

*Feature on Milkieston Luings from The Scottish Farmer (22nd January 2010 edition)
by Lynsey Clark*

THE EXTREME winter weather over the past month has caused major problems for farmers up and down the country, and as a result, hill cattle and sheep have often had to fend for themselves. But, the hill breeds are hardy in their nature and many of them thrive in the toughest of conditions.

That's certainly what the Barr family have found with their 100-strong Luing herd, which they run alongside 120 Blackface ewes and 500 cross sheep at Milkieston, near Peebles. Since introducing the breed to the 650-acre hill unit, they have been thoroughly impressed by its versatility and consistency.

"The Luings suit our system perfectly, as they are great for wintering outside and they're dependable – they produce a good calf every year and manage to keep their condition, so they've not got a lot of making up to do after they've had a calf," explained David, who farms at Milkieston with his wife, Catherine and son, Andrew, where the Barr family have resided since 1922.

As the herd is kept pure, the Barrs are able to breed their own replacement heifers which is ideal for their high-health status.

This was, in fact, one of the main reasons that they decided to buy into Luings.

"The health of the cattle is high on our priority list and the fact that Luings can be bred pure but still be run commercially is ideal. Our cattle are all Johne's and BVD accredited – it's important for us and for the buyers, who can be assured they are clean and safe to buy," said David, who had health in mind when setting up his herd.

"I bought six-month-old calves at Oban for a few years in succession from the Cadzow Brothers' herd. They are a clean, high-health herd, so I knew exactly what I was getting," he said.

The breed has been enjoying an upsurge in demand over the past few years and David – a director of the Luing Cattle Society – says this has been noticeable when it comes to selling surplus heifers.

A batch of around 16 are sold annually at Castle Douglas, a sale which only accepts cattle from herds that are members of a recognised health scheme. There, Milkieston heifers have reached up to 3400gns in the past, with last year's consignment averaging out at £2200. Pure Luing bulls are kept entire and sold for bull beef at 13-15 months old to ABP Perth. They generally average 300kg d/w and come to £750-£800.

In order to keep up the quality of the females, David and Andrew carry out their own classification system on the cows, marking on feet, udders and temperament.

"We're particularly selective about what females we keep for breeding and we've noticed an improvement in the cows through that. There's also been a noticeable improvement in the calving percentage of the cows, since joining the Hi-Health scheme four years ago," explained David.

Anything not quite up to scratch when classified (normally the bottom 20) go to the Simmental bull, to produce Sim-Luing calves for selling. Bullocks are sold as yearlings at Stirling or St Boswells, while the heifers go to Stirling, making up to £1500.

"There's a great demand for the Sim-Luings – when put to the Charolais or Limousin bull, these produce a tremendous calf."

Aiming for level calves, the Barrs try to keep to a tight calving period, with all the cows calving in May and June. While the cows are wintered at 1000 feet and the in-calf heifers at 1100 feet, for easier access they are brought down to a field at the back of the farm pre-calving.

"I really can't praise the Luings enough at calving time. Very seldom do we have to help them – and we've never had a Caesarian. They are regular breeders and when the calves are born, they up on their feet straight away, with plenty vigour about them," said David.

"The cows last a long time and they're milky too, and seem to keep their condition – without any fancy grub," he added.

Bulling and in-calf heifers receive big-bale silage and the cows get arable silage, with an added bite of concentrate. The cattle are wintered on a field that's then ploughed in the spring, sown with arable silage and undersown for renewed pasture – a system which works well.

"We can normally take enough bales up to last the cattle for three days at a time, but the recent snow meant we had to get to them every day, as we couldn't take up a big enough load," explained David.

The weather also meant that preparation for the sale at Castle Douglas, on February 5, was delayed, but that didn't stop the family receiving a strong trade, up to 2500gns, for their batch of 15 BVD vaccinated heifers.

The majority of them were by Benhar Zemin, a privately-bought bull that has proved a consistently strong breeder of daughters over the past few years. He sired the two 3400gns Milkieston heifers.

The other bull responsible for some of the sale heifers is Harehead Chieftan – another fine breeder of females, while hopes are high for the future calves off last year's purchase, Benhar Kingfisher.

"We knew the Luings would suit our system, but they've really done better than we ever thought they would. We were probably the first in this area to have them, but now a few of our neighbours have gone into them too, so they're definitely getting more popular.

"I'm a great believer in outwintering cattle and the Luings do particularly well on that system," said David.