

New Entrants to Farming Programme



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Case Study David Cooper



“Borrow as much money as you can when you are young. It may seem like a lot at the time but in twenty years it will have been a bargain!”

Define the system, do not be defined by others

A short biog...

David Cooper took on his first challenge in 2004 when he was just 17. He moved alone from Dartmoor to a 192 ha unit by Muirkirk, East Ayrshire, with 350 Herdwick ewes and 100 hogs. When he purchased the farm it was made up of 103 ha of inbye land and 89 ha of hill, however most of the inbye had been opencast and was poorly reinstated.

David worked to improve the land and infrastructure. He built the flock up to 700 ewes, operating a maximum health, minimum input sheep system. The flock is made up of Herdwicks and Welsh Mountain ewes.

In 2006 the opportunity arose to purchase part of a dilapidated neighbouring estate and 737 ha of mostly rough hill. Sheep numbers were gradually increased to 1,200 ewes mainly through homebred replacements.

In 2010 a further neighbouring hill block of 830 ha was purchased and the sheep numbers were increased to the present number of 3,000 ewes and 700 hogs.

Herdwicks are run on the harder hill land with Welsh Mountain ewes on the better hills. Ewe hogs are wintered on the inbye. All surplus lambs are sold finished as Euro Lamb by November. Draft ewes are all to be sold privately.

What is your main motivation to farm?

The first is to improve the land we farm and to leave it in better condition for the next generation. The second is to remain profitable.

What financial & advisory assistance have you received?

Farming largely without SFP, David had to rely on LFASS

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(Less Favoured Area Support Scheme) and has benefited from the SRDP (Scottish Rural Development Programme) to secure environmental payments to manage habitats.

Associated capital payments helped cover fencing costs. Approximately 1,510ha of the land is within a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This helped scoring for agri-environment but poses challenges to farming.

What has been your biggest challenge as a new entrant?

Farming without SFP (Single Farm Payment) on all of the land for many years meant that the sheep system had to be profitable without support payments. David supplements his income by working off farm, as a fencing contractor four days per week.

What hurdles have you had to overcome?

The biggest hurdle has been borrowing capital to purchase neighbouring land and expand the business. A robust and realistic business plan is required as well as an excellent working relationship with your lender.

You must know your costs and margins.

Land quality limits the type of farming systems that makes sense. You need to work with the land you have. Remediation of inbye and improving stocking rate has helped grazing potential greatly but this takes time. Improve what you have where possible but you need stock that are well adapted to the system and environment. Otherwise I would be working harder for few extra lambs but limiting potential for off farm work - it's a balancing act.



What advice would you give to someone thinking of entering the industry?

- ◆ Keep it simple.
- ◆ You define the system, don't be defined by others.
- ◆ Every farm is different.
- ◆ Don't give up

What are your future ambitions?

To continue to improve the farm as well as the stock and build up sufficient land and sheep numbers to farm full time.

New Entrants to Farming “get with the” Programme

There is a network of new entrants across the country at various stages of developing their businesses. You can join in:

- www.facebook.com/NewEntrants
- www.fas.scot/new-entrants/
- Regional workshops

For more info contact Kirsten Williams, Consultant, SAC Consulting, Clifton Road, Turriff, 01888 563333, Kirsten.Williams@sac.co.uk

There are useful free resources on the website too:

- Case studies—learning from the experiences of other new entrants.
- Guidance notes—benefit from advice tailored to assist new entrants to farming.
- Also see www.gov.scot/Topics/farmingrural/Agriculture/NewEntrantsToFarming