

The Bowen family—Optimising grass efficiency

The farm

Colin and Jenny Bowen took possession of Church Farm at the beginning of this year under a tenancy agreement. Church Farm is comprised of 54 ha, which will be farmed together with 22 ha in nearby Craven Arms. The Bowen's business is very much family orientated and involves a diverse range of interests, with family members each having their own areas of responsibility.

At present, Colin manages a nearby dairy and arable unit on a part-time basis and wife Jenny manages the family-owned 'Play barn' diversification project. Steve, the eldest son, runs the family contracting business and it is intended that he will oversee the arable aspect of the business in the future. Younger son, Allan, is very keen to increase the sheep flock and they are hoping to develop an effective mixed farming business.

Marches discussion group

The Bowen family recently hosted an event for the Marches Grazing Discussion group. The group heard that soil tests from Church Farm show that soil indices are very low (0 and 1) and there are signs of drainage degradation in low-lying areas of the fields. The group dug holes 30cm deep and it was noted that organic matter in the soil was less than the desired six to eight per cent, with low earthworm activity. This is likely to be related to poor soil management in the past.



Where possible, drains have been opened up and it has made a huge difference to ground conditions. Otherwise, infrastructure on Church Farm is adequate for the intended purposes of keeping sheep and growing arable crops, although work is being carried out to improve fence lines and sheds.

The Bowen family currently keep 260 Suffolk X Romney ewes, and have scanned at 160 per cent. It is planned that sheep numbers will increase at Church Farm over the coming years, either by keeping own replacements from prolific ewes or by buying-in cast ewes. The group discussed a flying breeding flock, where ewes are lambed and sold as couples, which means the grass would be freed up for hay cash crop. There is an option to over-winter ewes on stubble turnips or kale.

Improvements

The aim is to use Colin's knowledge of rotational grazing systems and grass measuring to maximum effect, with the intention of optimising grass utilisation on farm. This will be particularly important as stocking rate is increased while reducing dependency on bought-in feed.

Emphasis is currently being put on improving soil conditions while also being able to take a crop from the field. The plan at Church Farm is to utilise cheaper sources of fertiliser such as farmyard manure and chicken manure to improve structural stability and increase the biological activity of the soils. They intend to grow spring barley after fields have received animal manures. This will be taken off in July to be used as a feedstuff for livestock or it will go to an anaerobic digestion unit, then a cover crop for winter grazing will be drilled on some of the area.

Members of the grazing group expressed their own opinions of how the Bowens might move forward with their business plan. Overall, the group agreed that the Bowens' decision to focus on improving soil and grazing management at Church Farm will be of huge benefit as the business progresses. The proposed strategy to implement a rotational grazing and grass measuring system is a positive indicator that sheep producers are now looking towards optimising efficiency from the most basic resource – grass.