

Why Herd Health is Paramount at Onnen Fawr

Background

Both Tim and Alice Amery hail from farming backgrounds and, although working outside agriculture, when the opportunity arose to purchase a neighbouring 180 acre farm they returned to their roots initially renting out the ground as “grass lets”. However, with some of the rougher ground at Onnen Fawr in Carmarthenshire requiring habitat management under the regulations of Tir Gofal, the Welsh agri-environment support scheme, they started to build up a cattle herd to run on a low input approach as more of the ground was taken back to farm in hand. Having grown up with easily handled Hereford cross suckler cows it was an easy choice for them to establish a pedigree Hereford herd founded on a birthday present of six heifers from the Laxfield herd in September 2005 and a further seven in-calf heifers from the Border herd the following autumn. “The Hereford cattle with their wonderful temperament and ability to thrive on the land we initially put them on fell in with our low input labour system. Given better grazing they just excelled themselves.”

Although entirely pedigree, the herd is run commercially on a forage based system. The aim is to calve the majority of heifers at 2 years of age as long as they have attained 425 Kg LW at bulling. Only first calvers in the herd, which now numbers 33 breeding females, are offered a little concentrate post calving, with calves offered creep feed from 4 months.

Herd Health

A comment from a veterinary friend stating that “if you don’t screen incoming cattle to your herd, it’s not if you get a disease, it’s when”, and the Biobest Herdcare leaflet in the January 2007 edition of the Hereford Cattle Journal, prompted them to look into a CHeCS accredited health scheme for the herd. They decided “that as our numbers were still small there was no reason not to engage in the Herdcare cattle health scheme, but in retrospect size of herd and subsequent testing costs should not be seen as a barrier to disease control and its benefits.” The herd has been registered with Herdcare run by Biobest, since 2007 testing for all four diseases: BVD, leptospirosis, IBR and Johne’s, and they found the process of joining and testing to be straight



A selection of the Gomer cows grazing on Kale.

forward. Elite status with full accreditation for the four diseases was achieved in February 2008.

Not all the heifers brought into the herd had come from an accredited herd and the stock bull had also been working on a nearby farm so they were delighted to have clear tests all round first time. “I have since followed advice from Biobest on how to introduce new stock into the herd and have confidence that I’m doing all we can to maintain our disease free status. I find the staff at Biobest efficient, helpful and friendly. The ability to consult with a vet who is knowledgeable about not just the diseases being tested for but also the implications of infection has been highly beneficial. Our local vet takes the blood samples as the cows come into the crush for the first part of their annual TB test so there is no extra visit cost. We then post the samples to arrive the same week at Biobest with results returned to us and our vet within several days which allows our own vet to be included in discussion on the reports.”

Alice stated that the successful performance of her herd can be attributed in part to testing with Herdcare “our decision to test has saved us from some disastrous purchases where disease may have been introduced”. It is not often that a farmer admits that they could have made a disastrous purchase but it is refreshing to read this to emphasise the importance of understanding the health status of cattle entering your herd. They believe the benefits of Herdcare speak for itself. After reading a biosecurity article in the regular “Herdcare” newsletter the Amery’s now “never graze cattle next to neighbours cattle unless there is suitable double fencing with a big hedge” and have welcomed the advice available from Biobest either through the website, newsletter or in regular conversations with the cattle team.

The Future

In addition to ensuring the health of the herd Tim and Alice utilise Breedplan to monitor and assess the performance of animals in the herd. They view both Herdcare and Breedplan as “not just management tools but also marketing tools” which help assure prospective buyers of the health status and performance levels of her cattle. “I enjoy the fact that I know our cattle are free from these diseases and will not cause any outbreaks in the herds that they go to in the future. It doesn’t matter how good a stockman you are, if you don’t test incoming animals you will get something eventually. If a buyer has an outbreak you will be suspect. Without our health scheme we would have introduced cattle with BVD and Lepto.”

By managing the health and performance of the cattle at Onnen Fawr Tim and Alice are providing prospective buyers of cattle from the Gomer herd

Society member Alice Amery discusses why the Gomer pedigree Hereford herd is accredited under CHeCS regulations with Biobest Herdcare and the related benefits.



Alice Amery pictured with young bull Gomer Benefactor D2 in 2008 - since sold and working successfully in a local dairy herd.

with the assurance and confidence they need in making a healthy purchase. This can only be done through a continued commitment to testing and biosecurity which has been shown by the Alice.

Postscript

The Gomer herd is now taking advantage of the support for Johne's screening available to all beef herds in Wales from Hybu Cig Cymru. This provides funding of £4/head up to a maximum of 100 cows in the herd for the one screen as long as this is through a CHeCS licensed provider such as Biobest Herdcare. Further details Tel: 01970 625050.



Further details on the Gomer herd are available by contacting:

Tim or Alice Amery on 01558 822973 or tim@gomerherefords.co.uk

Biobest Laboratories provide specialist virology and serology testing services in addition to health scheme membership.

New tests available include Bactoproof™ the mastitis diagnostics service and an IBR PCR providing rapid cost effective testing for calves.

If you would like to know more about Biobest's Cattle Health Scheme "Herdcare", please contact the Manager, David Kay or a member of our veterinary team on 0131 4402628. More details on the four diseases covered are available on the website at www.biobest.co.uk

Herdcare is a CHeCS licensed cattle health scheme. Find out more about CHeCS and alternative providers of disease testing at www.checs.co.uk