

**T**he sight of a calf gently butting its mother's udder with its head, to stimulate the flow of milk, as the calf latches on and suckles, tail flicking with satisfaction, is one of the most natural scenes in the world. But on dairy farms, it's almost unheard of.

This is Rainton Farm in southwest Scotland, and this scene is why farmers, researchers, and policymakers from around the world are paying increasingly close attention to this farm.

For the past nine years the team here have been proving that dairy farming can work differently by keeping calves with their mothers for extended periods of time, rather than separating them within hours of birth.

It's called cow-with-calf dairying, and Rainton is one of only a handful of farms in the UK practising it. The system developed here is widely regarded as the 'gold standard' in cow-with-calf dairying. It's also the farm that proved it could be done at a commercially viable scale.

Last month the farmer, David Finlay, called on the Scottish Government to back this approach, by matching the European Union's €3 million investment in cow-with-calf dairy development. He wants to see help put in place for farmers considering a transition to this model alongside funding for academic research.

Rainton is located in Galloway – Scotland's dairy heartland – where almost half of the nation's milk is produced. More than 100 years ago the modern



milking machine was invented just a few miles from here, at a place called Bombie Farm, arguably making this corner of Scotland the birthplace of modern dairy farming. That Galloway is now at the forefront of dairy's nature-based reinvention feels fitting.

Commercial cow-with-calf dairying is a Scottish farming innovation that, currently, lacks meaningful Scottish Government backing, yet recognition for this pioneering farm continues to mount.

In October David was invited to speak at the World Dairy Congress in Chile by the International Dairy Federation, in August he was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of SRUC, Scotland's Rural Colleges, and earlier this year his late wife Wilma was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Soil Association.

Still, the farm remains an outlier in an industry proud of its traditions but driven by market pressure towards intensification and agglomeration. With wholesale milk prices plummeting, the direction of travel for Scotland's dairy industry points toward bigger, indoor operations. Rainton's nature-based approach – where the calf consumes a third of the milk – seems to defy logic, but it works.

I first heard about David and Wilma's cow-with-calf plans back in 2009. Over a cuppa Wilma explained their radical 'experiment' as they called it, which had been prompted by questions from visitors on farm tours.

Back then, Rainton was one of Galloway's most popular tourism attractions, the ice cream farm and adventure playground then known as Cream o' Galloway. Daily



# Diary of a 'radical' dairy farm

New documentary *A Dairy Story* follows Rainton Farm in Galloway where cow-with-calf dairying is challenging conventional methods. It is also a tribute to late farmer, Wilma Finlay, writes Lorna Young

farm tours drew families by the thousands. By opening their farm gates to the general public Wilma realised how many people didn't know it was standard practice to separate dairy cows from their newborn calves. She saw first-hand the public reaction to this practice, and it wasn't good. Young mothers, in particular, were horrified.

The reason Wilma had invited me round was to discuss how this cow and calf experiment could be communicated to the public. Might a TV production company be interested in filming it? I had no idea but suspected their rural location might make it logistically impractical. So, in 2012 she asked local filmmakers to capture some footage instead.

Ten years later, at our request, one of those filmmakers



**A dairy cow grooming her calf, main; David and Wilma Finlay, below; Wilma with cows and calves at spring turnout, bottom left; Ian Findlay and Lorna Young at IndieCork Film Festival, where *A Dairy Story* won Best Documentary, far left**

rediscovered it. The footage shows young calves in individual pens drinking milk from buckets. It was exactly what my colleague Ian and I needed.

You see in early 2022 we had revisited Wilma's idea of capturing on film what had been taking place at Rainton. We had picked up a camera and started recording, prompted this time by the very worst of news. Wilma had received a terminal cancer diagnosis. The scale of her achievements was so significant that we wanted to ensure her story was told. *A Dairy Story* – a documentary feature film – is the result.

Ian and I had never made a film before, but we had come to know the herd. An accomplished photographer, Ian had photographed them



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regularly over the years. We were in the right place at the right time to capture what was unfolding, but it was a case of feeling compelled rather than qualified.

We felt strongly that Wilma's story, and what the farm represented, needed to be shared so that people could understand the full story of this farm transformation, and decide whether this approach to farming offers something for the wider industry. Our approach was simply to put a window on the farm over the course of a year and capture what happened.

Wilma died earlier this year, but her legacy is the growing interest in cow-with-calf dairying. Farm tours still take place regularly at Rainton, but these days visitors are more likely to be international

groups of farmers, university researchers, and people interested in sustainable food.

What they learn turns conventional thinking about dairy farming on its head. The system at Rainton leans heavily into the natural instincts of the animals as well as the ecology of the land.

Cow-with-calf is the headline, but what has been developed is a holistic, regenerative food system that ticks every box policy makers say they want – sequestering carbon, enhancing biodiversity, it's a resilient and productive system.

Not everyone will agree that cow-with-calf dairying is the answer to sustainable food production, but perhaps they'll acknowledge the important role that alternatives to mainstream practice can contribute. Our hope for the film is that it sparks honest conversation.

Sadly, Wilma never got to see it, but her story seems to have struck a chord with film festival audiences. Since the film premiered we have had several pinch me moments; it won Best Documentary at IndieCork Film Festival in Ireland and the Audience Award at Central Scotland Documentary Festival.

Tickets for a special preview screening in Dumfries, which took place earlier this week sold out in just two days. Film festivals in the USA and additional Scottish screenings will follow early next year.

What seems to be resonating with people is hope. In a time when environmental news feels relentlessly bleak, here is a story about making things better for the animals in our food systems.

That calf, nudging its mother's udder, tail flicking with contentment – it's such a small thing. And yet it represents something much larger: the possibility that we haven't broken everything beyond repair.

**Lorna Young is the producer of *A Dairy Story* which will begin an independent screening run in Scottish cinemas (starting in Galloway) from 9 January 2026. For information about the film and screenings, or to join the mailing list, visit [www.adairystory.com](http://www.adairystory.com)**