Anglesey Grassland Society
Study Tour 14 – 16 September 2011
Summary

Early in January 2011 the Society decided once again to travel further afield to look at ways of improving understanding and knowledge of “Grassland based production of Beef & Lamb”, eventually ending up on the Western side of a very wet Scotland!

The involvement of Hybu Cig Cymru with Scholarship Funding added focus on the objectives for the Tour. The emphasis once again placed on Grassland Management and its role and contribution in securing sustainable food production. With stewardship of the land, the ever present “carbon footprint” and ways of “adding value” coming to the fore as the tour progressed.

The two family Units were visited - Michael Shannon at Biggar together with Sam Carlisle at Dumfries - demonstrated two different strategies, one based on lowering costs the other scale of operation, both highly aware of a changing markets needs.

Undoubtedly both understood the marketplace is “Global” in determining farmgate pricing and that volatility is a constant companion, whilst a growing urban population needs food. Sam’s question to a large New Zealand Dairy Producer with 8,000 cows “how long is your Winter”. The answer “about 9 hours” provides insight to the role of strategic planning in today’s Global Marketplace.

The two other visits to Messrs A. W. Jenkinson at Whinfel Park Penrith and SAC’s Easter Howgate part of Bush Estate gave an insight into how large scale operations are possibly key to future!

Built on “insight and hard work” Allan Jenkinson has built a large business portfolio handling 2 million tonnes annually of wood products. Starting in the late 1960’s collecting unwanted saw dust in a single tractor and trailer from Saw Mills around Penrith, and transporting this timber by-product to farms for use as bedding material for cattle sheds.

The 1700 acre unit in Cumbria’s Eden Valley is a tremendous model of “sustainable” farming at its best, testimony to the values of countryside stewardship practised at the optimum.

SAC Bush estate, a world renowned Research establishment, provided insight into advanced thinking and technological advances.
Messrs Jenkinson, Clifton Moor Farm, Clifton, Penrith

“In partnership with Nature”

The impressive farm steading at Whinfel Park creates the immediate impression of a farming operation in harmony with its surroundings, a place for everything and everything in its place.

The land formally part of the “Lowther Estate” consists of six holdings making up the 1,700 acres, Arable accounting for 700 with the remainder down to grass. Stocking is 150 Limousin Cows plus a 3,000 Ewe flock.

A network which consists of five miles of concrete roads links the units and allows smooth running of the every day routines involved, tidyness very much apparent with every operation.

The leasing back of surrounding woodland enables a very successful game shoot to be organised, integrating nature’s resources into a well planned business.

Stewardship of the land is undoubtedly high on the agenda but not losing sight of commercial reality as it blends in with the philosophy of running a highly successful farming business.

The impressive genetics of the Limousin Herd will see several Bulls sold at Carlisle and Sterling Bull Sales. The North Country Mule and Texel Sires provide an interesting blend for the Ewe Flock which sells finished lambs.

In many ways a “model farm” and well worth a visit.
Visiting a college farm gives an impression of what is possible given plenty of money! The sight of a £1.2 million cattle shed confirms the view but is only part of the picture.

Certainly the building of a “Green Cow Building” at a cost of another £1 million plus demonstrates how managing the environment is increasingly part of the agricultural remit moving forward.

A large Suckler Herd approaching 300 in number, mainly Aberdeen Angus cross Limousin crossed back to Aberdeen Angus is the core of this enterprise with a small purebred Charollais Herd and a purebred Ling herd both numbering around 30 each together with a few Autumn calvers.

The male animals are finished and sold mainly on deadweight to provide additional information on eating quality. The “Green Cow Building” is a joint venture with several partners to measure the impact of the carbon footprint by measuring methane output of finishing steers.

Several other interesting projects are under way measuring “acidosis” predicting time of calving, grading of finished animals, all via electronic devices attached to the animal. A window into how technology is looking to make management easier and more predictable.

The S.A.C does all the genetic evaluations for beef and sheep, looking at:-

- Beef carcass composition and meat eating quality – taste, colour, tenderness
- Out-wintering systems (utilising the uplands, heather moors, studying welfare, performance and impact on biodiversity)
- Temperament and maternal aggression (calm cows eat and grow faster)
- Electronic monitoring (oestrus is easier to measure/detect in suckler cows using a collar
- Future – climate change – greenhouse gas emissions.

Michael Shannon, Thankerton Camp, Biggar, ML12 6PD
The sign at the farm entrance indicates the diversification and adding value root pursued with this farming business, with the “eating quality” taken as the driver in structuring output from the farm.

Having worked previously for British Seed Houses the emphasis on grassland and forage products was paramount in the approach adopted. The aim to maximise the grassland to achieve 1.5 Kg dlwt from May through to September, then utilise forage Hybrids & Kale through Autumn & Winter together with big bale silage.

The two innovative strategies seen on farm were the total reliance on home-grown forages with no purchased or home-grown cereals used to finish animals and the sale of several animals through the outlet ‘Damn Delicious’. A butchers shop in nearby Lanark providing much of the Added Value with some retail sales also coming from on-line shoppers.

Aberystwyth High Sugar grasses providing the mainstay of the system together with excellent management of the grassland with the native bred Aberdeen Angus providing the correct genetics both for system and end product in terms of eating quality. Sound simple management is at a high level to achieve results witnessed here in Biggar.

Silage Big Bales and Electric fence used for outwintering cattle.

**Sam Carlisle  Nether Dargarvel, Dumfries**

A native of Ireland, Sam has farmed 300 Suckler Cows and finished over 500 head a year over the past three years in his adopted home in West Scotland.
A stockman with a keen business acumen is how one would describe a lively individual who shared much of his experiences freely with the group who gained much from his practicable hands on approach.

Good grassland management together with home-grown Maize and Barley provided much of the ingredients for effectively a Beef finishing enterprise with the Suckler Herd providing a base for the finishing enterprise.

The Suckler Herd utilised rough land and mostly kept away from homestead after calving, calving in a 8 week period with Irish Black as the foundation of Herd although Simmental cross Aberdeen heifers looked to be providing a more economic alternative moving forward.

Store cattle in on slats on a silage plus 2 Kg of feed are expected to “eat, drink, lie down and grow”. The slats are only a few feet above ground with scrappers to ensure that “gasses” don’t impede cattle performance.

Hay being fed out from the end of August to prevent Staggers in the Suckler Herd, whilst the finishing sheds saw ad-lib home-mix in front of cattle, a large efficient unit run with sound practical husbandry.

“Beware the Nation That Cannot Feed Itself”
Winston Churchill

**Conclusions from Scotland Trip**

a) To go away from ones usual environment is a good thing as it gives time for three essentials 1) Learning and seeing new things. 2) Interacting with others from different backgrounds and experiences. 3) On return following time for reflection what has been seen and learnt, can be distilled enabling further growth and development.

b) Grassland is the mainstay of Beef & Sheep production systems within the UK and all methods of utilizing either as conserved material or in the natural state as grazed grass is a worthy subject for study.

c) Information gathering and transfer is more easily facilitated and quicker than ever with modern communication technology. Several
innovative means of gathering information where seen on tour which still however require human interpretation to be of value!

d) Scale of operation is becoming clearly a requirement to compete within the “Global Marketplace” although good environmental stewardship is also essential as witnessed in our first two visits.

e) More than anything the importance of scale of operation and/or the ability to Add Value either through diversification or further involvement within “food chain” is clearly seen from all the farms visited.

Acknowledgments

Things very rarely just happen, to everyone who assisted in making the Study Tour a success, numerous individuals gave willingly of their time to make the three days take place.

A huge thanks to everyone for their contributions whilst too many to name individually particular thanks to Edward L Jones for arranging visit to Jenkinsons together with Rhidian Jones and Ian Pritchard from SAC.
Our Coach Driver Carwyn who efficiently and quietly ensured we all returned home safely, somewhat older and a little wiser for the experience.

Lastly to Hybu Cig Cymru for their assistance in providing additional stimulus to make certain the seeds of an idea at committee actual came to fruit.