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Investing in Fertility to Implement a Compact Calving I

Key Messages

- Gradually reducing calving period to nine weeks will directly improve gross margins, increasing calf output and reducing labour costs through easier herd management.
- Achieving a compact calving period whilst minimising replacement rate requires enhanced herd management to increase conception rates through better nutrition, easier calving, bull fertility and disease management.
- A compact calving period therefore brings multifaceted benefits to herd performance with resulting improvements in health and fertility also increasing profitability through more calves being born alive, improved calf performance and reduced veterinary costs.

Introduction

Average upland suckler producers are subjected to low profitability with a gross margin of £26/cow, as shown in Table 1. The deadweight beef price has dropped by 45p/kg since October 2018, inevitably reducing store cattle prices and therefore lowering upland suckler herds' output.

This, coupled with potential post-Brexit subsidy reductions, means suckler producers must improve profitability by increasing their efficiency.

Average farms calve for 15.3 weeks, but better fertility and management could shorten this to nine weeks. This compact calving period will improve the gross margin by increasing calf output whilst reducing labour, forage and veterinary costs.

Importance of a Compact Calving Period

A compact calving period of nine weeks substantially improves profitability for the following reasons:

- Compact calving around spring turnout can reduce feed and bedding costs as cows are often turned out after calving for ease of supervision. Cows that calve sooner will be turned out sooner, maximising grazing, which is the cheapest feed source.
- Calving supervision is only required for 9 – 10 weeks, reducing labour costs.
- Increased weaning weight and age mean replacement heifers are more likely to be suitable for calving in earlier periods at two years old.

- As indoor calving progresses, diseases such as scours build up. A shorter calving period reduces disease build-up, and more calves being born earlier means fewer calves are at risk, increasing calf output and reducing veterinary costs.
- Calves born earlier in the calving period will have higher and more consistent weaning weights, increasing output. Figure 1 shows a calf born in the sixth three-week block can be 121kg lighter at weaning than a calf born in the first period due to the former being 100 days younger. According to Table 1, this calf will be worth £236 less at weaning. A 24kg increase in weaning weight achieved through a cow calving one period sooner will increase calf output by £46.80/cow.
- Cows calving earlier in the period are likely to conceive sooner as cattle do not begin oestrus cycling until their uterus has recovered about 40 days post-calving. Figure 2 shows cows calving in the first and second three-week blocks have three more opportunities to conceive than cows calving in the fifth block as their uterus has recovered before they go to the bull, hence the industry target of 65% of cows calving within the first three weeks. The later calving cow is less likely to conceive before the bull is removed so will either be empty or extend the calving period.
- Table 1 shows a suckler cow incurs £265 of variable costs per year and therefore must produce a calf annually to pay for itself. A nine-week calving period minimises the number of less fertile and barren cows on the farm which would have a calving interval above 365 days, thus maximising calf output.

Achieving a Compact Calving Period

Improving conception rates through herd management is key to achieving a nine-week calving period. Transition from the average 15-week period to nine weeks should be gradual, removing the bull progressively earlier each year. Steadily culling the least fertile cows from the herd will avoid having too many empty cows and replacements.

OUTPUT	£/COW
Calf sales (195p/kg, 273kg calves, 86 calves reared/100 cows)	457
Less cow and bull depreciation, bull maintenance and calf purchases	166
Total output	291
VARIABLE COSTS	£/COW
Cow concentrates (£200/t)	26
Calf concentrates (£238/t)	14
Vet and medicines	33
Straw bedding	56
Misc (commission, haulage, tags, levies)	25
Total variable costs (before forage)	153
Gross margin (before forage)	138
Forage variable costs	98
Purchased bulk feed	14
TOTAL VARIABLE COSTS (inc forage)	265
GROSS MARGIN/COW	26

Table 1: A John Nix gross margin for an averagely performing, upland spring calving suckler cow per year. Output consists of the value of the weaned calf at 250 days old.

5 Period to Improve Suckler Producers' Gross Margin

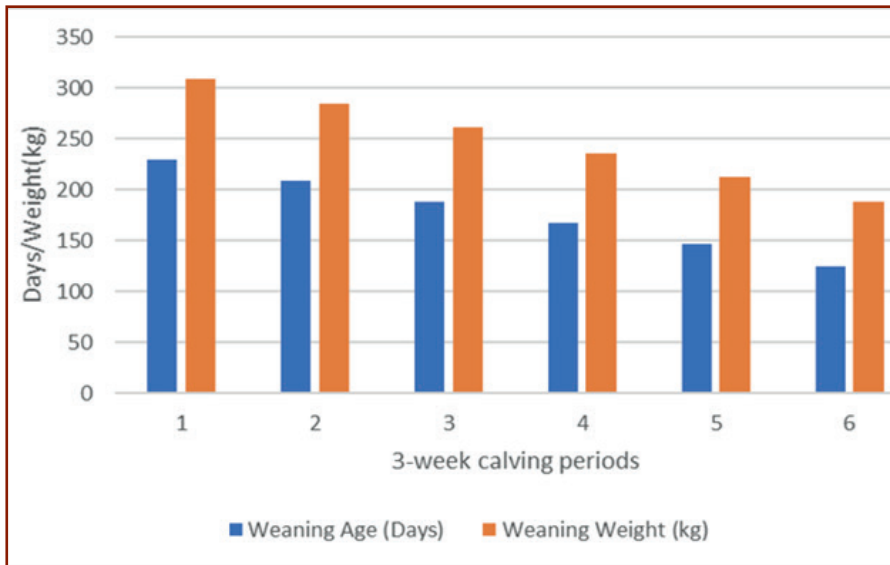


Figure 1: The effect of calving date on age and weight at weaning. Assumed weaning at 8 months from start of first 3-week period, 1.15kg DLWG from 45kg birthweight.

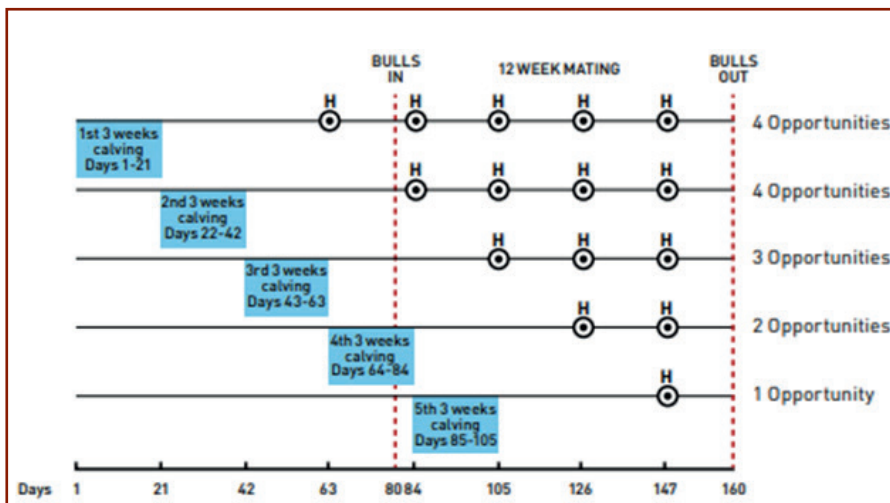


Figure 2: Number of mating opportunities for cows calving in each 3-week calving period. H denotes when the cow is in heat.

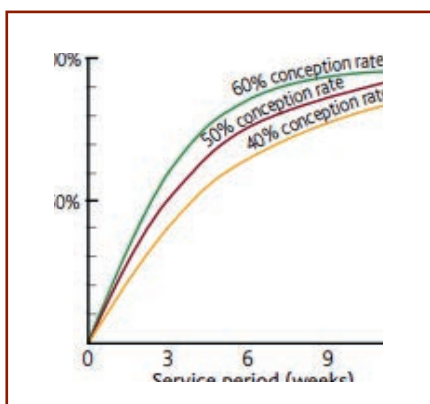


Figure 3: Percentage of cows in calf after a 12-week bulling period at varying conception rates.

This is important for the following reasons:

- Increasing cow life by one year can improve gross margin by £20/cow.
- Replacement heifers cost over £1,000 to rear or buy, with no return on this investment until the heifer's first calf is sold, affecting cash flow.
- Rearing home-bred heifers limits the farm's capacity to rear saleable stock.
- Purchasing replacements risks biosecurity, potentially importing diseases such as BVD.

Figure 3 illustrates that after nine weeks with a bull, 15% more cows will be pregnant if the herd conception rate increases from 40% to 60%.

A 65% conception rate equates to 96% of cows in calf after nine weeks with the bull, above the industry target of 95%. Improving conception rates after the first service by 1% can be worth £1.28/cow, therefore a 20% improvement would equate to £25.60/cow each year.

Improving Conception Rates

1. Body condition

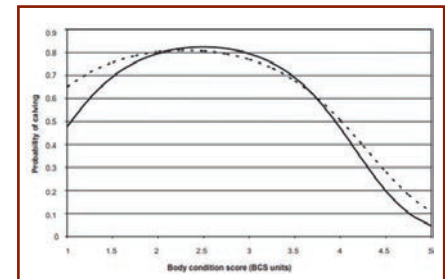


Figure 4: The effect of cow body condition score at calving (–) and turnout (---) on the probability of cows calving in the first 42 days of the next calving season.

Adequate feeding in the 60 days before and after calving is crucial for the cow to start cycling and get back in calf. Cows need to calve at a body condition score of 2.5 – 3. Figure 4 shows that cows in this range have an 80% chance of calving in the first two three-week calving periods in the subsequent year, keeping future calving periods compact, and maximising the chances of having 65% of cows calving within the first three weeks.

- Thinner cows have lower conception rates and a longer postpartum anoestrus period, taking longer to start cycling due to reduced LH production. Each body condition unit below three at calving increases the calving interval by 11.2 days, explaining the lower probability shown in Figure 4 of thin cows calving early in the next year. Calves of thin cows are likely to have lower weaning weights, reducing output.
- Cows above 3.5 are overfat, carrying bigger calves, which leads to calving difficulties and uterus damage, explaining the sharp fall in the conception rate for cows above 3.5.

Separating thin and overfat cows at weaning means they can be fed to optimise body condition before calving. Feed costs may not increase as lower rations for overfat cows may compensate for higher rations for thin cows. Whilst increasing calf output by minimising calving difficulties and improving calf performance, optimising body condition also maximises the chances of the cow conceiving within a nine-week bulling period.

2. Disease control: BVD



- BVD causes reproductive losses of £43/cow annually in severely infected herds.
- In early pregnancy, BVD prevents the formation of a corpus luteum, reducing conception rate. Later in pregnancy, BVD can cause abortions.
- BVD reduces output from infected calves as they are more susceptible to scours and pneumonia, compromising growth.

Management:

- Infected calves can be identified using BVD tags at birth. BVD testing tags cost £3.45/calf more than a standard tag.
- Persistently infected cows can be culled.
- Cows can be vaccinated to restrict disease spread, costing £2.95/cow.
- Biosecurity improvements, such as testing animals for BVD before purchasing, avoid importing the disease.

Given BVD's potential costs, eradicating it through culling and the small investment of £6.40/cow for tagging and vaccination will directly increase calves born alive, and improve calf performance and conception rates, resulting in a more compact calving period.

3. Calving ease

PREVIOUS CALVING	SUBSEQUENT BREEDING SEASON SUCCESS RATE
No assistance	96%
Assisted by stockperson	25%
Assisted by vet	34%
Caesarean	74%

Table 2: The impact of assisting calving on future breeding success.

Reducing cases of dystocia (difficult births) will improve conception rates and profitability for the following reasons:

- As shown in Table 2, stockperson assistance can reduce successful conception in the next breeding season by 71% compared with a cow calving naturally. Assistance increases the risk of damage to the uterus, leading to uterine infections which delay oestrus cycling, meaning the cow takes longer to conceive and so is unlikely to calve in the earlier periods.
- Assisting calving incurs labour and veterinary costs, with caesareans costing over £200/cow.
- Assistance increases the risks of cow and calf mortality; calves assisted due to dystocia are 12.8 times more likely to die in the perinatal period than unassisted calves.

Management:

- Estimated breeding values (EBVs) for calving ease, gestation length and birthweight can improve calving ease. Figure 5 shows a bull excelling in these direct calving ease traits although his daughters will be harder to calve. These EBVs are particularly important in selecting easy calving bulls for heifers who are 9.7 times more likely to suffer dystocia.
- Selecting traditionally easy calving, native breeds can help reduce calving difficulties.
- Cows calving at body condition of 2.5 – 3 have a reduced risk of dystocia.

Whilst increasing the number of live calves born, and therefore output, improving calving ease will also reduce veterinary costs and maximise subsequent conception rates, maintaining a compact calving period.

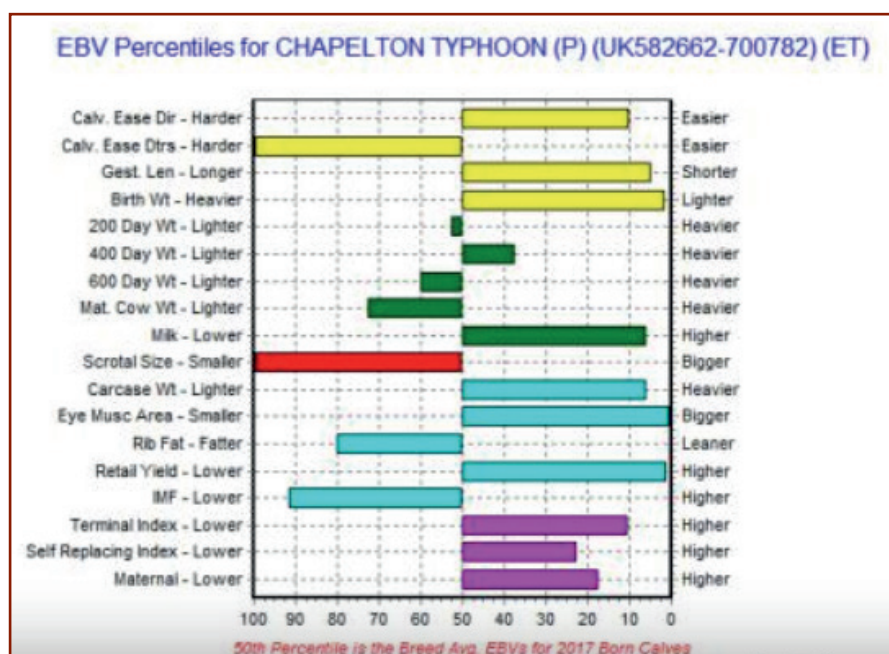


Figure 5: EBVs for a Beef Shorthorn bull, Chapelton Typhoon.

4. Bull management

Bull fertility is vital to achieve a compact calving period, with 20 – 25% of bulls sub-fertile. Bulls with low libido may not serve cows in oestrus or may have poor semen quality, meaning cows do not conceive. Given the limited mating opportunities shown in Figure 2, these unsuccessful services may mean cows do not conceive within nine weeks, resulting in empty cows. Bull breeding soundness exams are therefore worthwhile:

- As Figure 6 shows, physical fitness to mate and sperm quality are tested before mating, identifying sub-fertile bulls.
- Earlier culling resulting from these examinations can increase bull depreciation costs, but reducing working life from five years to four will only increase depreciation by £6/cow.
- The additional calves and earlier calving resulting from only using satisfactory bulls increase calf output by 24kg per cow each year, worth £46.80/cow according to Table 1. For a bull serving 30 cows, this is £1,404/bull, 14 times greater than the £100 investment in an examination.

Figure 6: Criteria for a bull breeding soundness examination certificate.

Henry Scholefield,
Beef Shorthorn Cattle Society
Student of the Year 2018

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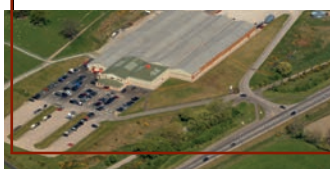
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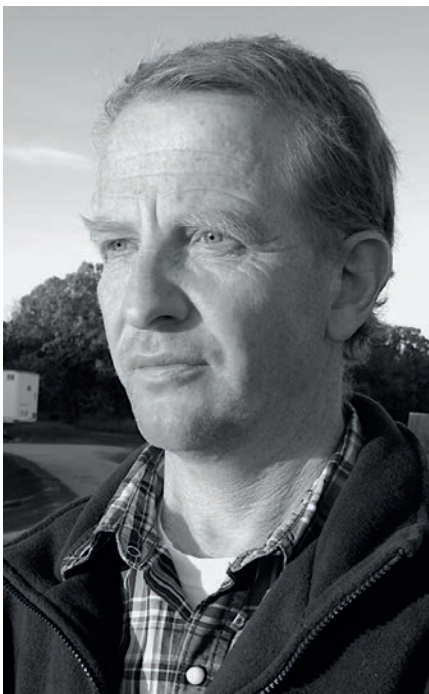
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Canadian Luing Report 2019

Iain Aitken



As always, our year has been dominated by weather issues. After extreme drought last year, 2019 started out even drier – until mid-June when the heavens opened. We received over 10" of rain in the following month, which was enough to turn the dire pasture situation around, but it came too late to boost hay crops. Unfortunately, a few areas of the Prairies never broke the drought cycle and are faced with herd liquidation this autumn due to lack of affordable feed. A second wet cycle hit the southern Prairies in September, dumping another 7" of rain on us here, which has completely halted harvest and does not bode well for getting the crops off before winter.

Last winter, we recorded the coldest temperatures I've experienced in Canada, with two days of -49°C (factoring in the windchill effect) and one day of -51°C! Those are pretty extreme by anyone's standards.

It was a test for man, machinery and livestock, but the Luing cows came through with flying colours. I didn't hear anyone complaining about them having too much hair last winter, but we did have one potential customer visit, looking for cattle with more hair coat than his existing herd!

Demand for our cattle continues to grow among ranchers interested in the "easy care" attributes of the breed. Interest from American ranchers looks set to result in some sales there for the first time in 25 years. The potential of this market is huge as the three US states closest to me are home to over four million beef cows compared to 3.7 million in the whole of Canada and around 1.5 million in the UK. This is an exciting opportunity, but to capitalise on it, we'll need to keep expanding the breed population, as well as attracting more young breeders to carry the work forward. "Time waits for no man," as the old saying goes!

Glenlivet Luings



A farming family from Glenlivet in Banffshire, has improved efficiency and saved on both input costs and manhours since introducing the hardy Luings breed to its business seven years ago.

First generation farmer Alastair Nairn, together with his wife, Jean, and their son Stuart, run a successful beef and sheep enterprise across 2,000 acres of hill and upland ground. They are based at Clashnoir Farm, which they have farmed on a secure tenancy from the Crown Estate since 1982.

Situated right in the heart of malt whisky country, Clashnoir lies on the snow line and is home to one of the most inland herds of Luings cattle. With the Glenlivet area exposed to some of the worst weather in the UK and the well-known Lecht Ski Centre only 13 miles away from Clashnoir, the nearby Lecht road is one of the first roads in the country to be blocked every year with snow. “We’re situated within the Cairngorm National Park so we catch all the snow and bad weather,” said Stuart. “In fact, the nearby Tomintoul village is one of the highest villages in Scotland, if not the UK.”

Initially, the Nairn family’s suckler cow herd was an ongoing criss-crossing programme, based on Limousin and British Blue breeding, as well as a pedigree British Blue herd which involved embryo transfer (ET).

However, expensive vet bills including a number of caesareans every year, increased bedding costs and endless amounts of hours taken up at calving time have seen the family drift away from the continental breeds and build up a herd of pedigree Luings cattle.

“Our aim was to produce show calves and although they were shown successfully, with many sold on to be exhibited at major shows across the UK, it just wasn’t viable any more,” said Stuart. “We were having to put away too many cross cows at a young age after bad calvings and caesareans or because they wouldn’t take to the bull – it was a real waste.

“A number of years ago though, Dad purchased 10 Luings cows from Lord Lovat’s dispersal which were bulled to the Charolais and Simmental. We were very impressed with them for their hardiness and productivity so when it was time to make a change, we knew it had to be the Luings,” he added, pointing out that the vast majority of their ground is situated 1,000 feet above sea level.

In 2012, Alastair purchased four pedigree Luings cows with calves at foot at a dispersal sale at Aberdeen and Northern Marts’ Thainstone Centre, and that same year, bought another four pedigree heifers from Angus McColl, Golspie, at Dingwall and Highland Marts’ Dingwall Mart.

Thereafter, additional bulling heifers were purchased at both United Auctions, Stirling, and Dingwall.

Admittedly, the family prefer to buy in mature bulls that are fit and ready to work and so that they can see previous progeny on the ground, giving them a better idea of how the sires are breeding. The first Luings bull at Clashnoir was Attonburn Hercules, a bull purchased privately from the Symons’ herd at Attonburn, Yetholm, in the Scottish Borders, before later buying Luings Lawman at a dispersal sale at Thainstone. He made a real stamp on the herd and produced “top notch females” with great natures and plenty of milk.

Other notable sires include Wooplaw Muldorich; Commonsides Nick; Wellbeck Torridon; and two other bulls purchased privately from the Isle of Luings.

“We’ve experimented with the Luings bull on some of the cross cows and we have been impressed with the results,” said Alastair. “The Luings can be crossed with any breed to produce hardy, productive and milky females.

“We particularly liked crossing the Luings with the British Blue cross cows as you get a bonnie, roan-coloured calf.”

With just 26 cows left in the commercial herd and the aim to phase them out over the next couple of years, the Nairns have continued to build up the pedigree Luings herd and now have 130 pedigree Luings females due to calve next year, with an additional 40 heifers retained for bulling.



“Up to now, we’ve been keeping all of our heifers for breeding so we’re in a position to cull harder in the Luing herd and perhaps sell on surplus heifers for breeding,” said Stuart. “We can keep more Luing cows here than continentals and we’re producing more from smaller cows.”

In contrast to the commercial herd, all of the Luing cows are out all year round and the majority of them calve outside on the hill throughout May and June, with only a handful brought into cubicles after the calves have been weaned.

This is a real advantage to the family as all commercial cows had to be housed inside, which not only meant housing was tight when they had a larger herd but it also increased the workload, with cows virtually watched 24/7 at calving time.

Calves are then introduced to creep feed in November before weaning in February. All bull calves are kept entire and sold at 15 months of age to ABP or Woodhead Bros, Turrieff, while heifers head back outside to grass at the end of May. A couple of the bulls have been kept on this year for potential breeding.

“The creep feed is a good way of getting the calves introduced to feeding when they come inside and it’s much easier on their mothers,” said Stuart.

“We’ve found that the Luing breed produces easier fleshing progeny and we’re getting more crops of calves out of the cows compared to the previous herd.

“Our bulls usually kill out at 350kg and our most recent batch of 12, which sold to Woodhead Bros, all produced R4L grades,” he added.

As well as using less straw than before, with the Luings utilising poorer performing ground, the Nairn family has also found the breed to be very fertile.

“One year, we had 70 Luing cows calving and there was only one out of that batch that was yeld,” said Stuart. “The cows are easy maintained at calving time as we tend to only need to check them first thing in the morning and last thing at night.”

Both Alastair and Stuart praised the Luing Cattle Society for being so welcoming and friendly to new members and added that Breed Secretary Una MacQueen had been a huge help to them.

Out with the beef enterprise at Clashnoir, the family run a flock of 1,000 ewes to include 350 commercial ewes and 650 Blackfaces, of which half are crossed to the Texel cross Bluefaced Leicester tup to produce a hardy, easier kept cross ewe.

Stuart also runs a pure Blackface flock and sells around 20 Blackie shearlings every year through Dingwall and Highland Marts’ Dingwall and Fort William centres. In the past, they have sold to a top price of £1,200 and regularly average above the £500 bracket. In conclusion, it just goes to show that the hardy and efficient Luing breed has the ability to not only save on ever increasing costs and manhours but can act as a dual-purpose breed and be crossed with other breeds of females to produce progeny well suited to market specifications.

Katrina Macarthur



Retired Farming Social Group

Jill Rennie



The year got off to a flying start for the Retired Farming Social Group, which received a generous donation from the Luing Cattle Society at their AGM in Castle Douglas. The donation was earmarked to go towards a summer trip for the group. We had been hoping to have the trip and, thanks to the generosity of the Society, were now able to put our plans into action.

The group wanted to visit the National Museum of Rural Life at East Kilbride, and this would be our first full day trip.

Word soon spread about the planned trip, with new people getting in contact and wanting to join us. The bus was booked, and we all met at Tarff in Dumfries to travel to East Kilbride together, where we sat down to a lovely lunch. The afternoon passed very quickly as members had so many interesting sections to look at, including the original 1950s farmhouse a short walk from the main museum. The house had a lot of original décor and furnishings, as if the farmer and his wife had just popped out. The farmyard had equipment from the 1950s, as well as a variety of animals to look at, from hens, pigs and cattle to Clydesdales. The museum housed an amazing collection of tractors and combines plus lots of other interesting pieces of equipment which stimulated intense discussion amongst members of the group.

All in all, everyone had a great day, and this would not have been possible without such a generous donation.

Once again, thank you very much to the Luing Cattle Society for your support. The Retired Farming Social Group meets every month, and we have had a variety of smaller local farm visits across the region, with speakers also lined up for the winter months.

The group continues to grow, with new people enquiring and wanting to join. If you would like further information, please contact:

Jill Rennie, Co-ordinator

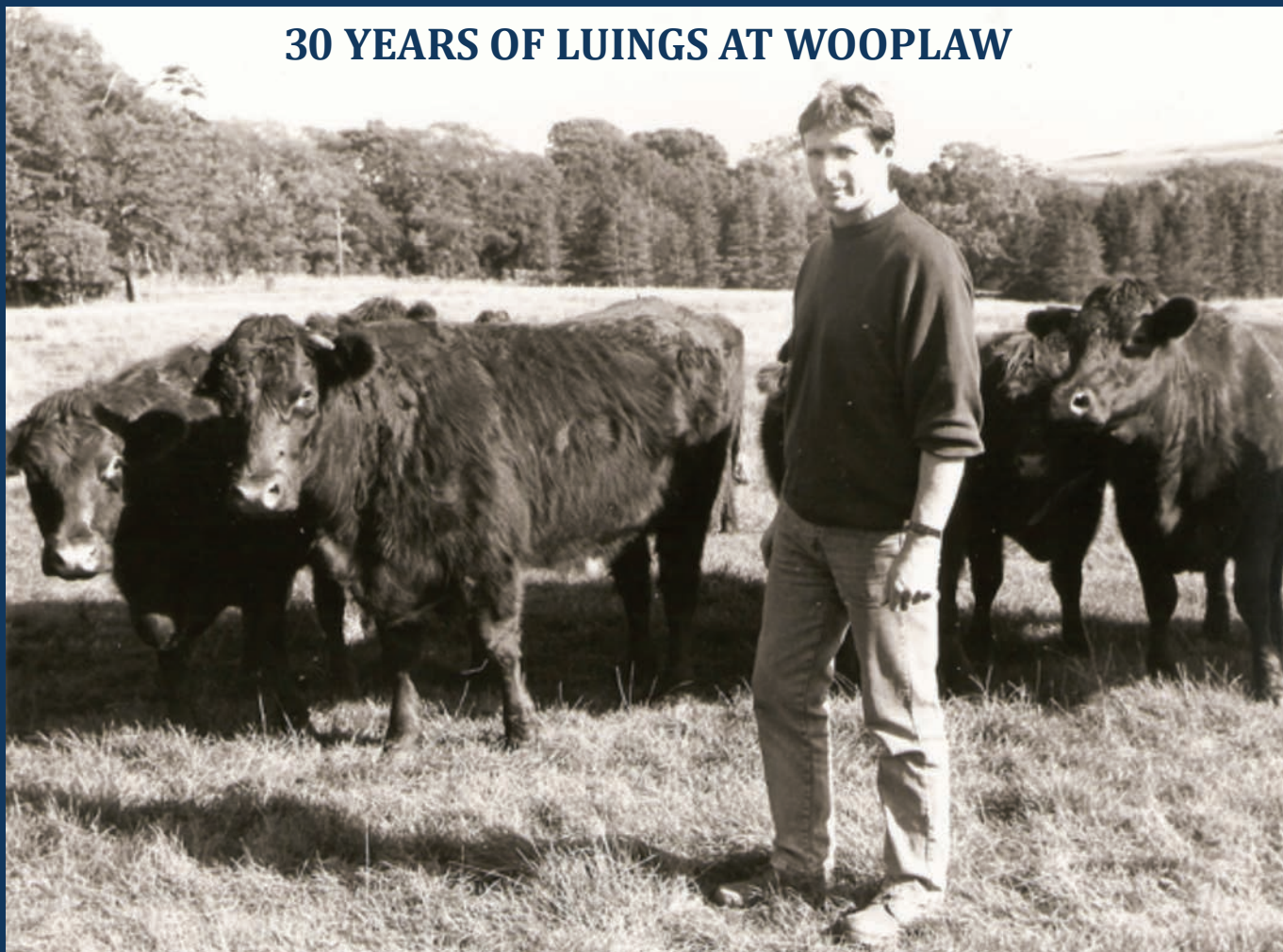
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E: retiredfarminggroup.info@gmail.com



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Monzie Esteem P

Luing Laggan

Luing Vagabond

Wooplaw
Knockando P

Monzie Finlay PP

Eight Young Bulls for Sale



WOOPLAW EXECUTIVE
(H – Strathmashie)

WOOPLAW EXPLORER
(P – Strathmashie)

WOOPLAW EXODUS
(H – Thor)

WOOPLAW EXPERIENCE
(H – Torridon)



WOOPLAW EXHIBITIONIST
(P – Strathmashie)

WOOPLAW XANADU
(P – Scalpay)

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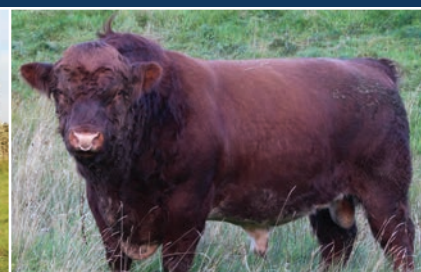
CURRENT STOCK BULLS

Wooplaw Torridon P

Wooplaw Strathmashie P

Wooplaw Thor P

Wooplaw Scalpay P





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AD21.5.2019

CRAIGDARROCH

X-Men for sale in 2020....



Xavi
PP

Xanni
P

Xero

Khaka
P

William Graham & Son

Craigdarroch Farm

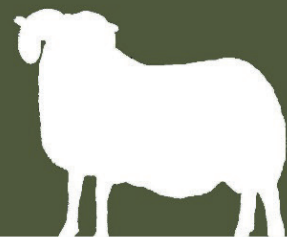
Eliock

Sanquhar

DG4 6LE

Tel: 07920 859668

Enquiries Welcome



The 2019 Premier Bull Sale Line-Up

Herewith the 2019 Premier Bull Sale line-up. All details given are from the time of sale, and bulls are listed in catalogue order.



Backmuir Warrior

Sire: Harehead Savivatu
Vendor: Mr P. Simmers
Height at Shoulders: 57"
Scrotal Circumference: 44.5cm
Weight: 912kg
Price: 6,500gns
Buyer: S. Marshall, Concraig



Backmuir Wildfire

Sire: Harehead Savivatu
Vendor: Mr P. Simmers
Height at Shoulders: 56"
Scrotal Circumference: 41.5cm
Weight: 848kg
Price: 3,500gns
Buyer: S. Marshall, Concraig



Luing Warpath

Sire: Luing Lad
Vendor: Cadzow Bros.
Height at Shoulders: 57"
Scrotal Circumference: 41.5cm
Weight: 972kg
Price: 6,000gns
Buyer: Messrs Finlay McGowan, Dirnanean



Backmuir Wanderer

Sire: Finlarg Scorpio
Vendor: Mr P. Simmers
Height at Shoulders: 57"
Scrotal Circumference: 44cm
Weight: 828kg
Price: 3,500gns
Buyer: St Joseph, Muncraig



Culmaily Winston

Sire: Benhar Nevis
Vendor: A.L. & A.C. McCall
Height at Shoulders: 58"
Scrotal Circumference: 41.5cm
Weight: 966kg
Price: 2,500gns
Buyer: Glenlyon Estates, Glenlyon



Benhar Woody

Sire: Benhar Lennox
Vendor: Robert McNee Ltd
Height at Shoulders: 56"
Scrotal Circumference: 40.2cm
Weight: 898kg
Price: 3,000gns
Buyer: Mr C. Young, Balintore



Benhar Wrangler

Sire: Culmaily Sheamus
Vendor: Robert McNee Ltd
Height at Shoulders: 58"
Scrotal Circumference: 40.5cm
Weight: 1014kg
Price: 10,000gns
Buyer: Kedzlie Farm Ltd, Swalemoor