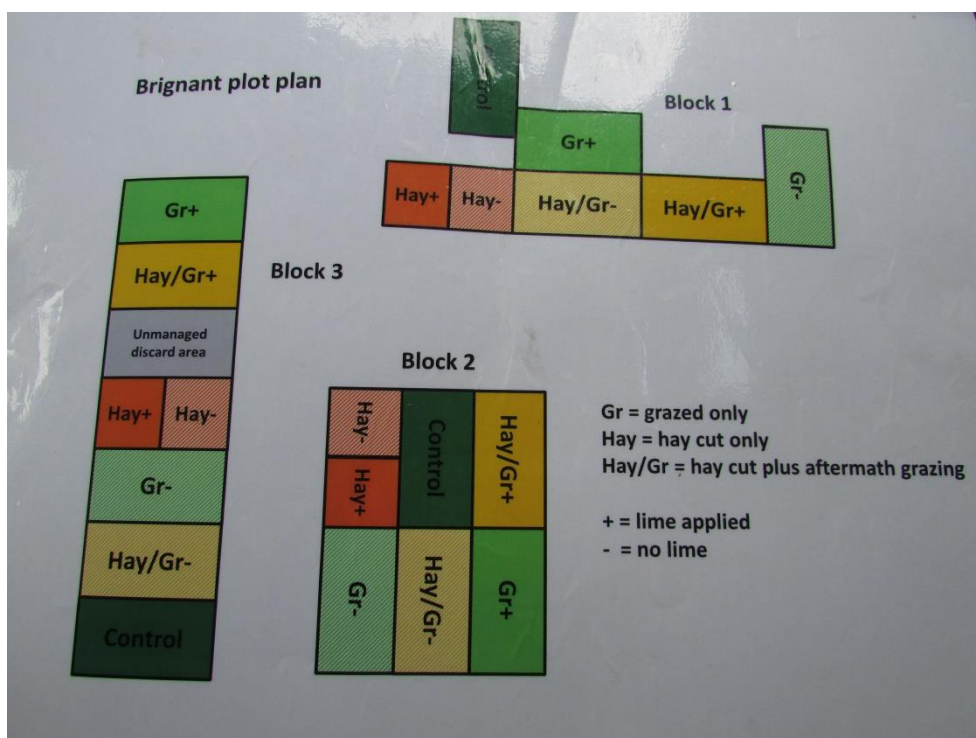


Figure 1. A plan showing the different treatments the Brignant plots had received at Pwllpeirian.

The Brignant long-term plots were set up 25 years ago, when there was an interest in reverting improved pasture back to something more natural. The different treatments to the plots were grazing only, hay cut only and hay cut and aftermath grazing. Half of all the different treatments had an application of lime and the other half without. Cutting took place after 12 July. There was no added Nitrogen (N), Phosphorus (P) or Potassium (K). The control plot was treated as normal with cutting, aftermath grazing and applications of N, P, K and lime as required.

The control plot was dominated by grassland species but the plot that had been limed and cut after the 12 July showed a shift away from grassland to broadleaved plants and wild flowers. From surveys done on these plots, it can be seen that greater plant diversity has led to an increase in insects, slugs and frogs.

Another plot had been left for 25 years without any treatments or grazing. What had been left with was poor plant diversity with Yorkshire fog and moss being the dominant species, but although floral diversity is poor, it provides a great habitat for small mammals like voles or mice which birds can feed on. Looking right across the different plots, we could see a big response to the different treatments. If we want to maximise the biodiversity of an area it is not just one treatment that is needed but a mixture of treatments i.e. grazed and cut area, as each different area provides a home for something which enables us to maximize the biodiversity of the area.

The visit to Dr Fraser was very useful as it was clear that when it came to our project site, we would have a greater chance of increasing biodiversity if we treated different parts of the ground differently. Perhaps leaving an area to be grazed or cut until after 12 July and fencing off an area next to woodland without any grazing or treatments would create a habitat for small mammals. Different treatments would take place in between for the other areas. This seems a better way forward to us rather than just one prescription of extensification or rewilding.

From Pwllpeiran, we headed north to Carlisle.

On Wednesday 2 October we headed north again to Moffat where we visited Alisdair Davidson at Poldean Farm. He has a herd of 340 Saler cows. A small number form his nucleus herd of pedigree Salers from which he then breeds his heifers for his commercial herd. The commercial herd are put to a Charolais bull. He buys his bulls direct from France. He prefers a small, more muscular bull to put over his cows. All his cows calve within a 6 week period. The calves are all the same golden-brown colour and because of this and the tight calving period, they are very easy to match up when it comes to selling. Out of the 340 cows he calved last spring, Alisdair touched nine. Three were due to caesareans and six had to be put on to suck. The cows are of quiet temperament and he has no problems with them when he or either of his two part time employees have to work with them. The cows looked in lovely condition and we could not get over the uniformity of the calves. He said that he sells the cows at 13-year-old! We seem to be lucky at the moment if we have a cow last that long without going barren or suffers from mastitis.

We were very grateful for Alisdair for giving up his afternoon to show us around his farm and share with us his experiences of rearing and breeding Saler cattle. He is very keen on knowledge exchange, which I think is why he enjoyed his time being a monitor farm in Scotland.

We stayed Wednesday night in Moffat and the next morning, Thursday 3 October, we headed east to Melrose area to visit the Livesy family and their Cleuchhead herd of Salers. They have had a lot of success at both shows and market. They have been breeding Saler cattle for more than 25 years after bringing some of the first imports in to the country. They run a herd of 80 pedigree cows alongside commercials that are between 50% and 95% Salers. We viewed some of the bulls and heifers they would be selling in Castle Douglas Market.

Next Steps

1. The Penpont Project.

Going forward, all parties, the landlord, us the tenants and the young people from Action for Volunteers will look at four key questions regarding the ground involved in the Penpont Project.

- a) What was there?
Look at historical records and ask previous tenants how the ground was managed years ago.
- b) What is there?
Look at current practices and do baseline surveys of flora and fauna.
- c) What could be there?
Look at this with help from specialist consultants.
- d) What should be there?
Major decisions to be made going forward.

Action for Volunteers will be visiting the site towards the end of February. We will hopefully discuss questions a and b above.

2. Suckler beef herd

Since going to Scotland on the Management Exchange trip we purchased 6 heifers and 1 bull from the Livesy family at Castle Douglas Market. The Saler bull will be put on the Saler heifers and a few other suitable cows and we will hopefully gradually replace all of our dairy cross cows with Salers. This will obviously take a while and we will take the hit with Saler bull calves, but we feel that the attraction of a closed herd is worth it.

Key messages

What are Public Goods and who decides? At the moment, we have no idea what the next agricultural policy will look like, but if increasing biodiversity is deemed to be a public good then after our visit to Dr Fraser, we have been able to formulate a proposal which we will put forward to the Penpont Project. We feel that instead of just a blanket prescription of extensive grazing with no inputs (rewilding), it would be better to have a number of different prescriptions across the ground with perhaps woodland added to the steep and awkward parts of the ground.

Between TB, the anti-meat agenda and other factors it is very hard to make a profit with suckler beef herds. We believe that trying to aspire to a closed herd should hopefully increase our herd health and profitability. From what we have seen on our Management Exchange we hope our cows will have increased longevity, calve easily, produce thrifty calves that take their first colostrum quickly and that the cows will then return to the bull quickly.