

A Northumberland beef and sheep farm has undergone a series of radical changes in recent years, including a move to organic production and a general shift in livestock breeding policy. Wendy Short reports. Pictures by Adrian Legge.

Monitor project brings new ideas to organic business

Following a significant expansion programme, Simon and Claire Bainbridge decided to convert Donkin Rigg Farm to organic production back in 2009. The couple farm in partnership with Simon's parents, Ivan and Elizabeth, and the holding, on the outskirts of Cambo, is a mixture of owned and rented land totalling 650 hectares (1,600 acres).

"Organic was something we had been interested in for a long time," says Simon. "However, we were convinced successful conversion requires a fairly large acreage so as much livestock feed as possible can be produced at home.

"I also wanted to retain our full-time shepherd, which meant maintaining numbers, or even increasing the flock size. These are the reasons why we delayed the switch-over until the opportunity came up to take on extra land."

Simon and Claire already have a two-year-old daughter, Abigail, and are expecting a second child.

Despite their busy schedules, they volunteered to take part in the monitor farm project. Partners include Eblex, XL Vets and European Farming and Food Partnerships (EFFP).

The couple's three-year experience in this role, due to end in spring, has helped them clarify their future plans, says Simon.

"Being part of the monitor farm project has made us consider every aspect of our business and has generated a lot of fresh ideas.

"From the outset, we were determined to avoid changing the farm policy just for the sake of it," he says. "New elements have been introduced, but only where we felt they would help to improve our bottom line in the long-term."

Due to the ever-increasing price of bought-in organic feedstuffs,

“”
New elements have been introduced, but only where we felt they would help to improve our bottom line in the long-term
SIMON BAINBRIDGE

the emphasis is firmly on home-grown produce for both sheep and cattle. The rotation includes spring oats, as well as barley under-sown with either lucerne or red clover/grass.

A deferred grazing programme has been adopted, but there are plans to move towards rotational grazing, wherever possible.

Sheep at Donkin Rigg are managed on a stratified system. The farm has a nucleus Swaledale flock, some of which are put to a Bluefaced Leicester tup. Mules go to Hampshire Down, Suffolk or Texel tups.

"We are aiming to produce a maternal ewe with EBVs that will suit our outdoor, no concentrate system. As part of this goal, we have purchased two Lleyn tups," says Simon. "Depending on the outcome, this breeding programme could result in a move away from Swaledales and Mules, to allow us to achieve more rapid genetic progress.

"Lleyn tups come with EBV figures. The females are smaller than Mules and are cheaper to keep. One Lleyn ewe can produce her own body weight in lambs by



Claire, Abigail and Simon Bainbridge.

weaning time, making her highly efficient. Lleyns also have good quality wool, which is now more valuable than it used to be."

Simon is a strong supporter of EID tags for flock management, and received a grant towards the purchase of the relevant equipment in 2010.

Electronic ID

"EID is a great time-saving device, enabling me to read tags, weigh and draft 400-500 sheep within an hour. It has made me realise the significance of the growth check following weaning – it falls by around two-thirds and I don't believe it ever fully recovers.

"I am now trying to finish lambs while they are still on their mothers. This means I need to have animals of the right breeding and quality, and make sure they always have good quality grass in front of them."

Ewes in all groups are lambed outdoors in April; with only problem animals brought inside. No concentrates are fed.

In 2011, the combined flock had a lambing percentage of 183 per

cent scanned and 163 per cent lambs on the ground.

Most lambs are finished on silage aftermath. They routinely have access to brassicas, but this year the weather has been too wet to grow a successful crop. Any lambs not ready at six to seven months old are housed and fed on red clover silage and whole oats.

Simon says there has never been a case of bloat on this feeding system. The idea is to have all lambs away by the end of the year, he says, but this is not always possible on a forage-based system.

Lambs by a terminal sire are taken to 42-45kg liveweight and generally grade R3L to 4H. Last year's crop achieved an average 280g daily liveweight gain off grass and attracted an organic premium from meat supplier, Dunbia.

"The premium varies throughout the year, but usually increases during December and January," says Simon. "We get the impression buyers who are committed to selling organic, British red meat are starting to question where their supplies are going to come from in future."

The Bainbridges have only kept Hampshire Downs since 2008, but have achieved notable success, winning the Hampshire Down Sheep Breeders' Association commercial flock of the year award for 2012. Special mention was made of both their technical and business approach to sheep farming.

The couple were first introduced to the Hampshire Down by their vet, Joe Henry, who runs a small pedigree flock and supplied their five current rams. They consider the breed a useful terminal sire for use on the Mules.

"The Hampshire Down has a lot of good qualities," says Simon. "My main aim as an organic farmer is to finish as many animals as possible off grass and the new cross-breeding programme is working out well."



The farm has a nucleus Swaledale flock which is put to the Bluefaced Leicester tup.

Farm facts

■ The Bainbridges moved to Donkin Rigg in 1991 from a smaller farm in County Durham to expand their enterprises and generate enough income for Simon to work at home after he left agricultural college

■ Donkin Rigg itself comprises 145ha (360 acres). Since their arrival, the family has acquired three other farms in the surrounding area. Half the land is owned and the remainder is rented

■ Most of the farm is classified as a Severely Disadvantaged Area and there are 62ha (153 acres) of moorland

■ Undersowing plays an important part in maximising the production of home-grown feed. Spring barley is generally sown at half the usual seed rate, with red clover or lucerne stitched in

■ The Bainbridges have embraced the opportunities offered by the various stewardship schemes, with the farm in an organic Uplands ELS and HLS

■ They feel it is important the farm generates income outside traditional farming and there has recently been investment in a 20kW turbine



Mules ewes go to Hampshire Down, Suffolk or Texel tups and the aim is to produce a maternal ewe with EBVs to suit the system.



Angus and Hereford cross cows are bred for smaller, easier calving cows, and a new 20kW wind turbine has been installed.

“The lambs are thrifty, partly because they have a good covering of wool. The longer a lamb lies on the ground after its birth, the colder it gets, so this trait is important. They have get up and go and an excellent daily live weight gain.”

A cross-breeding system has been adopted on the 150-cow suckler herd, with Aberdeen-Angus bulls used on Hereford cows and Herefords on Aberdeen-Angus females.

Easier management

There are still several Simmental types within the herd, but these are being phased out in favour of a smaller cross-breed. Simon used to run a spring and an autumn-calving group, but has recently changed to a spring-only calving pattern for ease of management.

Heifers are bulled once they reach a minimum of 370kg and are calved at two years.

All replacements are home-bred, but any animal with a pelvic area measuring less than 142cm is finished, as the focus is on reducing difficult calvings.

“My aim is to secure a premium by supplying high quality heifers to other producers,” says Simon. “I need to build up a good reputa-

tion for my breeding stock, so easy calving is vital. There have been problems in the past, but they can almost all be traced back to one bull, which has been removed.”

Fertility is another important trait, he says. The heifers run with the bull for six weeks and the cows for nine weeks. Any animal not in-calf is culled, without exception.

Pasture silage, straw and red clover silage, taken from two cuts, are the primary ingredients in the winter ration and animals for finishing are given home-grown oats. Calves are not creep-fed and are usually weaned around November.

Finished cattle are sold to Dovecote Park at 16-24 months, but Simon would like to reduce the finishing period to an average of 18 months off grass. He is hoping the introduction of Herefords will help towards this goal.

Simon says it is still early days with the organic system. “I am convinced it would be better to sell some of the livestock, rather than buy in feed. Farming without the flexibility of applying nitrogen or using herbicides is a challenge, but it is proving to be the right decision for this type of farm. I would not like to go back to a commercial production system.”

NOVARTIS
ANIMAL HEALTH

IF ONLY SHEEP WITH RESISTANT WORMS WERE THIS OBVIOUS

QUARANTINE DOSE
BE SURE
WITH ZOLVIX

ZOLVIX[®]
MONEPANTEL

EVERY FLOCK, EVERY YEAR

- Incoming stock can bring someone else's resistance problems onto your farm
- So quarantine dose to clean out all incoming stock

And when you do, use Zolvix – it's the world's most effective wormer.¹⁻³

Have you tried Zolvix yet?

See your vet to find out more about Zolvix or visit

www.farmanimalhealth.co.uk



protecting the future of your flock

For further information about ZOLVIX contact: Novartis Animal Health UK Ltd, Frimley Business Park, Frimley, Camberley, Surrey, GU16 7SR. Tel 01276 694402 or in Ireland Tel 051 377201. ZOLVIX contains 25 mg/ml monepantel. ZOLVIX[®] is a registered trademark of Novartis AG, Basel, Switzerland. Advice on the use of this or alternative medicines must be sought from the medicine prescriber. Legal category: [POM-V] in UK and [POM] in ROI.

References: 1. NAH Study Y08/16; Y08/70. 2. Kaminsky R et al. Parasitology Research 2010. 3. George SD et al. Veterinary Parasitology 2010.

Use medicines responsibly (www.noah.co.uk/responsible)