

# Cattle integration helps to sustain potato soils

Pembrokeshire enterprise JR Scale & Co has found a convenient way to introduce cattle to support sustainable potato production

Great beef and potatoes are two essential ingredients when it comes to Welsh oggies or Cornish pasties. For the JR Scale & Co farming business at Benton Farm, near Milford Haven, Pembrokeshire, potatoes have been a key part of the farm for some time; now beef is too.

The need to maintain or even improve the farm's naturally good potato land further was one reason for introducing beef into the farming system – all part of a wider regenerative strategy to drive financial performance and reliable business sustainability.

The decision was made to increase the beef headage significantly to 240, split equally between first-year calves and second years to finish before two years old.

## Poor previous experience

But introducing beef for a significant increase in their farm's livestock component had proved difficult in the past. Breeding from suckler cows came with concerns over bovine tuberculosis, buying store cattle to finish risky with unpredict-



able pricing and rearing baby calves from local dairy farms too specialist.

With three unsuccessful attempts in the past, and Morgan Scale estimating £100,000 of working capital being mopped up, a different approach was needed.

A new way of beef production started in spring 2023, aiming to make profitable use of herbal leys. This involves working with an integrated dairy-farm-to-dinner-table beef business that places weaned calves at four months old and a minimum 120kg live-weight on co-operator finishing units.

The first batch from Buitelaar Group was 70 calves, all dairy-beef crosses bred from Aberdeen Angus and Longhorn sires out of Holstein-Friesian cows. Another 120 arrived in March 2024.

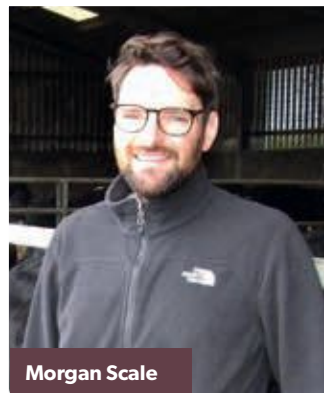
## Minimising financial outlay

The spring 2025 batch will see their 240-head target being reached. For Morgan,

two of the most practical attractions are that the highest-risk early rearing phase has been done, and the calves have been matched before delivery for uniform size, weight and age. Financially, a compelling factor is that the farm never owns the cattle, eliminating a six-figure outlay.

The finished beef specification is a 260kg carcass (500kg liveweight) at or before 23 months of age, depending on the management system. How they get from start to finish is Morgan's decision, with guidance from Buitelaar's advisory team for optimum productivity. Of the first batch of 70 to be finished, 68 were prime beef, one had been lost to a positive bovine TB test and one had died of natural causes.

Under this bed-and-breakfast system, the farm pays for feed and bedding, work-force and veterinary provision, and other necessary consumables such as trace elements and mineral supplementation.



Morgan Scale

Second-batch calves approaching one year of age arrived in spring 2024



PHOTOGRAPHY: RED ROCK SERVICES/BUITELAAR TIM SCRIVENER

“**Regen beef can enable farmers to create significant additional value from their current farming operations, without adding a whole lot of cost**”

Payment is by an open-book formula for the total liveweight gained at an agreed minimum rate set at the outset. If between arrival and departure the market price of finished beef has risen, the payment rate is topped up via a formula, also known at the outset. If finished beef prices have dropped, payment is not discounted.

According to Buitelaar regen consultant and Powys farmer Marc Jones, one of the most compelling practical attractions is that it offers an ‘a la carte’ rather than a set menu, geared to the results growers want to achieve. “Essentially, it’s all about the soil,” he says.

Of the five regen principles, Marc notes the addition of livestock complements other actions and does so 24/7. He points out that herbal leys keep soils covered and living roots in the ground, providing a contribution day and night with a fresh supply of manure. For Morgan it is too early to clarify the benefits to potato soils, but his initial observation is that soils are improving as a result.

### Integration obstacles

Where arable cropping predominates, company chief executive Adam Buitelaar identifies that arguably the toughest obstacle is how to equip a farm workforce with sufficient livestock experience to run a beef enterprise.

Part of Buitelaar’s business strategy is to help arable farmers overcome the obstacles of introducing beef cattle, and he says a pragmatic approach can bring significant benefits to an arable enterprise. “Regenerative farming is a personal philosophy, an agile and evolving process, rather than a blueprint.

“Regen beef can enable farmers to create significant additional value from their current farming operations, without adding a whole lot of cost. A compelling attraction is that it allows farmers to choose practices that are best suited to their own farm context. But avoid being purists and focus on being pragmatic.”

For Morgan, the introduction of beef cattle and incorporating herbal leys into the system was purely a business decision. With no Sustainable Farming Incentive option to help cover costs, he is convinced that not making the change because of the financial outlay would be an ‘own goal’. “It’s about healthier soils, premium-quality potatoes, healthy livestock and healthy financial performance,” he concludes. 🌱



## Form farm partnerships to ease livestock integration

Writtle University lecturer William Hudson thinks farmers should work together to overcome the challenges of establishing livestock on arable holdings. “As well as moving stock from field to field, why not from farm to farm? Growers working together could develop an integrated mobgrazing strategy that works for all and helps share the time and cost of creating the necessary infrastructure.”

Working together, growers could hire specialist contractors rather than train or recruit new staff.

### Challenges

In his view, the challenges of introducing livestock are worth it. Providing fencing, water, shelter and gaining husbandry skills come with its difficulties, but soil benefits are the reward. William points out that for some farms where livestock have been introduced, it has resulted in a threefold increase in soil organic matter.

It is the disappearance of livestock from many farms that has contributed to the poor soils found, he says. “There are multiple benefits from reintroducing livestock into an arable system, aside from adding pasture into the rotation. Livestock add to the soil biology through their dung, provide an additional source of organic manure and, when grazing a cover or

winter crop, they recycle nutrients.

“The rotational changes that come with it also play a part. Adding a perennial crop in the rotation counters soil erosion, builds structure and brings different species into the system. Cover crops also offer the chance for root diversity. Crops with strong taproots are excellent options for compacted soils. The greater the crop diversity, the more species it attracts, so it is working above the ground too.”

William believes growers shouldn’t overlook further market opportunities. He notes many independent retailers supply meat sourced through supermarket supply chains, but local collaborations could offer opportunities.

“The system has been based around cost rather than excellence, but more consumers are taking an interest in where their food comes from and are prepared to seek out and pay for more sustainable and higher-quality providers.”

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