

Luing Journal Breeder Feature - *Nunnerie*



Alastair MacArthur and son, David

The MacArthur family's Nunnerie herd has been hitting the headlines in the Luing cattle world over recent years, producing top prices for bulls and females at society sales, and setting a new breed record of 25,000gns for Nunnerie Xenon in February, 2020. Although primarily successful Blackface sheep breeders, securing lead prices in the sale ring with ram lambs and shearlings, Luing cattle have become a staple part of the family business, producing hardy and efficient home-bred replacements.

After coming across David Kerr's Luings at Craigdarroch, the family established the Nunnerie Luing herd in 1992 with the purchase of two in-calf heifers from the McNee's Benhar herd. The family continued to buy in several other heifers over the following years and in 1996, purchased their first bull Glengorm Tyrant, which has left a lasting stamp on the herd.

"We previously ran Galloways and Blue Grey cows but were looking for something to breed our own replacements and to produce a bigger and stronger calf," said Alastair, who farms with wife Ann, and their son David, who is now the fourth generation to farm at Nunnerie. *"Luings have a great temperament and are very fertile and easy calving. They have a thick skin and can stand up to harsh weather which suits the farming system here."*

Situated in the Lowther Hills, at Elvanfoot, near Biggar, the MacArthur family has been farming at Nunnerie since 1901 and purchased the originally tenanted unit almost 40 years ago. The land rises from 950ft to 2000ft above sea level, with the majority of ground at Nunnerie rough hill and around 150 acres enclosed and 50 acres of arable ground suitable for silage production. A further 600 acres of previously quarried ground is farmed nearer to Biggar, at Annieston and Muirhouse, both of which have been purchased gradually over the last 20 years. This ground is mostly in grass but allows for 25 acres of rotational kale to be grown, followed by spring barley prior to reseeded.

The Nunnerie team, which includes daughter Fiona, who helps out in her spare time, and shepherds, Craig Thornborrow and Neil O'Sullivan, run 70 pedigree Luing cattle and 1100 breeding ewes at Nunnerie, while a further 1200 ewes run between



Annieston and Muirhouse. During the summer the cows are run in two groups on different areas of the Nunnerie hill, each with a bull. "Luings are great foragers and graze on the hill all year, but because the peaty ground can become very wet during winter, they are offered big bale silage and mineral blocks on gravelly areas from late November onwards" said Alastair

Calving takes place at the end of March, preferably outside if the weather is decent and Alastair comments that the cows are great mothers, and rarely need any assistance at calving. *"Luing cows are more than capable of calving outside and our cows take full advantage of their 1000-acre block hiding in sheltered glens,"* he said. *"We get a lot of wind and rain, with our annual rainfall at 1362 mm so in spells of stormy weather, we bring batches of cows into the shed to keep them away from the muck around feeders. This allows them to get back onto clean areas as soon as they have calved."*

The calves produce good growth rates without creep feed as the first turn calves generally average 300kg at weaning when they come straight off the hill at Nunnerie in November. Calves don't generally get a chance of creep feed as the cows don't hang about the feeders until November time.

They are then moved to Muirhouse, where they are in-wintered and fed a home mix. *"The breed has great versatility and can easily adapt to any finishing system from intensive bull beef to more extensive low input grazing"* said Alastair. Early born male calves are kept entire and are finished as bulls, before being sold to Stoddart's, where they averaged 390kg this year and grossed over £1400 per head at 15-months-old. They produce mainly U grades, with the most recent batch sold in July, reaching a top of £1488 or 366p per kg for one weighing 406kg.

Later born male calves are castrated and fattened more slowly on grass at 18 to 19-months-old at very little cost while a few have been roughly wintered and



finished at an average weight of 395kg at 27 months, which Alastair believes is big enough for the current market demand.

As the herd is kept pure, the MacArthurs have been able to breed all of their own herd replacements for the past 10 years which is ideal for the high-health status. *“The health of the cattle is high on our priority list so it’s a real advantage that Luings can be bred pure but managed in a commercial and low-maintenance system,”* commented Alastair. *“We have been members of the Premium Cattle Health Scheme for more than 10 years, with our cattle BVD and Johnes accredited, and stock for sale clear of IBR and Lepto.”*

In order to keep up the quality of the females, the Nunnerie team pays close attention to feet, udders and temperament when keeping home-bred replacements which calve down at three-years-old. *“The cows are quite capable at calving at two-years-old but would require separate management,”* said Alastair. *“At the moment, we are considering running some two-year-old calvers for a year at Muirhouse before joining the hill herd. We may also graze a few of the older cows for an extra couple of years on the lower ground. We aim to breed with a medium-sized, hardly hill cow and unlike many other breeders, we are just as happy at keeping the roan coloured Luing cows as we are the more fashionable red types.”*

The Luing Cattle Society’s dam classification scheme has been well supported by the MacArthur family since it began operating in 2002, which Alastair says has been a great marketing tool when it comes to selling pedigree bulls. *“We have been using the dam classification system since it started which is an extremely important part of what we do, giving buyers a reliable source of information when it comes to buying a stock bull,”* said Alastair.

Charles Symons, who is fieldsman for the Luing Cattle Society, also pointed out the huge importance of the dam classification system. He said: *“This scheme is the most important tool we*

use within the breed and has been really helpful to our members, particularly those who are establishing a new herd or who are having problems with various traits.”

This system gives buyers an assurance that at 18 months of age, the bull has attained a standard of soundness, growth and conformation, and that the dam of each bull for sale has been scored as above average for feet, locomotion, teats and udder, in accordance with the society’s rules. Overall, the scheme was designed to fit in with breeding objectives for a profitable suckler cow to improve the overall performance of Luing cattle herds across the country.

Although the MacArthurs breed and sell top-quality bulls, they are aware of the Luing’s maternal ability as a profitable suckler cow and so have always put emphasis on improving stock and sale heifers.



Alastair started selling autumn-born in-calf heifers at Castle Douglas in 1999, where he produced strong averages just shy of £1400. With all calves now spring-born, the heifers are sold as bulling heifers at United Auctions, Stirling, Dingwall and Highland Marts’ Dingwall Mart, and Castle Douglas. In 2018, Nunnerie sold 28 bulling heifers to average £1885. *“We decided to change our policy from selling the stronger heifers at Castle Douglas in February to the autumn so that the cattle can be taken straight from the field,”* said Alastair.

“This ultimately saves three months feeding and allows for easier management for our buyers.” Younger heifers are overwintered and sold at Dingwall in May. Stock bulls are purchased every two to three years, with one of the herd’s most influential purchases to date being Harehead Davy Dee, which was purchased for 8000gns in 2004. He was a roan and polled bull with great character, and his first crop of daughters sold up to 2700gns, averaging 1800gns, with 25 of his daughters still found in the herd today. In 2008, the family sold a Davy Dee son named Nunnerie Harvey, for 14000gns to the sire’s breeder,

Professor W.A. Penny, Harehead, Duns. Harvey then went on to sire the previous Luing record holder, the 20,000gns Harehead Mourie.

While the Nunnerie team have enjoyed many successful days at Castle Douglas, this February will go down in history for them, producing the new breed record of 25,000gns. Their record breaker, brought out with assistance from freelance stockman Dennis Gall, is by the 17,000gns Finlargo Tornado, out of a dam by Nunnerie Magnus, and sold to the Renwicks at Craig Douglas, Selkirk.

Harehead Walker, which is a son of Finlargo Nero, has been out to work at Nunnerie for the second time this summer, after being purchased for 17,000gns at Castle Douglas in February, 2019. He is the fourth Harehead bred bull used on the herd, and his first calves born on the ground this spring look promising.

Looking ahead, Nunnerie has eight young bulls which they hope to have forward for sale at Castle Douglas in February, and Dingwall in May. Six of the bulls are by Finlargo Tornado and the other two are by Harehead Nonu.

Outwith the beef enterprise, the family’s large-scale sheep enterprise includes mainly Blackface ewes which are bred pure and crossed with the Bluefaced Leicester, as well as Mules and pedigree Texels. *“There is no alternative to cattle and sheep grazing on much of our land and we already have a reasonable amount of forestry,”* said Alastair. *“Cattle grazing is good for our hill which is mainly Molinia and it encourages diversity in plant species and provides a habitat for a wealth of waders and other bird life. The cattle grazing also provides a natural fire break between the forested areas which surround the farm. We are quite certain that native breeds are on the rise, with hardy, easily managed and low input Luings at the forefront,”* he concluded.

