

NUFFIELD WALES – VISIT TO NEWTOWN



It's a case of once Nuffield Scholar always a Nuffield Scholar and over the years the organisation has spawned groups of scholars with common interests or on a regional basis. These groups get together to look at new techniques or approaches or to have in-depth discussions on factors affecting their businesses. These groups play an important role in keeping scholars au fait with progress in their particular interests.

One such meeting was in September when Scholars and some prospective scholars visited two upland grass farms in the Newtown – Welshpool area. The organisers had chosen two contrasting upland livestock farms - a relatively small, fairly heavily stocked farm and a large farm with extensive grazing. Both farms had inherent problems and it was interesting to see how they were adapting to meet the challenges.

The first visit was to the all grass farm, Llwyn y Brian near Newtown farmed by John Yeomans and his wife Sarah. The family are farming 290 acres in 9 blocks spread over some 10 miles. The main holding of 232 acres which runs up from about 750 to 1400feet was bought by his butcher / farmer father in 1973, but since has expanded by renting another 58acres. There is around 100acres of lower land, 132 of improved hill and 54 acres of mineral peaty soils, part of which is steep.

The farm forms part of the site of Mynydd Clogau Wind farm, with four of the thirteen turbines situated on the Yeomans' hill. The installation of the turbines, which are not as massive as those now being installed elsewhere, began in 2005 and went on stream in July 2006. John warned that establishing a windfarm is not without difficulty and is not a license to print money.

The farm has 69 mainly home bred spring calving suckler cows, 22 of which are pedigree Limousins, the rest are mainly Limousin crosses, with no females having been brought onto the farm since 2001. AI is used on some of the pedigree cows and around six pedigree Limousin bulls are sold annually, with most of the rest of the cattle sold as stores at around 11 to 15 months at store sales in Knighton and Builth. John's philosophy is to breed cows with a good temperament, which calve easily and milk well, with the aim of producing above average store cattle to command a premium.

The Yeomans run a flock of some 620 Beulah ewes which apart from buying in replacement Beulah and Border Leicester rams, the flock has been closed since 1981. The flock has been individually recorded since 1986 and has been part of the Beulah Sire Reference Scheme since 1996. The ewes are scanned and housed in late January and lamb mid-March to April. They sell 15 to 20 Beulah rams a year and sell their Welsh Mule ewe lambs at the autumn ewe sales.

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To increase the farm out-put some 6 to 8 cattle and 60 to 80 lambs are finished on the farm and slaughtered at Llanidloes and cut up to meet an increasing demand for the farm's boxed meat. The boxes are delivered by the family over a very wide area and the growing demand is being fuelled by word of mouth.

The second visit was to Cannon Farm, a large difficult marginal farm near Llanerfyl, Welshpool. The high rainfall farm which rises from 760 to 1485 feet is managed and run by Nigel Elgar. He went to the farm in 1986 and became a managing partner in 1988. Realising something different was required to ensure the future of the business; Nigel started converting to organic in 1991 and is very involved with selling organic livestock as a director of Graig Farm Producers Ltd.

Faced with the difficulty and cost of employing labour, Nigel Elgar decided the business would have to undergo a fundamental shift to meet the changing circumstances. He decided to reduce the amount of land they were renting, reduce the number of suckler cows, halved the ewe flock to 500 and dispense with hired labour.

They are now farming 922 acres, split between 535 acres of Natural Hill grazing, 282 acres of improved pasture, 29 acres of Semi-improved hay meadows and 76 acres of rented land. The Welsh Black suckler herd has been reduced from 42 to 20 and the farm runs a nucleus herd of 18 Highland cows which are mated to Highland bulls. The progeny of the Welsh Black cows, which calve in April and May are sold as stores in the following November at around 18 months to members of the Graig Producer Group, where they command a small organic premium. The Highland cattle are regarded as ideal for grazing the un-improved hill and most of the female calves are retained to build up herd numbers, while the males are taken through to finishing at 40 to 45 months and the meat sold direct to consumers.

How-ever Nigel perceives a problem with the stocking levels he has to adhere to on the unimproved hill within his environmental scheme. The stocking rate on the habitat land is only 0.05 LSU per hectare a year with a maximum level at any one time of three times the annual stocking rate, which he says will create problems in controlling bracken as to stop it spreading requires mob stocking by cattle for short critical periods.

The sheep flock consists of 500 Welsh Specked Face ewes and 120 ewe lamb replacements. 25% of the rest of the lambs are sold as finished at an organic premium, with the remainder sold as stores to members of the Graig Producer Group. The flock has been recorded as part of the Welsh Hill Speckle Face Sire reference scheme since 1999 and all sheep now have electronic identification. To reduce labour requirements, from this year all ewes will be crossed with Easycare rams to produce wool shedding sheep.

An area adjoining Nigel Elgar's hill grazing is being considered as a possible site for a 43 turbine windfarm. It seems ironic that to establish the facility will require the clearing of a fairly large area currently under carbon capturing woodland.

During the discussions both John and Nigel said they are worried about the threat of the Welsh Assembly Government deciding to reduce support for farming in the marginal and upland areas. They were both adamant that such a move would jeopardise their farming businesses and would also have a detrimental impact on the landscape and on the social and economic viability of the hill and upland areas.

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