

# A Man's a man for A' That in a dairy farm legacy

Bryce Cunningham of Mossgiel farm in Ayrshire, where Robert Burns once lived, tells **Cat Thomson** about being Scotland's only Pasture for Life accredited dairy and the importance of organic farming to the climate

**B**ryce Cunningham from Mossgiel dairy farm in Ayrshire shares a connection with a certain ploughman poet. Robert Burns lived at the farm between 1784-86 and along with his brother Gilbert, they worked on the place after their father was declared bankrupt.

During his time here, Rabbie met Jean Armour, wrote poems including To a mouse and had his first book of poetry published. Working in the bard's footsteps Mr Cunningham said, "I share a connection, I can be doing a manual task, thinking about nothing then all of a sudden you think - hang on a minute Burns was here." Because of its elevated location and the weather, Mr Cunningham said "we have a very heavy clay soil which is still a bit of a challenge to farm at times." He lives here with his fiancée Ashley, along with their blended family; Harris, seven, and Murray, four, Arran, five, and a daughter Blaire, eight months. He said, "I got engaged on Christmas Day, and we are looking to get married this year."

Growing up here, Bryce had no interest in going into farming, instead he left school aged 16 to work at Mercedes Benz as an apprentice technician. However in 2013 he discovered both his father and grandfather had serious health conditions so he decided to return to



help out. The timing could not have been worse: sadly both his grandfather and father died. In addition, the dairy sector was in crisis and the farm was saddled with massive debt. Mr Cunningham said, "Our milk price had dropped from 27p to 9p, I was working 20 hours a day but our hands were tied by this really low price, which was effectively going to throw us out of business. It just felt very very unfair." In 2015 the bank pulled its funding, Mr Cunningham said, "I was forced to sell most of the cows, some machinery and a small amount of land we owned just to survive. My grandpa and grandmother had been on the

farm since 1948 and they had always said farming was never the easiest way of life but they had been able to make a living. In my father's years, through no fault of his own, there was debt, stress and the cows had to produce more and more milk. All of this was caused by how the international milk market worked."

Frustrated by the situation, he along with another 30 farmers staged a protest at local supermarkets. They bought all the milk from the store then gave it away to people for free. "I felt we must have been doing something right in the past," he said. "People were asking how they could support local



Far left, gold topped Mossgiel milk; main and above, dairy farmer Bryce Cunningham milking his herd at his farm in Mauchline, Ayrshire. Pictures: Robert Perry

farmers (females) join the milking herd at around three years old. In Burns' day they also had the same breed of cow and Rabbie's mother Agnes Broun, made cheese from their milk. Mr Cunningham said, "In a way, we are trying to recreate the milk that Robert Burns would have drunk." Mr Cunningham explains they have three breeding bulls on the farm: "The main man is called Vision, another Endurance and we are thinking of calling the third one Rabbie but we haven't confirmed that just yet." They have a cow happiness manager called Elizabeth, her job is to make sure the cows are looked after and are comfortable and healthy. Elizabeth is at all the calves' birth and gets to name them, so some of the Mossgiel girls are named: Cherub, Lizzie, Louisa, Breeze, Stella and Frankie.

Mossgiel is still very much a family concern with Mr Cunningham's sisters and mother involved. He said: "If we ever have any issue with staff, they are the first ones to come and help out." He explains they recently opened their own coffee shop in Mauchline which they hope will be used as a community space for local groups to meet free of charge. Of the farm's environmental ethos, he said: "I genuinely believe we can make a massive difference to the Scottish dairy industry. We are going to try and become carbon neutral in 2025. We are replacing two of our vans with electric ones and hoping to install renewables to try and reduce our carbon footprint." They were the first plastic-free organic dairy in Scotland, and have forged a relation-

ship with a catering company, and in four months they have reduced the use of 14,000 plastic bottles. Mr Cunningham said, "We first announced that we were going to become single use plastic free back in 2019. Everything we supply milk in now is reusable." In 2019 they won the future food category at the BBC Food and Farming Awards and recently Mossgiel won the most sustainable rural business at Scottish rural awards. He said, "Fingers crossed one day my vision for Mossgiel will come true. It has made me realise just how important organic farming is to facing the climate emergency." But not everyone agrees with his vision: "You never create change by pleasing everyone," he said. "You need to be passionate to farm. I would love my kids to do what I did and go off into another industry see a bit of the world and then back to it they wanted to."

Returning under the circumstances he faced "was just a nightmare of a time." He is still passionate about farming, but he said, "there are certainly dark days - and you do get very difficult days." But he is proud of what he has achieved. "When we had to sell the cows, I genuinely didn't think we would be there a year later, so I really do see a bright future because of the fact that we were able to work with the local community to save the farm."

**Mossgiel Organic Farm, Tarbolton Road, Mauchline, East Ayrshire, KA5 5LL; 01290 550 307**

Cat.Thomson@scotsman.com

## NEXT WEEK

Next week we talk to a caffeine fuelled couple from Selkirk who are on a mission to improve the quality of coffee available in the Scottish Borders

scotsman.com

farmers." This gave him the idea to become independent and offer doorstep deliveries. Mr Cunningham decided to farm organically, and to pasteurise the milk themselves. He said, "We don't standardise the milk here, so we are able to supply a more natural milk but we do ask slightly more for it. It is only available as a seasonal product from April to December, we call it the gold standard milk." Mossgiel is Scotland's only Pasture for Life accredited dairy which means the cows only eat grass. He said, "to run that system, we can't graze outside during the winter months so the cows come in and we feed them

and they get a four-month holiday from milking." Making the change to organic was not easy, the ground needed to detox. He said, "we also had a lot of issues with weeds, and rushes. Burns even wrote a poem about them." Luckily the breed is very good at turning low quality plant material into very high quality milk. Grass fed Ayrshire cows' milk is ideal for use in speciality latte artwork which opened up a new market supplying high end coffee shops.

Now in their fifth year of organic farming he feels they are only starting to understand how the land works. Their initial successes meant that they soon ran out of milk to sup-

ply their customers, because of the limited number of cows they could keep on the existing farm land. To expand, Mr Cunningham decided to support other organic farms from the south west of Scotland, by buying their milk to satisfy increasing demand. Mr Cunningham said, "we made a couple of stipulations: they had to be small organic family farms with a policy that their bull calves are not shot at birth. In the UK 90,000 dairy bull calves are culled and that is something I feel very strongly about, it is a serious flaw in the dairy industry." He explains, "this other milk which we sell 365 days of the year comes from those

five farms. We pasteurise, bottle it here and then deliver it every day." Mr Cunningham said, "we have got our own doorstep delivery run supplying around 450 houses around the farm. But we also supply milk to other dairies, across the central belt of Scotland and further north."

The herd now has 48 Ayrshire cows, Mr Cunningham affectionately calls them the Mossgiel girls, a nod to Robert Burns' ode to the Mauchline lasses or poem The Belles of Mauchline. He ensures that the calves stay with the cows until they get weaned, then bull calves are sold off to Peelham farm on the East Coast and then the heif-