

Lynsey Clark, The Scottish Farmer, January 31, 2009

BEN LOMOND is one of the most popular tourist spots in Scotland, and the Galloway cattle that roam at the foot of it make for a postcard perfect picture – but, as the owners of those cattle, the Maxwell family explain, there's much more to their favoured native breed than the ability to look good in a photo.



"No other breed would suit our system like the Galloways. They thrive on our hill ground and are great foragers – they're able to convert poor forage in to milk," explained Duncan Maxwell, who farms with his wife Vivien, and their son David, at Blairvockie, Rowardennan, where they run 40 pure Galloway cows, plus followers, under the Ben Lomond prefix.

The farm, which comprises 5000 acres, rises from just above sea level at the steading, to 3000ft. It's a steep incline, and there's no doubt it'd take a hardy beast to endure a winter out on the hill at Blairvockie. But the Galloways manage it, without any adverse effects, and have done since the Maxwells took over the lease of the National Trust-owned farm in 1985.

At that time, the herd had been established for around 12 years, founded with 10 cows from the Sunart herd, by

Duncan and his parents John and Margaret, when the family farmed at Cashel, a hill unit just a few miles from Blairvockie. After selling up there, John and Margaret moved to the Jaw Farm at Fintry, taking with them the Dun Galloways in the herd, and leaving Duncan with the black cattle at Blairvockie.

He's since concentrated on producing a larger type of cow. "Our aim was always to produce a bigger cow, but one that maintains its fleshing too. The Galloways needed to be a bit bigger, in order to compete with other native breeds, which they can now do," said Duncan, who has bred all his own replacement females since the late 1970s.

Increasing the size of the cattle in the herd was the reason behind the purchase of Suncrest Commander, a bull imported from Canada in the mid-1990s. He served his purpose well, and most of the cows in the herd today originate from him and his daughters. Also bought for their size, conformation and good locomotion, more recently, were the bulls, Edition of Kilnstown, Drumhumphry Keane, Landline of Romesbeoch and Blackcraig Lunatic – a 1200kg bull that, according to his breeder, John Finlay, is named after his buyer! All four bulls have proved successful on the breeding front.



In fact, the Kilnstown bull is sire to the family's best show cow yet, Ben Lomond Iron Lady. She has won four show championships and secured the overall supreme title at Dalmally in 2003, plus she bred the herd's top price bull so far, the 6200gns Ben Lomond Maximus that was champion at Castle Douglas, and Ben Lomond Leonardo, which sold for 3000gns.



While increasing in size over the years, Duncan points out that the Galloways have also managed to maintain their longevity. "We keep cows to an average of 14 years old, and after calving aged three, they have a calf every year," he said.

"The cows are great mothers, with plenty milk, and they're easy to work with," added David. "We tag all the calves as they're born, on the open hill, with no problems. They need to be quiet, there's 30,000 people a year walk through the hill to get to Ben Lomond, so there's no way we

could have wild cattle roaming around."

Their ease of calving and mothering ability makes the Galloways and Galloway crosses great options as suckler cows, agree Duncan and David.

"They're a flexible breed that can fit in to any system; they thrive on rough terrain, but do well on quality ground too. Compared to a lot of suckler cows, they're really easily maintained, which is especially appealing with the way concentrate feed prices are fluctuating. While increasing in size, they've still managed to keep their traditional attributes," they explained.

The Ben Lomond Galloways have formed an ideal partnership with the Maxwell's 1200-strong Blackface flock. "The Galloways eat the mat grass and expose the sweeter grasses, which improves the grazing for the sheep," pointed out Duncan.

"They're actually a popular conservation tool, to improve the heather, which is important here on the SSSI land of Ben Lomond."

The herd is on a spring calving system and the heifers which are not kept as replacements (normally around 12) are sold at Castle Douglas and Carlisle. Last year's lot of 10 sold to 1100gns and averaged £860. The bullocks, meanwhile, are finished off grass, at 28-months and sell to Scotbeef averaging 320kg deadweight.

"We sell our bullocks to Scotbeef due the convenience of selling them in one batch," said Duncan, who is a huge fan of Galloway beef. "It's an extremely tender and tasty meat, which is why it's much sought after by butchers and restaurants.

"We could easily get the bullocks to the same weight by 20-months if we pushed them harder, but it suits our system to fatten them off grass, after being wintered on some ad-lib silage and a barley blend," said Duncan, who has high hopes for the future calves off their new stock bulls bought last year, Klondyke Nimrod and Rooney of Gall-way.

The SF visit to Blairvockie allowed some added practise on the halter for the entries heading to the Castle Douglas show and sale, on February 12 and 13. The line-up includes five heifers and two bulls, all by either Blackcraig Lunatic, Drumhumphry Keane, or Landline of Romesbeoch. The same bulls are responsible for the six heifers entered for the Carlisle sale, on February 27.

David, who came back to work at home having completed a degree in Agriculture and Business Management at Aberdeen, splits his time between Blairvockie and helping out his Grandad John, who has Dun heifers from his Jaw herd also destined for next month's sales.

It's all go inside the house too, as Vivien is currently developing a luxury 'home from home' style bed and breakfast. If the home baking we tucked into on our visit is anything to go by, it's well worth a visit. And, you can always go for a stroll up Ben Lomond to work it off afterwards!

