

**Peter Cook
P & L Cook and Partners**



Buchan Monitor Farm

Messr Patrick Dickson
Acrestrype Farm
Fyvie
Turriff
AB35 5SH
Tel 01888 511252

Report on 1st Meeting held Monday 26th May 2008

Provisional date of next meeting: Tuesday 22nd July 2008

Facilitators: Peter Cook Tel 01467-642802 cooknewton@btopenworld.com
Jim Booth Tel 01651-843607 jim.booth@saos.co.uk



TOP TIPS FROM MEETING

Simply culling problem ewes and tagging the ewe lambs from ewes which have lambed by themselves, have not mismothered, have good milk and feet, has created a marked improvement in the Dicksons flock and greatly simplified lambing. Don't underestimate what you can achieve through selection on the farm.

INTRODUCTION

This was the inaugural meeting of the new Buchan Monitor Farm starting at North Camalynes. The previous Buchan Monitor Farm with Robert and Ethel Chapman, Tophead Farm, Strichen, had completed a very successful 3-year period.

There was an excellent turnout of over 70 people, largely local farmers but also a good representation from the wider agricultural community.

Joint-facilitators were Peter Cook and Jim Booth, with Peter chairing the meeting.

Johnny Mackey from QMS briefly described the project. He reminded the Group that the main aim was to improve the profitability of local farms and stressed that success would largely depend on the Community Group's involvement. The project is funded over a 3-year period by QMS, Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government.

A Monitor Farm is a representative commercial farm who opens up their business to the Community Group. The programme is about improving the performance of the Monitor Farm through setting goals, recording progress, benchmarking, sharing information and ideas, adopting best practice, having a market led approach and ensuring knowledge transfer to the wider agricultural community.

The aim of this first meeting was to:

1. Meet the farmers, get to know the farm, the system and enterprises.
2. Have a look around the livestock, some crops, and the buildings
3. Review the business by undertaking a SWOT analysis
4. Identify issues that needed attention and possible future meeting topics

The Monitor Farmer, Patrick Dickson jnr, welcomed everyone on behalf of himself and his father Patrick snr. He then described the farm business and its development.

The business extends to 450 acres on three units, Acrestrype, North Camalynes and Birkenhill. The farms are all tenanted from Aberdeen Endowment Trust. Birkenhill (168 ac) was added recently (2002) but has no farmhouse and a limited stabling.

A copy of the handout providing a description of the farm, resources and enterprises is provided in Appendix 1.

FARM WALK

The farm walk stopped off at 6 points of the farm. Key issues from the discussion at each stop were as follows;

1. **Group of Suckler cows**

- 74 suckler cows and 15 heifers – all spring calving March/April
- Closed herd, hi-health status herd, aim to sell breeding heifers.
- Moved to closed herd due to time at marts and increased disease risk
- Bought a Luing bull to ensure hybrid vigour (mainly Simmental cross cows), and especially looking to improve maternal side. Calves very docile.
- Wanted to keep red colour for breeding heifers, noticed worth up to extra £100.
- Select heifers based on highest growth rate and good feet
- Calve heifers before cows. Heifers calved at 2yrs old.
- Luing cross cows put to Simmental bull (only 2 bulls Sim and Lu)
- Males kept as bulls to compensate for breeding focus on maternal side
- Last year 97 cows and heifers → produced 80 calves. Problem with heifers.

2. **Field of ewes and lambs**

- Originally had Shetland Cheviot ewes but had problems with milk fever so started keeping own replacements. Are now tagging all lambs from easy lambing ewes with good feet, etc so can identify which lambs to keep as replacements.
- Started with Lleyn tups 4 years ago to move towards easier lambing and for good maternal qualities. Very pleased with lambs. This year introduced an Easycare (wool-shedding) tup.
- Sheep flock 224 ewes & gimmers and 42 hogs.
- All lambs sold finished going to Woodhead Brothers, Turriff. Large proportion off grass, but also off stubble turnips and grain later in winter.
- Dicksons feel scanning and hence appropriate feeding is crucial
- Flock scanned 187% and lambed 170%
- Dickson's try and foster on triplets to singles – house both these groups at night so can cross foster. Getting more difficult to achieve as ewes lambing quickly by themselves so chance for wet foster missed.
- Had toxoplasmosis with 10 ewes aborted. Suspect cats introduced virus through feed barley stored in shed.
- Field carrying ewes & lambs has had 70 units N per acre (end March) plus 35 units N (Mid July). Current stocking rate 10 ewes & lambs /acre. Group discussed whether or not clover could replace part or all of the N. Dicksons are using more clover in leys. Are establishing a red clover crop this year.
- All skittery ewes are marked and culled. Group members backed up observed differences between breeds, even as feeding lambs, in level of dags/skitter.

The Group then had a look round the steading at North Camalynes.

3. **Steading at North Camalynes**

- Good range of traditional buildings for storage.
- Centre feed cattle court with 4 large pens with yokes (home made) in the feed barriers. Have found yokes a tremendous benefit for handling cows, any assisted calvings, etc
- Patrick has rigged an innovative closed circuit camera on a wheel which is used to monitor calving cows at night (monitor in kitchen).
- Cattle court cleaned out and used for temporary grain store at harvest.
- Winter feeding – silage used at start of housing up to new year. Then cows go on ammonia treated straw plus barley. Keep cows lean for calving. Prior to turnout, cows and calves back to silage to help prepare cattle for grass at turnout.

- Calves creep fed at grass from July (males entire so need to get onto concentrate ration early)
- Dutch barn used for lambing inside at nights

The Group then moved to Acrestrype Farm (where Patrick Snr lives), which is less than a mile away.

4. Acrestrype - Slatted shed.

- Slats in traditional byre with no tractor exit from the pass. Must reverse down the pass.
- Calves weaned late September, weighed and wormed, done in 3 weekly batches.
- All bulls finished inside on slats and sold to McIntosh Donald, Portlethen.
- Calves weighed on to slats in autumn.
- Concentrate feeding starts at 4lbs then quickly up to 6lbs over 2 feeds, then gradually increase to ad lib by new year.
- Use silage for roughage as straw a problem for the slurry in their slats.
- Barley mixed with Harbro Buchan Bull and Invercrombies. Carried in by bags (bruiser, fed by auger from grain tower, sits near to the slats).
- Don't have to clip many cattle.
- Target weight 320kg dwt Normally R4L. Max 16 mnth age.
- Can get occasional pneumonia in building (but only half a dozen cases).
- Heifers are housed opposite the bulls. More silage based ration.

5. Acrestrype - Pen of 5 tups

- Three Lleyn tups, pure Shetland tup and an Easycare wool shedding tup.
- Hoggs put to the Shetland for an easy first lambing. Lambs not very valuable, but it "trains" the ewe lamb.
- Wool shedding tup loses wool from April/May onwards. Aim is to breed replacements which drop their wool avoiding the cost of shearing and the hassles of dagging, backing, maggots. Much discussion about the hardiness of a sheep which loses wool and the likely mess in fields. However, wool coat is short so not a lot of wool left lying around and experience seems to show they are quite hardy – will monitor over the programme. Will take two generations until have entirely wool shedding sheep.
- Discussion over logistics of so many breeds and keeping crosses correct and avoiding in-breeding.

6. Acrestrype - Field of Winter Barley

- Use blend of Sequel/Retriever, with Sequel (6-row) sown on outsides to deter crows.
- Believe blend yields an extra 0.5 tonne per acre.
- Keep 100t for own use and sell any surplus.
- Member of co-op Aberdeen Grain, where store (80t) malting barley and OSR.
- Have limited storage for grain at home, only 100t bin.
- Use mobile drier to dry grain.
- Contractor used for combining, silage and spraying. Considering getting contractor to do more of the sowing.

The Group then moved into the silage pit for a fly cup and home bakes.

INTRODUCTION TO THOMASTOWN FARM, FYVIE – COLIN CLARK

In addition to the Monitor Farm, the Group will have access to a large-scale cattle finisher. This is the first time under the Monitor Farm Programme that an 'associate monitor farm' will support the main Monitor Farm.

- Thomastown extends to 1,000 acres, of which 800 acres are cereals, 170 acres grass with balance woodland, conservation.
- Previously Colin sold a successful potato packing business in England and returned home to purchase the family farm in 2004.
- Approx a third of the cereals crimped for livestock feed, third in Pearl winter barley sold for brewing and a third down to malting spring barley.
- Finish approx 1,550 head a year mostly on straw courts. Purchase large forward steers (av. 550kg) and finished over 60-90 days. Feed silage, straw & crimp barley.
- Finished cattle sold to Woodhead Brothers, Turriff.
- Finished Cattle costings: 2007 average Gross margin (difference between buying and selling value) £152/head. Has to cover feed cost at £1.20 /day and overheads £1.20 / day. Average 80 days on farms.
- In first 6-months of 2008, Average Gross margin £280 / head
- Sow clover and rye catch crop after crimped barley. Keen to look at how to build up fertility, make better use of muck and reduce input costs.
- Also finish store lambs through the winter. This year stores cost £36 and averaged £54 fat.

The Group will visit Thomastown at our next meeting

GROUP EXERCISE

Following their fly cup, the Group re-convened to undertake a SWOT of the business.

STRENGTHS

- Proximity of 3 units to each other
- Hi-Health livestock, closed herd
- Family business
- Breadth of expertise
- Mix of enterprises
- Enthusiasm of father & son
- Good range of buildings
- Self-contained; replacements, feed
- Very tidy
- Soil fertility

OPPORTUNITIES

- Calving % improvement
- Selling breeding heifers
- Use health status
- Fert. use / nutrients
- Malting barley premium
- Livestock fertility
- Simplicity or Expand ?
-
-
-

WEAKNESSES

- Feeding bull performance only average?
- Lack of grain storage
- Complexity – too many enterprises?
- Labour limiting – how replace father in future?
- Quality of stock v. Closed herd compromise?

THREATS

- Patrick Snr – retire in future
- Illness / accident
- SFP declining
- Rising Input costs (fert & fuel)
- NVZ Issues
- Rent increase
- Market prices - volatility
- Red tape
- Blue tongue, FMD, etc
- Climate Change ?

In the last session of the day, the Group then considered areas for improvement and issues for future discussion. These included:

- What are the objectives of the Dicksons ?
- Beef breeding policy, replacements, and systems. Is the closed herd the correct route, is the maternal angle of the Luig correct, how improve bull performance?
- Agronomy of crops; improving profitability, inputs
- Carbon Footprints
- Coping with high input costs – using clover, FYM, etc
- Crop marketing / Storage / Aberdeen Grain
- Whole farm business analysis and enterprise mix
- Review sheep enterprise and its direction

Additional Information: Management Group

The project will establish a 'Management Group', comprising of representatives from the Community Group (CG). The purpose of the Management Group is to represent the CG, make decisions, provide feedback and guidance to the project. It will comprise of 5-6 reps who would normally serve for a year.

Date of next meeting

A provisional date has been set for Tuesday 22nd July.

APPENDIX 1

Description of Farm's Resources and Enterprises