



FARMING IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS: CASE STUDY SERIES



Dan Watkins & Family Powkesmore Farm Ditton Priors Bridgnorth



INTRODUCTION

Dan, his wife Andrea, their two sons and his father run Powkesmore farm near Bridgnorth. They have been farming regeneratively for five years with a mixed operation including a suckler herd, arable and a parent-stock intensive poultry operation. Dan is a member of the Clee View Farmers Group, which encourages knowledge sharing and collaboration within the Clee View area of the Shropshire Hills.

REGEN AT WORK

Over the last five years, Powkesmore has been developing its approach to regenerative farming, landscape stewardship, and building a circular system to reduce external inputs.

Dan approached rotational grazing through a great deal of research and a gradual process to test how it could work with the land and animals at Powkesmore. In Dan's view you can read a lot about these approaches, but **"you just want to make sure it works before you invest too much time and money into it."**

The income from the poultry operation has helped to support the shift to a smaller herd of 160 cattle, which are moved daily with a three-week rest period for each field through the summer. Small amounts of manure from the chickens has been applied in the arable system to distribute nutrients for growth of grass and herbal leys, which in turn gets crimped then fed to finish the cattle. This system has meant that the farm hasn't bought in any synthetic fertilisers in years, reducing operating costs, and has seen an increase in earthworm activity and soil health.

Dan's noticed that rotational grazing breaks the cycle of stomach worms through the rest periods. This has been proven through testing blood and dung samples for liver fluke and intestinal worms. Additionally, the cattle no longer need fly treatments due to them being moved regularly. This has meant over a year without having to worm the stock or give fly treatments, resulting in a reduction of insecticides in the animals, and healthier soils.

Developing the system means striking a balance between available grass for finishing and the size of the herd, and working within the reality of the landscape, which means that the cows still have to be in for a part of the year. Despite the challenges, Dan is committed to a long-term plan that will take gradual refining.

SALES

Currently, the family does a small number of beef boxes for friends and family but the majority of the beef goes through Pickstock in Telford, with bulls going to Bowlands or Kepak. Good heifers go into sales at Bridgnorth market.

The infrastructure at Powkesmore includes a cutting room, which Dan refers to as 'the Shop'. Increasing direct sales from the farm would help to increase margins and is a part of the development plan. He has considered the role of a profit-share with the right partner in developing this branch of the business.

"We've been going down this regenerative route and realizing, actually, we've got - and I don't mind saying - a superior product, healthier. I think we've got another level to sell off there now"

The role of marketing the product is another important facet that often farmers don't have the time to do, which most importantly for Dan involves communicating the benefits of grass-fed beef in a system that emulates nature.

POWKESMORE FARM

Watkins & Co Powkesmore Farm, Ditton Priors, Bridgnorth, Shropshire, WV16 6TW.
danwatkins50@gmail.com

RESEARCH INTO QUALITY

Baseline testing for benchmarking has become an important part of the model at Powkesmore. That has included nutritional analysis of the grass-fed beef from the farm through working with Harper Adams University.

“For me, the ideal thing is for us to be selling direct to the consumer. I want to produce the highest quality meat as possible, really healthy.. and that probably doesn't mean large numbers because we can't do that on this system. But if we can improve our soils and improve the feed we're feeding our cattle, that should improve the nutritional density of our beef.”

Dan attributes the quality of the meat to the quality of the grass and inclusion of herbal leys. He intends to repeat the testing periodically to gauge improvement and sees this as a way to appeal to customers who value product quality.

FARMING IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES

Like many farmers, Dan has accessed a variety of financial support to develop his vision for Powkesmore. This includes Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL), the Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme (SFI) and the Woodland Trust.

“FiPL has funded the electric fencing and the drag troughs, which has helped the mob grazing system. You know, this is where I started to invest more knowing that we're getting just the same if not more grass without any chemical fertilizer. It's just a win-win, with the same amount of cattle.”

The purchase of a direct drill (part funded by FiPL) has also supported the transition to a more regenerative system by improving the overall soil health across the farm. Dan has noticed improved soil structure and health which helps to reduce soil erosion, and he's seen an increase in beneficial invertebrates and earthworms. He is eager to test the soil infiltration rate and drainage from land, to establish the level of improvement.

The reduction in inputs for parasite management has improved the health of the animals and soil - something that Andrea is especially keen to continue improving and monitoring.

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

A challenge for grass fed systems with fewer animals is how to provide a constant supply for buyers. Dan's buyers recognise that there's a growing interest in grass-fed beef, but it takes time to develop a market model.

“All the grass fed beef is going be finished pretty much at the same time, but it's the supply chain right through the year, that buyers want.”

This is a challenge that Dan thinks will take a couple of years to consider and plan for within his business model and system.



AT A GLANCE

At Powkesmore, the family believes in working with nature, not against it. The process has been evolving gradually and has been yielding benefits across several systems on the farm, showing that farming doesn't have to conflict with nature and biodiversity improvements.

“I just feel like we can deliver all this biodiversity and this carbon capture. We can do it, and farm, and produce food.”

