

BGS Summer Meeting

Hosted by Cornwall Grassland Society

The British Grassland Society (BGS) summer tour earlier this month saw some good debate around the issue of age at first calving for suckler heifers, and also the working age of bulls.

The summer meeting took in two beef farms, with around 200 people visiting **Bill and Suzanne Harper's** farm near North Tamerton. The Harpers have 200 South Devon and Black Limousin cows and sell breeding bulls. They breed their own replacements and also sell finishing animals.

They are developing a rotational grazing system and have invested in tracks and fencing to ensure animals can be moved easily. In addition to the cattle, they are developing a flock of Lleyn and Texel x ewes.



Cattle on the Harpers' farm

The following day, the group visited **Jono and Sue Cole's** farm near North Hill. The Coles' farm 100 Stabiliser cows organically and sell breeding stock, and are using herbal leys to improve soil health and to maintain or improve animal performance.

Both farmers agreed that cost control is fundamental to suckler beef farming and they recognise the need to invest in re-seeds, deal with docks and push grassland management.

One interesting point shared by Bill was that he is aiming to calve his heifers at a minimum of 2.5 years as he felt that his South Devon heifers needed more time to develop, and he preferred not to use bulls until there were nearly 24 months of age. Jono's heifers, however, needed to calve by two or they wouldn't remain in his herd and he was working bulls at 15 months of age.



Herd of cattle grazing at the Coles' farm

The dairy visits served an important reminder that the beef and sheep industry needs to start discussing costs of production and making the connection between these and the price they're receiving. When dairy farmers discuss contracting, labour or feed costs in the format of pence per litre, it is instantly comparable with the milk price.

The visits also suggested that more dairy farmers are considering beef production as a way to deal with price volatility.

AHDB Beef & Lamb advice is that the industry should target heifers that calve at two years – see page 14 of the BRP manual [Optimising Suckler Herd Fertility for Better Returns](#) – as growth rate targets are easily achievable on grass-based systems.

It is possible for bulls to begin working at a younger age and this shouldn't cause any long-term issues as long as they are appropriately sourced and well-managed. See page 9 of our [Fit-For-Purpose Bulls](#) document for more information.

The summer meeting also included visits to a number of dairy farms with systems that rely heavily on well-managed grazing or well-made silage.