

Ear to the Ground Podcast Transcript

Episode 29-

Aled Rhys Jones-

Hello and welcome to Ear to the Ground, the podcast brought to you by Farming Connect. I'm your host Aled Jones and today's episode comes from Blaenglowon Fawr Farm near Talgarreg in Ceredigion. It's the home of Bleddyn Davies and his family who run a mixed beef and sheep enterprise. Bleddyn is also an advanced Prosper from Pasture group member and we are here today to see how he's benefitted from the programme and how it's allowed him to adjust his grazing management to ensure a resilient business going forward, particularly considering the potential challenges that lie ahead for the sheep industry here in Wales. Also, for listeners that might be interested, a new application window for the Prosper from Pasture programme runs from 26 October until 26 November and more details can be found on the Farming Connect website. Bleddyn, thank you very much for the welcome. We are currently in one of the sheep sheds on the farm here at Blaenglowon but we hope to head out to see the land and go for a walk about shortly as it's a beautiful day here in Ceredigion. But, before we do that however, perhaps you could provide an introduction to yourself and the farm here.

Bleddyn Davies

I'm Bleddyn Davies, I farm here at Blaenglowon Fawr in partnership with my mother and father. We are a 300 acre beef and sheep family farm. We run 750 ewes here at the moment. They consist mainly of Tregaron type Welsh and Aberfield x Welsh. The Welsh go back to a Aberfield or a Welsh tup for our own replacements and possibly sell a few of the ewe lambs. And then the Aberfield x Welsh go back to a Primera tup with the sole purpose of producing finished lambs off a grass based system alone without the reliance of concentrates. We also run a herd of 25 suckler cows which are mainly Limousin X and Belgian Blue X, and they go back to a Limousine bull. They calve from the end of March through to the end of May. And then we also run around 40 dairy beef calves, and we do about 40 every year and they also run on a rotational grazing system as well.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Have you introduced a lot of change compared to the system that your parents used to farm here, is it very different to how it was here ten to twenty years ago?

Bleddyn Davies-

I wouldn't say that much difference, just slowly moving forward and make the most of what we've got here. We're in a good area for grass growing and a poor area for crop growing so it makes sense to us to make the best use of what we've got here. We are only six miles away from the sea but we do go up to a 1,000ft on the top fields. It does suit itself to rotational grazing as its quite free draining land. We have changed some of the breeds and the management system here, but the main principal of producing prime lamb is still the focus point for us.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Yes, we'll come on to a few of the things that you've mentioned there in a moment, but as a young farmer in the industry, and I know there's a lot of change on the horizon, how do you feel about the future and how do you see the next few years panning out for the industry?

Bleddyn Davies-

It certainly going to be a very interesting few years, five to ten years possibly and it's going to be quite challenging. Personally I think it's about focusing on your own farm and what you're good at and what the farm is good at, making the most of it and concentrating on what's within your own control and let the rest look after itself.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Yes, there are a lot of things that are beyond our control. The political environment is very changeable and the market prices are very volatile but at least you can focus on things in your control within the farm here. Talk us through some of the things you've done recently, you mentioned the breed change and also the grazing management, which has been a key focus of yours.

Bleddyn Davies-

On the breed side of the sheep we've moved towards the Welsh and Welsh x Aberfield flock from keeping a Suffolk x Speckle and the Beulah Speckled face. But we felt that the longevity of the Welsh was better and we put more focus in producing finished lambs in the last couple of years. And then on the grazing side, two years ago, I started going through the Master Grass programme with Farming Connect and I started to focus more on the grass. It's always been an interest of mine, grassland and grazing systems, since I was in university in Aberystwyth and improving that knowledge. The Master Grass chance came and from there I trialled a rotational grazing system with the lambs for the first year with a red clover lay, and that worked pretty well. There were a lot of lessons learnt, so after that we invested a bit more in electric fence infrastructure and moved on to doing the ewes and lambs when they were a month old. As the fields improved slowly, we extended it so that the flock is on a rotational system all year round.

Aled Rhys Jones- Clearly you had an interest in rotational grazing before the Master Grass course but that course gave you the confidence and the inspiration to go out and do it?

Bleddyn Davies- Yes, it did, and it also gave me some knowledge as well to ensure that I didn't do more damage than good to the ground and to the animals in reality. You can also take a lot of things away through open days with Farming Connect which focuses on rotational grazing. Also, the contacts I've made through both those elements, there are people you can call upon if you need some advice here and there to what's best to do. It seems to be going not too bad at the moment anyway.

Aled Rhys Jones-

What did your family think of the system, I know you farm very close to your parents, did they support the idea?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, we were all a bit weary at the start to see how much work it would be to set it up and was grass going to grow to match the demand we had. But in all fairness, I did have some freedom to start off on the lambs to see if it worked and when I suggested using it on the ewes and lambs they said, carry on and see if you can do it. My moto in reality is, that if you don't try it once you'll never know if it works or not. So we tried it and it's still going on here.

Aled Rhys Jones-

So what difference did you notice in lamb performance after implementing a rotational grazing system?

Bleddyn Davies-

I suppose that there wasn't much difference in lamb performance, but the main difference we saw was that the quality of the red clover lay improved. We saw that more red clover survived year on year so we do have a better sward now and with that we were able to stock higher. We could then fatten more lambs on less area and keep more grass for the priority stock which were the ewes going back to the tup.

Aled Rhys Jones-

So you've looked at the rotational system alongside improving the grassland leys, have you done any reseeding?

Bleddyn Davies-

We haven't done much reseeding. We do have a reseeding programme here but it's not a very extensive one. Some of the fields I use during the winter for rotational grazing would be a bit awkward for reseeding as they are big fields, so I would be taking a big part out of the rotation if we reseeded them. But by being a bit ruthless on the rotational grazing and stripping the grass back and allowing the best grasses to come back, I have seen a definite improvement in quality.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And does that enable you to finish the lambs all off grass and reduce your reliance on creep or possibly no creep at all?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, well we haven't bought any creep here for the last two years. So it's very much a grass based system here. We do try and get everything away from here before the turn of the year to provide the chance for land to bounce back before we turn the ewes and lambs out. And due to grazing management when the lambs are on the ewes, we've seen more lambs being sold earlier this year than previous years. We were a 100 lambs ahead at weaning point this year compared to last year and we also have less lambs left here at the moment.

Aled Rhys Jones-

So are they fattening quicker then on these lays would you say?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, I would say so, because we have been able to keep good quality fodder in front of them and through the Prosper from Pasture programme, we had grass samples taken which came back last week. Dry matter content was 12%, protein came back at 29% and ME at 12%. If I went out to buy that in a bag, it would cost me an arm and a leg.

Aled Rhys Jones-

It goes back to what we constantly hear that grass is the cheapest form of feed that you can supply and if you can get that quality then it's a huge saving for the business. It's all down to weather and if

conditions suit. If it goes cold you might be lacking grass at certain points of the year. But this year in particular if we did need a get out clause, price of store lambs have been high enough to justify it.

Aled Rhys Jones

Yes, it's been a good year in terms of prices. But talk us through the grazing management, say for example over the course of the entire season from lambing all the way through until your last lambs are sent off for slaughter. How do you manage that system?

Bleddyn Davies

Once they've lambed they'll have a day or two in here in the sheep shed in individual pens. Then they'll be out on set stocked fields around the farm. They'll then be moved between three weeks and four weeks of age up to the top fields then, where they're rotationally grazed in mobs of around 220-230 ewes. They will then be rotationally grazed until weaning when the 300 heaviest lambs go on to a red clover lay. The ewes stay on their rotation and the rest of the lambs stay together on another rotation. Then moving on towards tupping the ewes are used to clean up any fields that need to be grazed and rest in a way then, while we keep on adding to the 300 on red clover. So if we take 50 away to the abattoir we add another 50 in to take their place to keep on top of the grass there. Then, when it comes to tupping the ewes come off the rotation and are back to being set stocked around the fields around the shed again where they were turned out. Then, once they've finished tupping at the end of November, they will go up to the top fields again, an area of 110 acres, and they'll be rotationally grazed until a week before lambing. They'll have a hectare allocation every two and a half days during that period.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And was that a plan you developed specifically for this farm or did you use external help and indeed the Prosper from Pasture programme to develop that?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, advice from Prosper from Pasture definitely helped me in the first year and they've helped me again this year as I've adjusted. Last year, the field size was two hectares. I did lose a day or two here and there due to bad weather and ewes stomping more of the grass during that weather when they were walking around looking for shelter. So this year, I've halved that and gone down to hectare blocks for two and a half days which should reduce damage and allow me to lose less days of grazing then.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And do you intend, on the back of the success you've seen with this system, to increase your sheep numbers? Do you think you can carry a lot more stock on the same amount of land because you're grazing differently?

Bleddyn Davies-

It's definitely been proved that we can grow more grass, and definitely proven that we can carry more sheep, but this year hasn't been the year to go out and buy ewes for our system so we've stuck to breeding our own replacements for now to try and increase numbers for the future.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Yes, so you're planning to build and increase over a sustainable period of time. Talk us through the mentality and the concept of this all grass wintering system, do you think that's key to try to minimise cost?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, it's definitely down to looking at the costs, and balance the cost between what you used to spend and what's needed for the system. The all grass wintering system is a system that we have used before, but now with a bit more accuracy. We used to keep them out all year round but there was a bale of silage here and there, an energy bucket and a bit of cake if the weather went bad. We also tried fodder beat which was another cost to bring in, but with this system now they will just be on grass until a week before lambing. We'll be aiming to place quite big covers in front of them so they'll have plenty of food. But working it out against previous years, from all the bought-in cost between tuppings and including lambing, we have saved £2.30 a head on bought-in feed.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Yes, it's a big saving. But was it a bit of a risk the first year you were trialling this system and did you question if the ewes would be in the right condition come lambing?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, it was definitely a risk. We do tend to pull out some of the older ewes, which aren't in peak condition then. They will then run with the triplets after scanning so they'll have a bit more priority. But yes, it was a nervous time trying to make sure it worked.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Well it's a glorious day, the sun is shining here at Blaenglowon Farm it's probably best to take a look at some of the top paddocks to see how it's done on the ground.

Bleddyn Davies-

Well, we are here at the top of the farm. We are at around 950 feet here. Looking east on a clear day it's clear to see Llyn y Fan Fawr and Llyn y Fan Fach. And then looking to the west we are looking out across Cardigan Bay, and if you are here on a clear day you can see all the way up the bay and as far as Ynys Enlli and to the top of Pen Llyn.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Well it's a fabulous spot that I've past numerous times but haven't appreciate the view. We can see the paddock system clearly in front of us, and there's a big mob of sheep in the distance that we'll talk about but I do understand that this area is referred locally as Banc Sion Cwilt. Tell us the legend that is Sion Cwilt.

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, as you said it's referred locally as Banc Sion Cwilt, apparently a local smuggler called Sion Cwilt used to hide his contraband in the seventeen hundreds. I haven't found any yet but you never know there might still be some here.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Well if you manage to find it during recording this podcast we'll split it, is that ok with you Bleddyn?

Bleddyn Davies-

Seventy-thirty split then.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Tell us more about the mob that we see in front of us, you were telling us earlier that you have 750 sheep in one mob?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, that's 750, all the sheep in one mob. They were split earlier in the year, between ewes that were in good body condition and the ones that could do with a bit extra on their back and they were on a leader follower system. But they've all come up to condition and they are all running together now.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And what's the size of that paddock they're on over there?

Bleddyn Davies-

That's currently a two hectare paddock, that's the size of paddock I was running last year, but the field that we are in now, I've already split it into hectare blocks so they'll be on half what they're on now during the winter.

Aled Rhys Jones-

So the intention is to get 750 ewes on a hectare block then?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, 750 will be intensively grazed on one hectare block for two and a half days. They'll be going in to covers of around just over 3,000kgDM/ha and coming out of covers around 1,300kgDM/ha, basically re-setting the pasture ready for the more productive grasses to come back to next year.

Aled Rhys Jones-

I see. And what's the rest period you give to each paddock then before they come around again?

Bleddyn Davies-

120 days is the aim, some get more and some get less. But they are not on the same direction of rotation every year so I try to rest fields quite a bit so that we ensure that soil structure remains at optimum level.

Aled Rhys Jones-

I see, so you stagger it then. You have a mixture of permanent and temporary fencing. So you use some electric fencing, has that worked quite well for you?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, the area we've got for the all-grass wintering system is 110 acres, there's four 20-acre fields and a 35-acre field so they've then been split up with electric fences.

Aled Rhys Jones-

You mentioned earlier that you have some solar powered components to these fences that makes it easier for you to manage.

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, the energisers we use are the solar powered ones, it reduces the risk of batteries going flat and sheep running wild and entering paddocks they shouldn't be entering.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Yes of course, that's critically important for this system. We are here on a beautifully dry day, and the land here is very dry as well, there's free draining soils here.

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, we are quite lucky it is free draining, and it's also quite high and steep in certain areas so it dries out pretty fast. Last year we did have a couple of wet days through the winter which did turn the surface a little sticky but because they were only on a paddock for a short period of time it didn't do any permanent damage and the grass soon recovered.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Yes, you mentioned storm Dennis in an earlier conversation and it's when the weather turns, you really need to hold your nerve on a system like this?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, we are actually standing in the field where the sheep were on during storm Dennis, and during that we had to revert to a bit of a secondary plan where we had to move them off onto a sacrifice field for a few days until the weather settled and then they came back on rotation.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Is that a difficult thing to see, that you see the fields being poached when the weather turns bad? Can there be a temptation to move them quicker or possibly put them on a larger paddock because of the mess?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, there can be, it does cause a few nervous days when you look at the weather and it promises heavy rain for a few days. Last year I possibly missed a few days, if I had stuck to it and left them there for a couple of extra days....but the soil holds up pretty well and they don't cause a lot of damage. They're not the heaviest sheep, so I think they are well suited to this type of land.

Aled Rhys Davies-

I guess, that it can be surprising how fast land bounces back from poached damage like that?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, well before storm Dennis on another piece of this rotation, they did damage one paddock badly, but they were moved off that area and within two weeks the pasture was back to a lush green colour. So it does show the resilience of grass and what you can put it through to get the best out of it.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And you're in quite a visible spot here, you've got the road passing nearby, is it sometimes a challenge when you have neighbouring farmers looking in and noticing the poaching and quick to pass comment on the system?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, it's definitely something. We are so close to the main road and we have a nice view here so you have to think that if I can see them, they can also see you. So it does add that element, and you can't do too many mistakes or someone will soon be on your back.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And in terms of the investment to get this system up and running and the fences and the infrastructure how much did that cost for you?

Bleddyn Davies-

We did have some old electric fencing here already, but we bought something in the value of around £2,000 worth of electric fencing and energisers to get us up and running. But as I said earlier, that's already been covered by the saving we made in concentrates and bought-in feed for the last winter and hopefully these electric fences will last several years for us.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Yes, and what about water troughs, did you have enough water points here?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, the issue that's holding us back a bit is water. This time of year it's not too bad, a tank of water does last them a few days. But during the dry May we had, it felt like a never ending job to carry water to them.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Yes, and I would think that you don't want too much intensive manual labour input, you want a system that is easy to manage.

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, the easier the system, the happier you are to manage it and the better job you do. So the next part of this project is to look at installing a borehole or two to ensure that we have direct water access to the fields rather than having to carry water to the ewes.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And fundamental to the success of the system is accurate recording of the grass growth, so are you measuring on a regular basis?

Bleddyn Davies-

I have been measuring for about a year now. And I'm currently part of the Welsh Pasture Project, that measures and sends in the measurements every two weeks. It's definitely interesting to see how different fields grow grass. The fields you think are the least productive might surprise you at times.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Does your eye improve with time? Obviously you can use various tools, plate meters to measure the grass but over time you can probably assess by sight the amount of grass within a paddock.

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, over time you do learn to have a guide in your mind, in terms of where the paddocks are at, but I think I'll stick to the plate meter because it just reassures you that there is plenty of fodder available for them.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And I guess those were the insights you've learned from being a Prosper from Pasture group member? To what extent has that been a major influence for you and this farm?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, it's been a big help. Not only the advice you get through Rhys and Dafydd who were our mentors in a way then, it was actually Rhys that suggested that I should halve the paddock size this year to try and reduce the losses and the loss of grass I was growing. But it's not just the information you get from them, it's the information we pass as group members to each other. Someone might want to try one thing, so if someone within the group has tried it previously you're several steps ahead as they've seen what you should and shouldn't do in that situation. So it's just a matter of passing knowledge and information on of certain systems.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And do you keep in touch and in contact with other group members and share experiences, the good and the bad?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, well we do have a WhatsApp group that's pretty active so we do keep in contact. If you're in a group such as that full of likeminded people which are on the same road then, it's very handy to have because most of them are full of information and knowledge which you can utilise.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Yes, I suppose it can offer that support network when you need some advice when things aren't looking so good so clearly it's a source of information as well, and for people that might be considering applying, would you encourage them to go for it?

Bleddyn Davies-

Yes, I would definitely encourage them, if anyone was interested in grass and the potential of grass to make their business more sustainable it's definitely the way forward. It's opened my eyes to what's possible with the grass and the land I have available to me and how much more I can get out of it.

Aled Rhys Jones-

And as a final question as we look across the landscape and the paddocks and mob in the background. Where do you see the future now for Blaenglowon, what's the plan over the next five to ten years?

Bleddyn Davies-

It still to keep an eye on our costs, and controlling what we can control. The land has shown that it can be capable of it, so we would like to push numbers up a bit and try to be a bit more efficient as well.

Aled Rhys Jones-

Well I have every confidence that you're going to for fill that and be successful in the future. Bleddyn diolch unwaith eto for the welcome here at Blaenglowon Farm.

Thank you to our listeners as well for tuning in and if this podcast has inspired you to apply for the next round of the Prosper from Pasture programme then don't forget that the next application window runs from 26 October until 26 November 2020. To be eligible to apply, applicants must have a recent Nutrient Management Plan, and if you need assistance with this please contact your local development officer. More information can also be found on the website. Well, that's it for this latest episode, we'll be back in two weeks' time with plenty more to discuss but until then on behalf of Bleddyn Davies and myself Aled Jones from Blaenglowon Farm thank you for listening and good bye for now.