



FARMING IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS: CASE STUDY SERIES



Duncan Bennett The Firs, The Bog Farm & Hope Park, Shropshire Hills

INTRODUCTION

Duncan Bennett has been shifting to a more regenerative system over the last few years and has become an advocate of this way of beef and lamb production.

He is a member of the Upper Onny Farmers Group. The group focuses on ensuring viable upland livestock farms and producing good food in a way that works alongside nature and benefits the environment, landscape and people."

A SHIFT TO REGEN

Duncan's system used to be a **"very commercial, very high input system"** for beef and sheep, which he described as feeling like always being on a treadmill, trying to pay off bills for fertilizer and seed.

A few years ago, as a part of the Upper Onny Farmers Group activities, Duncan and others attended a few farm visits to see different systems in action. The most notable, Duncan says, was James Rebanks' upland farm in the Lake District.

By changing to a rotational grazing system and reducing numbers of sheep and cattle, he has reduced inputs and improved his bottom line. Rather than selling the calves, the farm runs different year groups to finish on the farm.

By changing the breeds, Duncan has shifted the system to one where the animals are better suited to the landscape. The Aberdeen Angus cattle are intelligent and quickly caught on to the rotational system, and do well on a grass-based system.

Moving from Welsh Mules to Easycares as a sheep breed has also helped to reduce inputs. Having fewer sheep means that they are easier on the land, and a benefit of the EasyCares is that they are low-maintenance and self-shed, reducing the cost of shearing and the need for insect treatment.

The changes have helped to improve soil health and see the interconnections, even at the micro-scale: **"You're pouring insecticides on your stock, so that's inevitably going into the soil, killing all your bug life."**

AT A GLANCE

- Farming in the Shropshire Hills at 1,100 feet
- Began transitioning to regenerative farming and rotational grazing in 2021
- Cattle: switched to Aberdeen Angus from Stabilisers
- Sheep: switched to Easy-Cares from Welsh Mules

"It takes time. I'd never have thought three years ago I'd be where I am now. I wouldn't have even dreamt of it."

Duncan Bennett



DUNCAN BENNETT

Beef and lamb production -
farming in the Shropshire Hills
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SALES

Duncan sells all his beef into Pickstock at Telford. He's certain that he raises a product of exceptional standard because of the way that he farms, but a lack of local small scale infrastructure means that Duncan has never had the opportunity to try his own beef.

This is where he feels his story is being lost... Duncan's transition to regenerative farming has meant not only a higher quality of meat, but also a boost in biodiversity on his farm as he has taken a whole-system approach to stewardship. With the beef going straight into the general trade, Duncan's diligent work isn't seen by consumers, nor is his extra effort being rewarded.

This is where the value of direct sales and marketing would support Duncan's business, although this would add more complexity to his business. He feels that research into retail and local markets to determine demand for beef and lamb, and the volume needed to meet it, would be useful.

ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

In the last year, Duncan has started sharing the story of how he has transitioned his land and farming practices. He has hosted walking tours of Bog Farm, to demonstrate how he runs his farm and manages his livestock. He has also spoken about his experiences at the Marches Real Food and Farming Convergence and other events to share why he decided to make the change to rotational grazing and a lower-input system.

Now, Duncan is a vocal proponent of regenerative farming, not least because it has made his business more profitable due to the reduction of input costs. He describes the reduction as

"absolutely colossal"... "and the more you see the drop, the more you're trying to drive to cut the cost as well."

FARMING IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES(FIPL)

The impacts of climate change have led to more droughts and heavy rain events, so his management approach considers how systems on the farm can respond to these challenges. The FiPL programme has helped Duncan to set up electric fencing for his rotational grazing and to install more water supply infrastructure.

He explains, ***"drought was another bit of a kick start as well [to his regenerative farming journey], because in 2022, we ran out of water. We ran out of grass... So, while I don't want 2022 again, in another way, it'd be quite interesting to see now how much more resilient we are."***

Additional hedging, fencing and habitat restoration funded by FIPL has also played a part in developing future-proof systems on Duncan's land, including protecting watercourses and supporting biodiversity.



BIODIVERSITY

In just two years Duncan has seen a lot of change in his landscape: ***"...in diversity of plants and insects and birds. We're only at the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. The change has happened so quickly... I don't think I personally will ever see the end of it."***

This increase in wildlife has been a happy surprise for Duncan and the family. ***"We've always been nature focused, I thought, but I didn't realise how degraded we were."***

But what he's doing is working. He has started seeing nesting Curlews, hedgehogs, increased numbers of small birds, as well as barn owls.

His soil has also improved, seeing a year on year increase of dung beetles, which he started paying more attention to after he attended a "Dung Beetle Safari" workshop by vet Dr. Claire Whittle.

