

CARWOOD CRISS-CROSS SALERS FOR COMMERCIAL PROFIT

By Siân Sharp, photographs by Isla Campbell Photography

The Wight family are renowned for producing exceptional pedigree beef cattle and sheep and within minutes of entering the first field of stock it immediately became apparent as to why. Despite such a renowned reputation in the pedigree world with consistently good averages over a prolonged period, selling Charolais bulls such as the May, 2017-born Charolais bull, Carwood Nico, to the Coolnaslee herd, in Northern Ireland, for £14,000, it was instantly clear that Colin Wight and his wife Fiona had just as much pride and gained just as much job satisfaction from fattening and finishing a good quality pen of commercial bulls/heifers, or selling an even, well-balanced lorry load of fat lambs.

The Wight's have three daughters who all live fairly locally and work with NHS Scotland. Susan is a dietitian with Alison and Lyndsay both working as diagnostic radiographers. The family each take a consecutive week off work at lambing time covering a three week rush and are always keen to lend a hand on the farm at weekends and when they are able. The family are also ably assisted by two full time workers James Dunlop who attends to the stock and tractor man Kevin Blyth.

The farm itself extends to approximately 1200 acres, 600 acres of which was purchased in 1986 by the family partnership John Wight & Sons and a further 600 acres are rented seasonally. In 1987 just after Fiona and Colin got married, they took on the responsibility of farming the unit at the age of 24. Fiona explained, *"the farm was quite run down when we took it on, it has taken a long time to turn the farm around and find what suits the land and we have had to adapt our systems accordingly"*.

The sheds have been modified and added to over the years and consist mostly of cubicles or slatted sheds with rubber matting, mainly introduced because of the cost of purchasing straw.



The land consists of rolling hills, green pastures, and wooded shelter belts, but it does extend to 1000ft above sea level in parts and in the past surface artefacts have been found including early Neolithic pottery, hazel nutshell charcoal and lithics. The ground can burn off quite easily especially on the gravelly knowes, however these high areas provide excellent overwintering opportunities for dry cows where they feed on hard standing and gain shelter within the woods. They graze there supplemented with silage, straw and minerals throughout the winter and move closer to the farm, as the cows near calving.

The family have not undertaken any real diversification choosing to focus on improving what they already have and do. They implement good grassland management, shutting off fields with an electric fence during periods of rapid grass growth, this excess grass is baled and used for sheep haylage. The farm itself isn't really suited to a paddock grazing system but Colin and Fiona follow the principles behind this system with the good agricultural practice of regular soil analysis and appropriate lime application. Dung and slurry applications help to cut down on fertiliser use and maintain healthy soil structure. 'Shot grass' is a pet hate at Carwood although they admitted it was hard to avoid in the 2021 season.



The late Willie Davidson of Poldean, Moffat first presented the idea of Salers to Colin and Fiona and in 2009 Colin had the opportunity to witness Salers in their home environment, on a SAC farmers trip to France. The trip entailed visits to co-operatives, cheese factories and abattoirs but one of the excursions took them to Salers in the Auvergne region. The visitors were escorted by Laurent Antignac to cattle sheds some 4000ft up, Colin said, "I could not believe it, there were cows grazing on the hills with their calves. A coach load of strangers walked through them and we were able to scratch their backs". At the same time, there were also technicians on the farm, classifying fifty bulls, Colin added, "all the visitors walked through these bulls, we were staggered by how quiet they were and how uniformed they were in appearance". Back in the UK Colin witnessed Salers calved to a Charolais bull and noted, "the Salers cross Charolais calves were good, they were stylish and uniform in size and that is exactly what they have bred for me here at Carwood".

Shortly after in 2010, the family purchased six pure Salers heifers. Colin said, "farmer friends said we were mad, they said the Salers were wild, but we have never found that, they are inquisitive but not wild and we have found the breed to be just like those cattle I saw in France in 2009, quiet and easy to handle".

Those foundation heifers produced five bulls and one heifer, Colin said, "we were slightly disappointed as we had hoped for female replacements quickly, but not all was lost as one of those bulls was kept for breeding and some of the cows are still here, the Salers live well in to double figures". After that and until recently, Colin had purchased one or two commercial pens of Salers and Salers cross heifers each year at the Premier Sale, Castle Douglas.

Carwood currently have 240 cows which mostly calve at what Colin describes as their 'ideal age' of two and a half. Forty of those cows are pedigree Charolais, eight are pure Salers and the remainder are mainly Salers Cross,



Colin said, "we criss-cross the Salers and the Charolais and it works really well for us, we like the Salers cross, and we like the Charolais cross, and this criss-crossing is producing commercial calves, which when finished, command a profit".

Some of the black cows are Salers cross out of Limousin and Angus cattle previously bought as replacements.

Both Colin and Fiona placed a huge emphasis on having good-framed cattle, with good udders and feet that could calve easily. Colin said, "they have good udders, we hardly see any mastitis or have to suck a calf", he added, "since we introduced Salers, we have more head of cattle, less calving issues and better-quality stock".

Calving is spread out from early spring through the summer to give a steady flow of animals at finishing time. The calves start to receive creep in early August and calves are weaned in batches according to age from the end of October with dry cows mostly wintered outside.

Cattle are routinely vaccinated for BVD and Lepto and calves receive a precautionary double vaccination of Rispoval. Harbro mineral buckets are always available and pre-bulling minerals and pre-calving buckets are used to boost colostrum quality.



The cattle system is complimented with 900 commercial ewes. The majority are now Suffolk cross mules with some mules and a few Texel crosses. *“We like to criss cross the sheep too and find that Texel or Beltex cross tups on a Suffolk X ewe gives a tremendous finished lamb and also the Suffolk tup over the Texel cross ewe leaves a great lamb which not only can fatten quickly off grass but can be taken to heavier weights if required”*. Included in the ewe numbers are 45 pure Suffolks which are mainly Fiona's domain. Apart from the replacements, lambs are all finished being sent to Morrisons directly or sold live through Lawrie and Symington at Lanark Market.

Fiona grew up on a farm in Kintyre and met Colin whilst she was studying Animal Production Science at Edinburgh University. She works at home and takes care of most of the bookwork as well as being a full time lamber, occasional tractor driver and relief farm worker. The Suffolks are her farming "hobby" and the flock produce approx 20 Suffolk shearlings which are sold at Kelso and Stirling annually. She was secretary of The Scottish Charolais Club for five years and like Colin enjoys the social aspect of belonging to a Breed Society.

180 acres of first cut silage is taken followed by a second cut of around 100 acres. A contractor chops the silage, but all other work is undertaken in-house. They grow 100 acres of Spring Barley, 90 tonnes is treated with Maxammon with the remainder bruised and propcorned. This home grown feed is used either in a TMR or fed in a calf creep ration.

The family have been concentrating on bull beef for several years, they are fed ad-lib on a TMR ration and finished at 13 - 15 months at 380 kgs - 440 kgs deadweight. Colin said, *“the pure Salers will reach 418 kgs to 430 kgs and easily grade out at a U”*, he added, *“the Salers cross just get better and better as they get older and the top four or five on the payment report are always Charolais Salers crosses”*.

Breed	Deadweight	Grade	Price per kg
Salers X	388.7 kg	-U3	4.26
Salers	418.2 kg	-U3	4.21
Salers X	420 kg	U+3	4.31
Salers X	420 kg	U+3	4.31

The bull beef unit suits Carwood, having previously sold suckled calves and only finishing heifers. They found that leaving bull calves entire gets them away so much quicker and efficiently which is becoming ever more important with carbon audits and lowering emissions from agriculture. The bull beef operation gives them a steady income throughout the summer and Autumn before the cows are housed.



The heifers are then finished from Autumn through until the Spring. All finished cattle are sold direct to Highland Meats (Dunbia) or MacIntosh Donald (Kepak).

Previously all replacements were bought in but as Salers numbers have increased almost all replacements are homebred which helps to maintain the health status of the herd. Fiona said, *“whether it is sheep or cattle Colin likes decent framed animals and we had major concerns when the abattoirs capped the carcass weights however just like most farmers, we adapted our system to meet the standards”*.

There are currently two pedigree Salers bulls, Darnford Mack and Bacardi Knight and all the Charolais bulls are homebred. Colin said, *“we like to breed bulls we would use ourselves”*, he added, *“I don't place much emphasis on EBV's, but I do want my Salers bulls to be well fleshed, with good frame and a reasonable sized back end but not too extreme because we use them for replacement females”*. When asked from a commercial perspective about the Salers Cattle Society's decision to prevent myostatin carriers entering the herd book in 2024, Colin replied, *“I think it is a good thing, commercial men look to the Salers for their easy calving, milk and other maternal traits and it is important that the breed maintains these attributes”*, he added, *“some other breeds that have followed the myostatin path have lost some maternal aspects such as milk”*.

The criss-crossing at Carwood will continue and forms the foundation of their breeding policy with the two breeds complimenting each other very favourably. The rapid growth and efficient finishing characteristics of the Charolais coupled with the easy calving and maternal attributes of the Saler is a match unsurpassed by any other cross in Colin's opinion.