

FARM PROFILE

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Fraser and Nikki Brown and their daughter Katie at Shellfield Farm, Glendaruel.



PICTURES: WALTER STEPHEN

The past six years have certainly been eventful for Fraser and Nikki Brown.

The husband and wife team have taken over the running of the family farm in Argyll, began selling their lamb direct to customers, installed a 48kW hydro system and had a child - with another on the way later this year.

It has been a learning experience for the couple, but they have combined their own skills and passions to drive the farm forward. With Fraser's background in engineering and construction and Nikki's in PR and business development, they aim to create a profitable business which can survive without subsidies if necessary.

Fraser is the fourth generation of his family to farm at Shellfield, a 1,011-hectare (2,500-acre) hill unit at Glendaruel, having taken over the tenancy from his uncle in 2012.

He says: "My mum was brought up here, so I was used to coming

Working with their natural surroundings and combining a mixed set of skills has created a sustainable farm enterprise, taking food to the masses. **Lynsey Martin** finds out more.

Diverse grazing giving lamb a unique flavour

here on holidays and helping my uncle at clipping time. I probably had an idealised view of what it was like, but the reality of moving here and trying to make a living was quite different.

Profit

"We quickly realised we would have to diversify to make a profit without being solely reliant on subsidies."

Running 450 mainly Blackface ewes will never produce huge



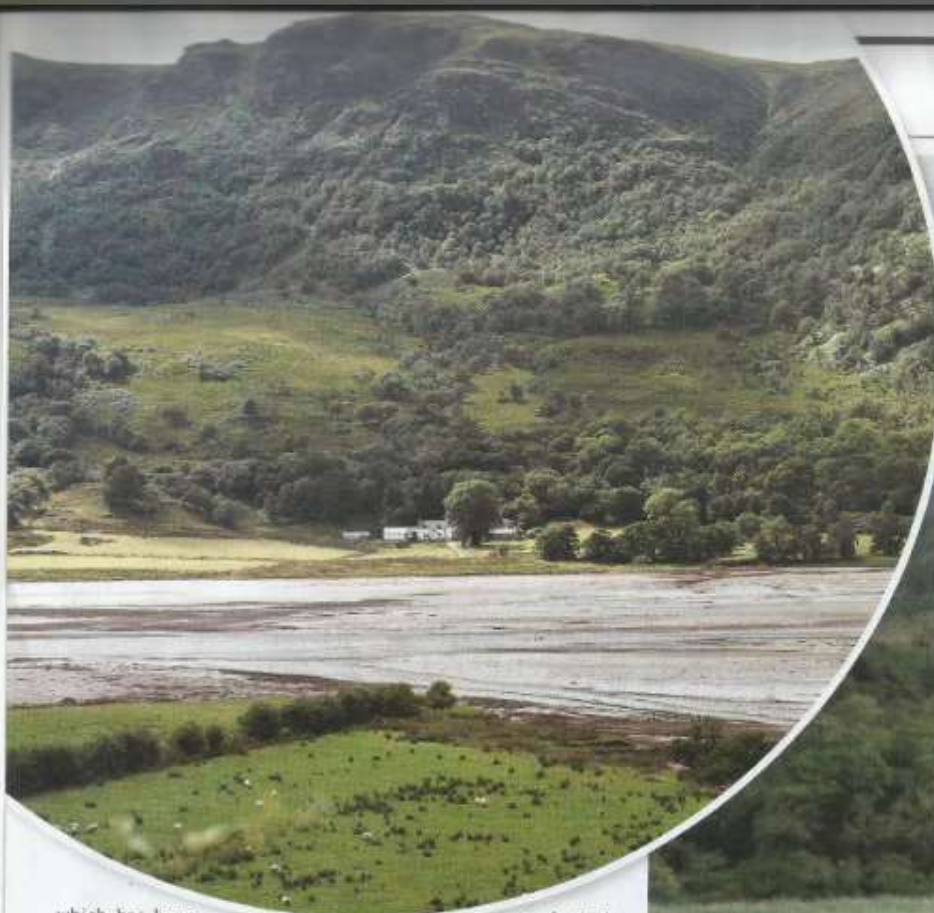
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FRASER BROWN

returns, so the couple decided to focus and capitalise on the plus points of the farm and the natural resources around them.

The fact the sheep are all naturally reared on diverse terrain, from the rough hill down to the Loch Riddon salt marshes, makes the meat particularly flavoursome and gives it a unique selling point.

They have also made the most of the wet climate by installing a hydro system, a £120,000 investment



which has been using the flow of water to generate electricity for two years.

Nikki says: "We started small-scale, selling lamb and mutton at local producers' markets, through the Food from Argyll group and using a local butcher, R.H. McIntyre, Bute, who we still use today.

"Getting people to try lamb burgers was a challenge at first, but we found once they did, they loved them."

The next step was investing in a stall and gradually building up a list of events, starting with the Loch Fyne Food Festival. They now travel



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NIKKI BROWN

to festivals further afield, including Belladrum, Inverness, and Trnsmt, Glasgow, as well as local events such as ButeFest. But it is not always the biggest events which make the most money, as Nikki explains.

"It has been trial and error with the events. Some of them charge a fortune for the stall space and we barely make anything, while smaller ones can often be the most profitable.

"We tailor the produce to the specific event too. For some we offer slow-roasted lamb, cooked in our hog roast machine, served in wraps with tzatziki, while others just require burgers and chips. We have seasonal staff which we hire-in as required."

Support

Nikki believes having a marketing budget and creating proper branding has helped improve the look of the stall and its promotional material, which will be useful going forward, with work now underway on a commercial kitchen and butchery unit at the farm.

The couple secured a Leader grant to help fund this expansion, which was matched by the S.J. Noble Trust, a local initiative which aims to promote rural regeneration.

Nikki says: "It was a long and sometimes difficult process to obtain the Leader grant, but after



The Blackface flock is kept on a simple system, keeping inputs as low as possible; (inset) the picturesque surroundings provides a few challenges, including eagles and foxes.

18 months we are now at the 'project live' stage, which is an exciting prospect for the business.

"At the moment, we are really busy through spring and summer, with the farm and various events, but it's far quieter in winter.

"This unit will allow us to expand into other areas, including ready meals, which will be frozen to avoid the need for preservatives, and also private catering. We will be able to enhance what we can provide at events and also cater on a far larger scale.

"We have such a beautiful setting here which we think would be a perfect location for weddings,

so this is something we want to think about in the future."

The farm system which provides the flavoursome lamb is a simple one and Fraser keeps it as low-input as possible, with the aim being to get as many lambs on the ground as he can and keep survivability rates up.

Challenges

The picturesque surroundings bring their own challenges, mainly ticks, which they treat against, and predators such as eagles and foxes.

Fraser says: "We bring all ewes down to the in-bye fields for three weeks for tupping, using home-bred

ARGYLL AND BUTE **FARM PROFILE**



Farm facts

- The farm was established in 1917 and Fraser's grandfather, Hamish, was in his 90s when he retired
- Out of 1,011 hectares (2,500 acres), only 40ha (100 acres) is in-bye and the rest is mountain goat territory

- 450 Blackface ewes
- Working at food events and music festivals
- Investment in on-site butchery and kitchen
- The farm has always diversified: it was once a bed and breakfast,

- and Fraser's grandparents sold milk, eggs and butter not only to local people and tourists, but also to warships in World War Two
- There is a diverse habitation of wildlife at Shellfield, including nesting birds of prey

ram lambs and some bought privately. That way I have better control over what's been tugged and when. They lamb on the hill in April and are back down for clipping in summer.

"We put hoggets and lambs away between March and September, with most brought down to be fattened on the salt marshes.

"We did have a small breeding herd of cattle, but it is difficult to make money out of rearing cattle here as it's so wet and the ground was becoming poached, plus we have no housing for them, so we sold them last year to focus on the sheep.

"That said, we intend to buy-in a

more traditional breed of store bullock to fatten on the hill and finish for beef production in the future.

"We're using traditional, low-input farming techniques, but mixed with modern ideas. The lambs are grown naturally, with minimal concentrates and we've found this, combined with the traceability aspect, is really important to customers. We supply a few local restaurants too, who like using quality local produce."

The coming months will be

particularly busy for the Browns, with construction of the new unit hoped to be complete by September, and two-year-old Elsie's sibling due to arrive in December.

Cooking

But Nikki has a passion for cooking and is eager to get stuck into the new venture of ready meals, which should keep them busy through winter.

Looking further into the future, Nikki is well aware there are big changes afoot for the wider industry.

She says: "Like everyone else, we are at the mercy of Brexit, and we can't control where farming subsidies will go, or how trade will be impacted.

"What we can do, however, is take control of our business and strive for long-term sustainability, through supplying great tasting food which exemplifies quality, provenance and traceability.

"These are our values, which we will take with us as we continue to develop and grow our business."