

Photo courtesy of Monitor Farm Scotland.

FARM FOCUS

THE DUNCAN FAMILY, LANDS OF DRUMHEAD

The Duncan family, trading as HJ & IM Duncan, farm around 1,000 acres at Blairfad and Lands of Drumhead, near Drymen in Stirlingshire. Having just completed four years as a Monitor Farm Scotland farm, the family have kindly allowed us to share how their grassland and forage crops work for them.



Photo courtesy of Rebecca Duncan.

Alongside a sheep and suckler beef enterprise, the Duncans have diversified into agritourism. The business supports five family members. Sally concentrates on the agritourism and the office, working alongside her mum Shona, who splits her time between agritourism, the office and the sheep. Bruce manages the cattle and farm maintenance with Gregor, who also takes on most of the tractor and machinery work, while Rebecca concentrates mostly on the sheep. Like every farming family, everyone mucks in across the whole business to make it a success.

SHEEP AND CATTLE

The flock runs to 1,100 ewes, made up of Cheviots, Cheviot Mules and Texel crosses. It is a closed flock apart from the tups, which are bought in as replacements are needed. Lambs are sold both store and fat. The herd of around 160 spring calving cows is predominantly Simmental cross and Aberdeen Angus, and is again closed apart from bulls, which are replaced as required. Calves are sold at intervals of 6, 12 and 18 months. The majority of the Simmental cross calves are sold straight off their mothers at around 350kg. The Angus calves are housed through the winter, then turned out to graze until around 18 months old, when they are sold as forward stores at approximately 500kg.

SOILS AND RESEEDING

Being part of the Monitor Farm project gave the Duncans the chance to look much more closely at their soils. Soil Essentials tested a large part of the farm in year one and re-tested at the

start of year four to measure progress. The initial results allowed the family to target lime at specific fields, primarily the silage ground, and they have seen a positive difference. There is still work to do to reach target pH, but the project has made the family much more aware of lime requirement across the farm.



Silage ground receives 20.3.20 at 150kg/acre for first cut, with a reduced rate for second cut. Ewes and lambs are turned onto the silage ground in spring to give the lambs a good start before it is shut up. Drainage is an ongoing focus for Bruce, who repairs as he goes and likes to dry up any wet areas well ahead of the plough going in for a reseed.

The rotation has become much more structured over the four years, with old leys ploughed up and the least productive fields targeted first. Some fields go through a forage crop before the new ley goes in, while others are reseeded grass to grass. Around 20 acres of our Mingary mixture was sown in 2026, with the family aiming to get the full seven year life from the ley, taking one or two cuts a year before grazing. Mingary is our most popular long term mixture, combining high tillering grasses for a dense sward with small and medium leaved white clovers chosen to persist under grazing, while still giving the flexibility to take a cut when needed. A small trial area of Hermitage, our multispecies mixture, was also sown in 2025 for the Monitor Farm project and grew well.

WINTER BRASSICAS

In 2026 a crop of Redstart rape/kale hybrid with stubble turnip was established, and it will carry 250 to 300 ewes from December through to February before being sown back into grass in spring 2027. This is the third time the Duncans have used this approach and they find it works well for their system. The crop has done well this year, standing around 80cm tall when measured this autumn, with good root development underneath.

"Reseeding has allowed us to extend the shoulders of the grazing season." Rebecca Duncan, pictured below.



LOOKING AHEAD

Going forward, the plan is to take out old grass every year, putting one field into a forage crop before it returns to grass, and reseeding another directly grass to grass. With reseeding now more structured, the family feel the way forward is clearer. They see potential to increase stock numbers, put more kilos on and improve the quality of stock leaving the farm, building on what has been tried and tested over the last four years.