

FORAGE FOCUS KEY TO BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION

Increased grassland reseeding with specialist leys and strategic use of different forage crops has led to a transformation in the performance of the Roberts family's sheep and beef enterprises at Ty Draw, Llanasa, on the north Wales coast.

Over a three year period, a greater focus on homegrown production has allowed increased stocking rates and a significant reduction in bought in feed costs at the 500 acre (200ha) unit, boosting output per hectare and overall profitability.

Change came about when the farm lost access to 180 acres (73ha) of rented ground at relatively short notice, forcing a rethink on the way the business was being run.

"We recognised the need to start doing things differently," recalls David Roberts. "Rent and feed costs were rising, and when we then lost a significant acreage of land it became obvious that we needed to make better use of our greatest asset – the land we still had."

Around the same time, David and son Mathew began their relationship with Field Options and ProCam agronomist Rhys Owen, who encouraged more reseeding and gradually introduced some alternative forage crops into their thinking.

"It's not only the fact that we've reseeded more," continues David, "but



David (right) and Mathew Roberts have seen a transformation in their sheep and beef businesses since adopting a more forage-focused approach.

we've improved productivity by applying lime and nutrients at the correct time. Rhys has helped to ensure we've applied the right attention to detail, selecting the right fields for the right crops and checking on establishment and performance down the line.

"Despite farming fewer acres, we're keeping more ewes and finishing our own lambs earlier, and therefore have capacity for more store lambs later in the year.

"The biggest change is the quality of our grass silage and the difference this has made to our bought in feed costs. We're now typically making 11.5 – 12 ME silage, instead of 9.5 – 10 ME, and that's allowing us to virtually eliminate concentrate feeding to the ewes, saving as much as £3 - £4/head in bought in concentrates."

The current acreage farmed from Ty Draw includes an additional 50 acres (20ha) of old pasture ground that has been added and improved over the past couple of years, but that still means the farm is 130 acres (53ha) smaller in land

area than before the change of approach. Despite this, the flock of Texel x Mules – bred to Texel rams and maintaining a lambing percentage of 185% - has increased from 1,200 to 1,400 ewes. Furthermore, instead of buying in 800 store lambs to finish, the farm supports 2,000 additional lambs each year, bought in during the autumn and finished over winter. The Roberts also grow 70 acres (28ha) of barley, with 120 tonnes being alkaline-treated for home feeding and the remainder sold.

Store lambs are all sold on contract to Morrisons, as are the finished cattle, and it was a prompt from the buyer than led to a change in the beef system, which now involves buying in Blue X calves from the dairy sector at 4 – 5 months of age.

"We've moved away from buying forward stores that were finished inside to a more extensive system," says David. "It means we are making better use of homegrown forage with the cattle, either as grazing or as quality silage, and we're producing a beef product

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Rhys Owen has encouraged grassland reseeding and the introduction of alternative forage species at Ty Draw.



A brassica mixture including turnips, kale and rape is used to finish bought-in store lambs over the winter months.

that meets Morrisons' requirements."

Increased grass silage quality is made possible by a reseeding strategy that now results in up to 40 acres (16ha) being reseeded each year with Field Options' medium or long term grass and clover mixtures. Grassmaster Pro-Nitro, which is a 5-6 year cutting and grazing mixture with red clover, is used widely, along with the longer term Preference

Pro-Nitro, which produces a dense and productive sward more suited to grazing, also with red clover.

"In addition to having better quality leys, we're also cutting earlier and more often," adds Mathew Roberts. "We're now taking our first cuts in May as opposed to June, and then take any following cuts within four or five weeks. The result is clear to see in the

silage analyses, which have significantly higher ME and – where we have red clover in the sward – about two to three percent more protein.

"The better quality silage has allowed us to cut out the concentrates for the ewes entirely, saving £5,000 - £6,000 across the flock. We're now just feeding silage and some soya for extra protein, and that's a far simpler job so we're also saving time and labour at a busy time of year."

Shorter term leys also fit into the system, with Field Options' supplying a mixture that includes a persistent and hardy diploid Westerwolds ryegrass that has this year not only provided a bumper yield of silage but is also going to serve as useful run-back for ewes that will be over-wintered on fodder beet, before being cut again for silage next year.

"This crop went in after stubble turnips and has been cut four times this year," adds Mathew. "It has yielded around 15 bales/acre in total and will now provide supplementary grazing for ewes being over-wintered on fodder beet."

Again, applying attention to detail, the Roberts are growing Lactimo, a fodder beet with high

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Red clover is included in medium and long term leys, boosting the protein content of forage by two to three percent.



The step to eliminate concentrate feeding to the ewes wasn't taken lightly but has successfully reduced feed costs by £3 to £4 a head.

freshweight yield and with a high percentage of root above ground, well suited to grazing.

"With the fodder beet and the brassicas, and with some rented grazing away from Ty Draw, we're able to rest the grassland from the end of November through to when we start lambing from mid-February," says Mathew. "That's important, as it means

we have ample fresh grazing for the ewes and lambs and are able to take our silage cuts earlier.

"We're now in a position where 90% of our home-produced lambs are finished and away by the end of June. They are creep fed to achieve this, but that's still a relatively low overall feed cost when you consider the savings that we're making everywhere else."