

NE Organic Discussion Group

Newsletter





October 2020

Later this month on Thursday 29th October we will have our 2nd meeting. As I already intimated it will be a virtual farm Tour. Charley and Andrea Walker of Barnside, Duns have agreed to host the event. Charley will talk us through his system and give us the benefit of his experience making use of video which we have shot prior to the event.

He has provided me with a lot of background which I thought was worth sharing. Below he notes some of their achievements and describes Andrea and his philosophy. I hope it will whet your appetite for the meeting, where we will learn more and have a chance to ask questions from this very successful and inspirational organic farmer.

I will send out invites shortly.

If you are interested and would like to know more Charley and Andrea are on Twitter and Facebook: -

Twitter handle is @BarnsideFarm and Facebook "Barnside Farm".

The following link is for a youtube video made by QMS in 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlqfzA2ZDpE>

Charley & Andrea Walker's Farming Philosophy & System

Background

We are tenants on a 625 acre upland beef and sheep farm near Duns in the Scottish Borders. We run 520 wool shedding ewes and 110 Welsh Black beef cows on a low input, grass fed, organic farming system that is integrated with our commitment to rural stewardship. We have two children, Tom, 18 and Jessica, 15.

We both have degrees in Agriculture from Harper Adams University College. We are the current Farmers Weekly Grassland Managers of the Year and were Agriscot Scottish Sheep Farm of the Year 2017-18. We won the Agriculture category in the 2017 Scottish Rural Awards and were highly commended in the conservation and environment category in 2018. We received a Future Farming Scotland award for promoting sustainable systems in agriculture in 2015 and we were runners up for Sheep Farmer of the Year in the 2012 Farmers Weekly Awards. We regularly host youth group, student and farmer visits.



Charley is a 2007 Nuffield Scholar and 2008 ASDA Beeflink Scholar. His Nuffield report, "Easier managed sheep and beef cattle" received the award for the report considered to be of most use to UK farmers. He served a term on the Nuffield board of trustees, as chairman of the Scott Country Lamb marketing group and was a Community Councillor for ten years. Andrea has served on the Parent Council of both local schools including a term as chair and is secretary/treasurer of the local village hall.

Aims and Philosophy

Our core aim is to operate a farming system that works with nature to produce organic beef and lamb in order to provide a healthy margin for the business, a healthy soil for the future and a healthy quality of life for ourselves and our visitors. Our philosophy is grounded in the laws of nature, recognising that animals, plants and soil organisms have successfully co-evolved over millions of years. Whilst we acknowledge that technology has its place, this means that we first look to nature for practical and ecologically sustainable methods. We strive to replace inputs such as fertiliser, grain, fuel, machinery, pesticides and labour with knowledge and management.



The greatest lessons we can learn are from the wild herds that roam the world's grasslands. For millions of years, bison, wildebeest, and many others have grazed in large, tightly formed herds, constantly moving to fresh grazing whilst the weak and the sick are killed by predators. These herds leave behind an area that has been grazed and manured but which then has a lengthy rest period before it is re-grazed. This process works to the mutual benefit of the animals, the plants and the soil structure and biology. These animals have evolved to give birth during seasons of abundance to maximize their chances of survival and subsequent fertility. These are some examples of the thinking behind the farming methods that we have adopted and describe below.

Rotational Paddock Grazing

We operate a rotational paddock grazing system which mimics the migratory grazing behaviour of nature's herds and flocks. Using electric fencing we graze large groups of stock in small paddocks for periods of 1-3 days and then allow a lengthy rest period before re-grazing. As well as providing an abundance of quality grazing, this promotes much better plant root development and growth, thereby improving soil structure, organic matter content, water retention and carbon capture.

Benefits:

- Improved grass growth and utilisation
- Improved pasture quality and digestibility
- Improved soil structure, organic matter, water retention and carbon capture
- Increased animal performance without concentrate feeding
- Ability to stockpile and subsequently ration pasture for winter grazing

Adopting this rotational system over the last four years has increased our stocking rate by 30% and generated a 48% increase in output without increasing operational costs.





Wool Shedding Sheep



For millions of years prior to domestication sheep would naturally shed their fleece in early summer. We have bred a flock of fully wool shedding ewes that do not need shearing, crutching or tail docking and aren't prone to fly strike. This has fundamentally changed the way that we manage sheep and the loss of saleable wool is far outweighed by the cost savings achieved.

Benefits:

- Eliminates wool related tasks
- Reduces stress on sheep and shepherd
- Reduces labour
- Reduces veterinary & medicinal inputs
- Increases management flexibility

Lambing and Calving on Pasture



Similar to animals in nature, we time lambing and calving to follow the onset of grass growth in spring. Both occur outside on pasture with minimal intervention. Ewes and cows are able to get all of their late pregnancy and lactation nutrition from spring grass and are able to express their natural behaviour at and around parturition, to the mutual benefit of us and them.

Benefits:

- Eliminates the need for livestock housing
- Reduces or eliminates concentrate feeding
- Reduces labour and stress at lambing and calving
- Allows ewes and cows to behave naturally
- Minimises veterinary & medicinal inputs

Ruthless Genetic Selection



We seek to emulate the role of the wolf pack in nature by applying a ruthless genetic selection policy to our flock and herd in order to prevent the continuation of problem breeding lines. Therefore, animals that need individual attention for feet, birthing or preferential feeding are culled once they have reared their progeny and their progeny are not retained for breeding.

Benefits:

- Reduces problem animals
- Reduces labour
- Reduces veterinary & medicinal inputs
- Simplifies management

Outwintering



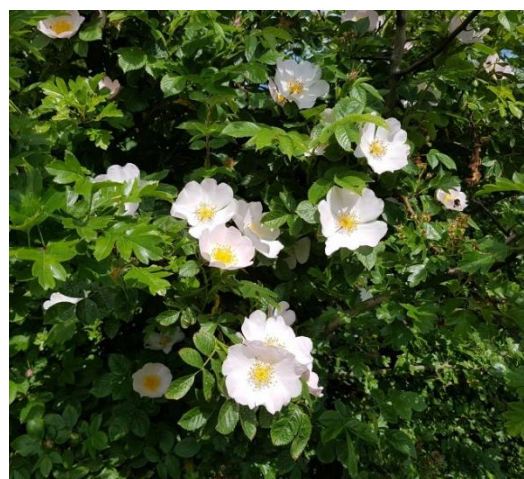
We outwinter all stock at Barnside by using our rotational grazing system to extend the autumn grazing season and by feeding silage on pasture during late winter.

Benefits:

- No need for livestock housing
- Reduced need for silage making
- Healthy environment for animals
- Nutrients directly recycled to pasture

Rural Stewardship

Whilst our farming systems are very much in tune with nature we have also enhanced the habitat and landscape value of the farm by planting woodland and hedgerows as well as sowing large areas of species rich native grassland. Water margins are fenced off and managed to enhance the biodiversity of the farm and protect water quality. Wader scrapes have been created to provide abundant feeding habitat for wader birds such as Curlew, Snipe, Lapwing and Oystercatchers. Mixed crops are grown for overwintering birds and grasslands managed for the benefit of ground nesting birds.



The Future

The successful integration of these methods provides a fantastic opportunity to improve both farm profitability and efficiency hand in hand with delivering far reaching environmental improvements. The benefits of such a system when contrasted with one that relies on grain feeding, mechanisation and fossil fuel consumption are huge.

We help to promote these ideas through our role as a host farm for the Quality Meat Scotland/Scottish Agricultural College Planning for Profit Initiative and through our involvement in QMS Grazing Groups both as a guest speaker and participating farmer. We look forward to contributing to the further dissemination and development of knowledge in this area. We are mentors for two new entrant farmers under the Scottish Government's Farm Advisory Scheme and we hosted the Livestock in Low Input Systems Conference in 2018 and the Farmers Weekly Graze Event in 2020.



Our ruthless genetic selection policy, choice of hardy, low input breeds, use of rotational grazing, outwintering system and outdoor lambing and calving allow us to operate a profitable and environmentally beneficial farming operation that gives us and our animals a great quality of life.



The soil Association have asked us to publicise the following, but they have a wide range of events available and they can be contacted direct for more details.

Planting Trees to Diversify Your Farm: Woodland creation, management and funding, Wednesday 21 October, 9.30–11 am.

[Book online](#)

For over 40 years, the Lockett family has been slowly but steadily planting trees on their farm in the Highlands, and using them to diversify their activity. Richard Lockett, also of the Scottish Farming and Wildlife Advisors Group (SCOTFWAG), will discuss how, as well as using the trees for livestock shelter and for wood fuel, they have created public woodland, wetlands and wildflower meadows and opened a B&B. Come along to discuss:

- Planting trees to diversify your farm
- Planting trees for livestock management and farm wildlife
- Planning your woodland: the right tree in the right place
- Broadleaf woodland management
- Q&A with Richard Lockett
- Funding information from Scottish Forestry

Free of charge to farmers, land managers and foresters in Scotland. Booking is required: **[Book online](#)**

For more information contact Ana by [email](#) or on 0793 082 4983 or Jane by [email](#) or on 0131 370 8150.