**GO Falkland**

**Blog**

**Johnnie Balfour**

**Draft 1**

**Making soils better makes business better**

***Johnnie Balfour, Balbirnie Home Farms***

Since the Second World War, we’ve bought in a bag and killed in a field to produce as much as possible from an acre of land. Although still core to what we grow, we’ve side-lined the soil in the race, and it’s costing us.

Going back to whole systems at Balbirnie Home Farms, maximising on our natural assets – sunlight, water, worms and hooves – we have focused over the last eight years on making our soils better and seeing our farming business become better and more resilient. A regenerative approach to farming is a no-brainer for me, it’s about mitigating risk in a different way to what we’ve been doing for the last 80 years.

While I was living in Hong Kong, where my wife and I moved with our young family for work, I completed a post-grad in Sustainable Agriculture as well as a course at the Holistic Management Institute. I’d always been interested in Holistic Management and what we could be doing with this ethos around giving livestock a more involved role in growing arable crops.

Our Farms Manager, David Aglen, was already experimenting with cover cropping and direct drilling, and, both on the same page, when I returned to the farm full-time five years ago, we took the handbrake off and started experimenting in multiple ways to give the soil the best chance at optimum health.

Integrating livestock into our crop rotation has been one of the most obvious uplifts – last year, the fields where we didn’t have animals integrated were less productive crops.

We keep big mobs of sheep on small areas of the winter sown arable fields for a short period of time, grazing enough to take the growth down but not too long that they decimate the root mass. It also allows us to rest the grass on the rest of the farm so that the covers are longer in the spring.

We grow forage crops to feed the cattle during the winter which has the benefit of keeping the soil covered year-round before sowing spring barley or oats. It brings diversity into the rotation and decreases disease pressure. Livestock is part of our toolbox of reducing the need for nitrogen and fungicide. It’s easy to tell where there hasn’t been livestock in the rotation as we need more chemicals to manage the crops.

With the cattle outside year-round, it’s also reduced our costs on concentrated feed and manpower on both bruising the feed and feeding indoors over the winter, which is another sideways win. Grass and forage are best for the animals and we’re spending a lot less too. We’re also proud to have been certified with Pasture for Life, which recognises what this approach is doing for ecosystems, and has growing appeal for discerning consumers.

All our growing on the farm now goes through a litmus test of regenerative farming’s five core principles: reduce disturbance, cover the soil, keep living roots in the soil, retain diversity in the crops and integrate livestock.

What we’re doing is not complicated – we very much keep to the KISS (Keep It Simple) approach. We haven’t got it all right, and like any change in farming it takes years not days to see the real results. That’s why I’m really looking forward to GO (Groundswell Outreach) Falkland this summer, to learn from others who are experimenting with different methods and delving into the science of soil. There’s an amazing line-up of different perspectives, from scientists to on-the-ground practitioners and highly regarded authors like Anne Biklé, and stages on the ‘journey'.

There’s a lot of conversation around regenerative agriculture underway in the south of England, but what works in Essex won’t necessarily work in Fife, so it will be particularly valuable to hear from experience in a Scottish context. It’s going to be a wonderful showcase of what’s already happening in Scotland, embodying the spirit of the Groundswell Festival of food and farming, with huge opportunities to speak to and to learn from, and with, the agricultural community in Scotland.

To read more about farm management at Balbirnie Farms, see the Pasture for Life article [here](https://www.pastureforlife.org/biodiversity/biodiversity-case-studies/johnnie-balfour-balbirnie-home-farms-1/2-2/).

**Johnnie Balfour is Managing Partner at Balbirnie Home Farm. He is on the GO Falkland committee and has worked with his neighbour Ninian Stuart at Falkland Estate and the Cherry family who founded the Groundswell Festival in Hertfordshire, with the wider committee and organising team to bring together this inaugural fringe event for Scotland.**