

# Farming for a Better Climate



## Making use of Bale Grazing at Balcaskie

Sam Parsons is the farm director for Balcaskie Estate, near Anstruther in Fife.

Sam along with his team run a large arable, beef and sheep business, who's focus has changed in recent years, moving away from a conventional production driven system, to a more holistic, regenerative approach.

The estate is mid way through an organic conversion and utilises mob grazing and herbal leys to improve soil health and biodiversity, without compromising stock performance.

After a comprehensive review of the business, a strategy was developed to take the business forward for the next 50 years.

The decision was taken to move away from commodity agriculture and instead focus on meeting the needs of the end consumer, this change has led to an increase in cattle and sheep numbers and a reduction in the overall arable area.

### The Herd

There are around 300 spring calving suckler cows on the farm. In the past, the herd at Balcaskie was based on Luing and Sim Luings, in recent years, the business has moved to breeding Lincoln Red cattle, and the intention is to run pure bred Lincoln Reds in the future.

The land at Balcaskie is a mixture of LFA and Non LFA but is all capable of growing a lot of quality grass and while the Luings performed very well, the Lincoln Reds are a better fit for the Balcaskie forage system, being a medium sized cow producing a good calf that will finish off grass. The herd is now part of the Pasture for Life Association and is committed to producing beef solely from forage. This requires a combination of an efficient maternal cow and a well managed grazing system.

Throughout the summer, the cattle are grazed in mobs of 100 cows, running with 3 or 4 bulls during the breeding season. Cattle are mob grazed on small paddocks, on daily shifts. Winter costs are reduced by the use of bale grazing.



<b>Name</b>	Sam Parsons
<b>Farm</b>	Balcaskie Estate, Fife
<b>Type</b>	Arable, Beef & Sheep
<b>Size</b>	4,500 acres total 1,100 hectares (in hand) Butchery pub and restaurant
<b>Staff</b>	7 full time

### Case Study

Find out what other farmers are doing to improve profitability and adapt to a changing climate in our series of informative case studies and practical guides.

Our Practical Guides cover 5 key topics:

- Reducing energy and fuel use
- On farm renewables
- Locking in carbon on the farm
- Making best use of nutrients
- Optimising livestock performance

Find further information, including links to other Case Studies, Practical Guides and our newsletter at [www.farmingforabetterclimate.org](http://www.farmingforabetterclimate.org)

Find us on Facebook or follow us on Twitter @SACFarm4Climate



Farming for a Better Climate is funded by the Scottish Government.



### Websites

[www.farmingforabetterclimate.org](http://www.farmingforabetterclimate.org)

[www.adaptationscotland.org.uk](http://www.adaptationscotland.org.uk)

[www.agrecalc.com](http://www.agrecalc.com)

Created: July 2020

## Mob Grazing

The mob grazing system is working well at Balcaskie, the system is flexible with fields being split by single electric wires, with water supplied by mobile troughs. The system is geared round grazing for a single day followed by roughly 90 days rest (this is flexible and changes as the season progresses). This system results in cattle grazing very big covers of grass, This system promotes diversity in the grass sward, improves soil organic matter without compromising on growth rates in youngstock and fertility in cows.

## Bale Grazing

Historically all cattle were housed at Balcaskie on a straw based system. In a bid to reduce costs, Sam trialled outwintering cattle on a bale grazing system which was very successful last year.

Bale grazing is a simple method of out wintering dry cows often used in North America. The system requires careful planning and organisation in the summer, in order to create a simple system for the winter. The ideal situation would be to select a relatively dry field, preferably with a dense sward of old grass, this will act as a raft to keep cattle on the surface. Exclude stock from the field for the later part of the summer and build up a big cover of grass.

The principle at Balcaskie is to put 100 cows on 1 acre with 4 bales of hay per day. The next day cattle move on to the next acre paddock leaving the previous paddock to recover for the rest of the winter.

As cattle are on large covers of grass, there is minimal damage to the soil, even on wet days. Bale grazing is an excellent cheap option for many farmers to reduce their winter costs. The Balcaskie herd will still be housed in the run up to calving to ease management for both cow and calf.

## Tips to set up a bale grazing system

Changing your wintering system can be daunting, particularly if moving to a fairly novel system. Here are a few key points to consider when setting up a bale grazing system

- **Select a dry field-** A free draining sloping field will dry out better throughout the winter, benefiting both stock and soil. Cattle are particularly tough animals but try to select an area that provides some shelter from the worst of the winter elements
- **Water-** Develop a flexible watering system that allow each small paddock to be watered rather than relying on one trough. Cattle walking from one side of the field to the other to get a drink will present a major poaching challenge
- **Fencing-** Good electric fence infrastructure is required. A single electric wire is sufficient but make sure voltage is high and the system is reliable.
- **Plan and Prepare-** Set out all your bales in the summer to avoid the need for tractors when conditions deteriorate. Ideally set up several fences at once. If you set up a week's worth of paddocks on the same day each week, cattle can be moved and fed in a matter minutes each day, for the remainder of the week.
- **Have a plan B-** If weather becomes particularly challenging, having a fall back plan would be very useful.



## Listen to our podcasts

Sam has recorded an interesting podcast episode where he chats to Robert Ramsay, Beef Specialist with SAC Consulting. During the podcast we get an in-depth introduction to the Balcaskie Estate, and a great insight into the management decisions as part of working towards the 50 year sustainability plan.

Sam explains in great detail how he manages the bale grazing system, and the reasons for the switch in cattle breeds.

Our monthly podcasts are available to listen to, or download from our Audioboom account. Subscribe to the channel to listen to each episode.

[www.audioboom.com/channels/5026802](http://www.audioboom.com/channels/5026802)