

Out and About with Guy Everard



Leigh Farm, Exmoor

We are a family business farming four farms which all form part of the Miltons Estate. We keep a commercial suckler herd of 500 cows, the majority of the calving takes place in 2 batches in the late spring/early summer and another batch mid-autumn. These cows and calves are housed from November to April. The suckled calves are sold at 9-12 months of age (Tb permitting). In addition to the cattle we keep a flock of 600 mule ewes which we put to Suffolk rams. We own and manage Winsford Hill, a 1,250 acre block of moorland which has been in various Natural England environmental management schemes since 1995. Winsford Hill rises to 1300ft above sea level and has an annual average rainfall of 70 inches.

In 2018 two things happened that started us down the road to keeping a herd of Luing cows.

1. Winsford Hill Modification of Stewardship Agreement.

In the Spring of 2018, after discussions with Natural England, it was agreed to adopt a modified management plan for the moorland. In practice this meant changing from adhering to a list of does and don'ts, to agreeing to a set of outcomes as to how the moorland should look in 5 years' time and us having a freer hand as to how the hill is managed in order to achieve these outcomes. Since 1995 there had been

a proscription against keeping cattle on the hill during the winter. My father (Christopher) and I both believe that this lack of winter grazing has been a contributory factor to the increase in the amount of gorse on the hill. During our discussions Natural England said that we could put cattle on the hill in the winter but they would have to be a native breed.

2. Leigh Farm Coming In-Hand

Leigh Farm is a 300 acre hill farm adjoining Winsford Hill. Leigh had been farmed by the Rawle family for nearly 100 years. In the early part of 2018 Chris Rawle said that he wanted to retire and surrender the tenancy of Leigh on 29th September 2018. We decided to take Leigh in hand and use it to rear replacements for the main suckler cow herd at Broford Farm.



The first sim-luing calf born at leigh

In order to be able to graze cattle on Winsford Hill all year round we clearly needed cows that were hardy enough to stick it but were also capable of producing a heifer that was the

right type to rear on and go into the commercial suckler herd.

Christopher remembered, that when he was on his travels in 2007 as chairman of the National Beef Association, he was taken by Robert Forster (Founder and Director of the NBA) to a farm near Otterburn where he was impressed by a herd of Luing Cows. The farmer and his son explained that when the weather was driving rain and sleet, other breeds would seek shelter but Luings remained grazing in the open. At a local show I bumped into Ron Smith, the retired farm manager of a large farm in the middle of Exmoor where they used to cross Galloways with a Whitebred Shorthorn bull to produce Blue Greys in the 1980's. I explained our situation to Ron and to my surprise he said if he were in our position, he would have a serious look at Luings.

So, with all this in mind we contacted Charles Symons who kindly arranged a 2-day farm tour in the July 2018 heatwave. On the morning of day one, Charles took us to see Ian Mckie's Cows at Lanton and then in the afternoon Andrew Mcknee's at Woodend Farm. On day 2 we met up with Bruce Gilchrist to see the Rawburn herd. Impressed by all that we had seen we concluded that a herd of Luing cows would be a good fit for Winsford Hill and breeding Sim-Luing heifers would help improve our suckler herd.

In October 2018 Ian Mckie helped get us going by selling a nucleus of 24 cows and a Simmental bull. A trip to the Castle Douglas sale in February 2019 added 16 heifers to the herd. Last November we bought 28 in calf cows with 27 Luing calves at foot from John Campbell at Currburn and 11 Cows and 5 Heifers from Phil Preece in Mid Wales.



First luing cows and calves arriving from lanton

We bought a second Simmental bull this summer and have built the Luing herd up to 87 cows and heifers in just under 2 years. The majority of the cows calve in the spring in the fields at Leigh. Once the cows and calves have mothered up, they go back out on the hill until the autumn, when we bring them in to wean and house the calves. The cows get a mineral bolus and go back out on the hill for the winter.

During the winter the cows are fed cobbs with a snacker feeder every other day and plus some hay if the weather conditions are such that they need it.

The cost comparison between the Luing herd and the suckler herd is quite revealing. The variable costs (including forage costs) to keep one of our suckler cows all year and her calf until weaning is £198/cow. The same calculation for the Luings is £78/cow! Even when replacement costs are added to the variable costs the Luings score better at £188/cow as against £276 for the commercial suckler herd.



Winsford Hill is one block of 1,250 acres. It is steep in parts with many overgrown combes. To try and reduce the amount of time spent riding around

the hill looking for the cattle we fitted four of the cows with GPS collars. These came from a Spanish company, “Digitanimal,” at 150 euros each they have proved to be a good buy. The collars link to a mobile phone app, so that if you want to see where the cows are you can simply check your phone.



The GPS system also sends a text message if the cattle go beyond the boundary of Winsford Hill. An added bonus of the collars is that they record where the cows have been grazing, and heat maps can be produced such as the one below.



This is a really helpful tool to demonstrate to Natural England the management benefits of having the Luings on the hill.

The other piece of technology we have adopted this year is using an electronic heat detection system. Each of the Simmental bulls has been fitted with a “Moocall heat collar” and Moocall ear tags to all the cows and heifers. The collar uses the cow/bull proximity, mounting behaviour and bull activity to determine when a cow is in heat and when she is likely to have been served and correspondingly when she is due to calve. We await to see how accurate this is next spring.



Establishing this Luing herd has been one of the most satisfying farming projects that Dad and I have done together. As the economics of farming change with a greater emphasis on “public money for public goods” I am sure that having a herd of Luing Cows on Winsford Hill is going to help us adapt to the new dynamic of a greater link between livestock farming and conservation.

Guy Thomas-Everard

