

Out and About with Rory Bell

It's 14 years since the business of Robin H Bell ventured onto its Luing journey – maybe it's time for reflection.

To begin with – the background. We – my wife Jane and myself, sons, James (24) who is the tractorman and Finlay (21) currently in 4th year Rural Business Management (from home), plus daughter Lucy (16) when not at school - run two rented farms. My father, Robin still has a keen interest in all things stock related. Roxburgh Mill is a 280 mixed arable unit four miles west of Kelso on the River Teviot, with 200 acres of arable ground and the remainder being permanent pasture. Winter Oats are grown which go to the local miller John Hogarth Ltd, while the Spring Barley is hopefully malting quality, with some kept for home use. The Teviot Simmental herd and Texel flock are at home here. Fifteen miles away, south of Jedburgh and just east of the Carter Bar, Plenderleith is about 1550 acres of hill and 290 acres of fields – all grass. Almost half of the field ground was reclaimed in the years since my grandfather took the farm in 1947. Peter Hunter is the resident stockman looking after the 100+ cows and 700 Blackface ewes.

Until the Luing herd was started, spring-calving Simmental cross cows were summered at Plenderleith and wintered inside at Roxburgh Mill on home-grown barley and straw. Cattle courts were rented locally to winter some of the youngstock. In the summer



when grass availability reduced, the cows went onto the hill, but I always felt that neither the cows nor the rough hill benefitted much. The large framed cows didn't perform on the vegetation available and they didn't cover all the hill – only the more palatable bits.

I started looking for a cow that would be able to forage the hill ground more effectively. My father had had Blue-greys in the past and also some in-wintered Luings for a short period. After Finlay McGowan assured me that they were ideally suited for the farm, I opted for Luings. The added attraction was that having had a pedigree Simmental herd since 1973, breeding Sim-Luings was a logical option. The Plenderleith herd was born.



The first batch of 15 heifers were bought at Castle Douglas in 2006 from Luing, Merkland and Nunnerie and 25 cows and calves followed from the Westwater dispersal. The only other females added since were bought at the Merkland and College sales in 2014. Bulls have been bought from Luing, Harehead, Dirnanean and Merkland. The bulls that have had most influence on the herd are Harehead Hammer and Merkland Nugget. Both these sires have left medium sized, well fleshed daughters that hold their condition whilst out-wintering on the hill. One hundred cows and heifers went to the bull in 2020 – half going to Simmental bulls.

All cows and heifers are wintered on the hill, getting feed blocks to start with then onto a ration of baled silage. We use a bale unwinder to feed the silage which has 3 benefits: 1- The ground doesn't poach, 2- There's no bullying because the fodder can be spread out any distance, and 3- The fodder can be rationed.

Heifers calve, at 3 years old, inside from the end of February and cows from 20th March. Some of the earlier cows are calved inside at Roxburgh Mill before returning to Plenderleith. The calves are weaned in mid-November down to Roxburgh where they are wintered on silage based ration. Protein and energy source is flexible depending on what is required/available. In the spring the youngstock go to grazing near Duns.



Both Luing and Sim-Luing steers are sold through the store market in the autumn. I have been culling cows fairly hard as I reckon that each crop of Luing calves are an improvement, so once I have selected stock heifers there are not many left for sale. We keep some Sim-Luing heifers for home use and have a ready local market for the rest.



What have we learned from the Luing experience?

Temperament - the most important trait in my book. The attitude of the Luing cattle here is excellent. One person can move a mob easily and there is very rarely any need to chase cattle by bike which is the norm on some farms. Working with them can be a pleasure!

Maternal traits – calving is rarely an issue and without doubt, the best place for a Luing to calve is on the hill. The biggest hassle can be finding a hidden calf among the rushes and drains. There has been an improvement in teat size over the period – no doubt due in part to the Dam Classification – but it's rare to find a calf, born out on the hill, that hasn't suckled. Whether this is because there are no other animals close by to disrupt the

cow/calf bonding or because the udder doesn't fill and extend the teats as much as might be the case in a cow that's getting better treatment inside? – some of you can tell me! Calving outside also reduces problems like scour and navel ill.

Fertility - The Plenderleith cows generally go out with the bull in the fields and then onto the hill later on in the bulling period. As long as there is a basic mineral provision – the Cheviot Hills are cobalt and copper deficient – fertility is not a problem. The average number of twins in the last 5 years is 6 for the 100-odd put to the bull.

Foraging ability – This was an issue with the thinner skinned cattle that were summered on the hill. Straight away it was evident that the Luing cows spread the ground better. They can be seen on all parts of the hill areas. In the early 80's my father electric fenced each of the sheep cuts so there are 7 separate hill sections and 2 more enclosures, all with water access. It means that the cows graze certain areas in the summer whilst other sections are kept for wintering.

Health – It is only in the last 15 or so years that ticks have become prevalent in the district. Yearling stock heifers are put on the worst affected area to hopefully



acclimatize but there has never been an issue. We have worked into John's 1 status and I'm sure that outside calving helps reduce any infection. It may be luck, but so far we have not had any foot problems either.

Versatility – Luing cows produce a good calf from the poorest of land. Give her better conditions and she produces a quality 1st cross calf. Sim-Luings are possibly the most under-rated suckler cow in the country – they will suit nearly every system.

Looking forward

Most of the cows only come through the yards twice a year – at weaning when they are pregnancy and John's tested, then in January to get a flukicide. This summer we have replaced the outside feed barrier with self-locking yokes. Having used yokes at Roxburgh Mill for 40+ years, I am hoping that the cows will hardly need to go through the crush. This should be a boon for times of labour shortage and for health and safety.

As a tenant, putting the hill ground into forestry is not an option. The Luings have proven that with appropriate supplementation they can utilize the poor quality roughage and improve it – which benefits the sheep too. As long as the cow type is suitable there is a place for a Luing at Plenderleith. We have to hold onto the hardy maternal characteristics that the breed was founded on.

Rory Bell

Photos by Rob Haining, The Scottish Farmer