



Self sufficient First generation farmers

Conversations with five exceptional first generation farmers

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All views expressed in this report are mine alone.



Introduction

I am a new entrant to agriculture of 4 years with no previous experience or family with skin in the game. I started with 10 sheep and I was hooked. I was a Postman until 2020, when I took the plunge and did a year in dairy. This accelerated my progression and farming knowledge. I have also reared 200 pet lambs for a profit. I have had lambing experience on a few different farms including my own. I have lambed from 1200 ewes in 3 weeks to as little as 30, indoor and outdoor. I am currently in partnership with my wife Sam at Brynmair Farming. Brynmair farming is a grass based system that runs a flock of 120 Easycare ewes that is aiming to expand over the next couple of years. We rotationally graze on 86 acres of permanent pasture, and bale graze in the winter on sacrifice paddocks.

As a first generation farmer I know I must perform at my peak to make a go of it. Having read Michael Blanche's Nuffield report 'The Farming Ladder', it has opened my eyes as to what I need to do. To succeed I need to be at the top 5% in everything I do. I wanted to visit first generation farmers that are a way ahead of me in their journey so that I can learn what their point of difference was to succeeding in becoming "self-sufficient". By self-sufficient I mean not having to go out to work off the farm. As I embark on my journey to being "self-sufficient" this exchange could propel me and all first generation farmers to our destination sooner through the lessons I would learn from these farmers. I believe that for me to be successful I must go out and speak to and learn from exceptional first generation farmers.

From this study I am looking forward to meeting and spending time with very different characters, who have very different stories, which in turn proves there are many ways to achieve "self-sufficiency". I want to learn their mindset and everything about them as a person. I have five key questions that I will ask them all;

Why ?

What is their Why? Everyone has a why and this is what drives each and everyone of us forward. My why's are that I want to have a lifestyle that gives me **freedom** and the ability to be around for my children (when I have them). A business that is **enjoyable**, but most importantly profitable. **Recognition**, be that from peers or loved ones, I believe that farming is what can give me that.

What are their no compromises ?

This is an open ended question, it can be asked for every aspect of your life. I will leave it up to them what they chose to answer it with. My no compromises are:- Everything I do must align with my core values, which at the moment I really struggle with and have an inner conflict in wanting to progress but at what cost.

What do they believe set them apart from other first gen ?

This will be an interesting question to get an answer for. Culture here in the UK often has us shying away from blowing our own trumpet, but I will encourage each farmer I visit to do just that. This question alone will give me great insight into the individual.

Biggest challenge. how did you overcome it?

This question alone will show if there is any coloration between us all as first generation farmers. I believe that we all have the same fundamental challenges and they are;- Acquisition of land, Capital and security.

A plan for the future ?/ Exit plan

Having reached self-sufficiency I want to know what is next on their agenda. Are they happy with where they are or do they want to progress further? Also do they have an exit strategy and if so what is it?

Tom Addison 10/06/2022
Green Valley Farm
Astwood

A new entrant of 9 years Tom has developed a business to be proud of, having started with 9 pet lambs he now lambs 150 ewes and sells all lambs fat with 100 lambs going as boxed direct to customers. He has a 100 acres on annual grazing agreements and 2 sheds that he uses to their potential rearing 200 calves annually. Tom has used grants to his advantage, evidence of this is to be seen in his purposely kitted out calf rearing shed. The Henry Plumb Foundation helped him with the purchase of Holm & Laue calf igloos, which then allowed his capacity to grow. He also used government grants to buy other equipment including locking head yokes and a Hydor ventilation system which has helped improve calf health as well as handling. Tom was the winner of New entrant of the year at last year's British Farming awards.

Why?

In control of his own destiny, and always wanted to have his own business from a young age. Pride and happiness in life and job. Money! Money opens doors.

No Compromises?

Quality, in livestock and how well you do things. High standards. Fair, wanting to be fair with landlords, buyers, sellers and everyone in between.

What sets you apart?

Happy to lose money!! No defined path. A 'Yes' man.

Biggest challenge, how did you overcome it?

Land and finance. Land:- Always going to be a challenge, but try to impress landlords. Jump when they call. Try and be the first person people think of when something new comes up, so network is key. Good words spoken about you will get you far. Always say yes and figure it out later. Just be nice. Finance:- Credit cards especially 0% ones (Be careful). Banks wouldn't touch him due to no assets or security. Private investments through joint ventures, but make sure both parties are on the same wavelength.

Plans for the future? Exit strategy?

Didn't know, but then got into it. Short term 1000 ewes. Wants to employ someone therefore needs numbers to justify it. Always wanted to do cattle but cashflow was a problem. Butchery/shop, there is a massive opportunity in the area for this outlet due to the population and people wanting to buy local food. He also wants to be in a position of always having meat hanging so that he can supply demand as it comes in. He's all about adding value to his product. He ended with - Dream 50 milking cows, 1 robot and a vending machine (mic drop).

Oliver Chedgey 11/06/2022
The Roaming Dairy
Hampshire

Oli grew up in Somerset on a small holding but always wanted to farm. He started his farming journey back in 2008 by buying 90 draft Romney ewes. Now he has 550 Romney ewes and 50 suckler cows on 1300 acres (700 which is owned by RSPB) with 7 different landlords. That enterprise now has a manager and is run more like a joint venture. He is now a dairy farmer based just north of Basingstoke in Hampshire. He is the owner of The Roaming Dairy Limited which was set up in 2018 as a share farming agreement, with the owner of Kingsclere Estates Limited. The dairy enterprise consists of 435 spring block cross breed cows. The cows are milked in a mobile parlour once a day. The estate is 2500 acres and 1000 of which is herbal ley. He went into dairy as a way of being full time as a farmer as he had to work off farm with the sheep enterprise. Cash flow was a real problem. Last year he took on a second dairy unit in Dorset on a contract farming agreement. This is more of a conventional dairy unit with a fixed parlour milking 300 Viking Red heifers. He has a great herdsman full time there and lets him crack on basically with meetings if and when needed. His KPI's on the dairy units are: Fertility, fat and protein and return on capital. Has 6 monthly meetings with his partner.

Why?

He didn't want to work, as in he doesn't see what he does now as work. It's more of a lifestyle and has no dictator on his back.

No Compromises?

Not forcing the system, and not trying to sell the system to anyone. It has to work for both partners.

What sets you apart?

Clean and tidy always, worked to a high standard. Believe that his negotiation skills set him apart from other farmers.

Biggest challenge, how did you overcome it?

Finance and security. To start the roaming dairy he had to borrow money. The bank wasn't an option, so went to Funding Circle and secured 50% of funding at 9% interest with the other 50% coming through private investment. Self Belief can't be underestimated!

Plans for the future? Exit strategy? In the short term he is currently on his Nuffield study to explore the next rung of the farming ladder and find out if land ownership is achievable within agriculture profits or if investments should be made out of agriculture in order to make the business sustainable long term. His exit strategy was simple, everything on the roaming dairy can be sold easily. He said if you turned this farm upside down there would be nothing left on the farm. Hasn't got money stuck in concrete. End of the day he needs to build equity.

Michael Blanche 16/6/2022
Culteuchar Farm
Perth

Michael is someone I had wanted to talk to for a very long time, as mentioned in my introduction his Nuffield report has had a profound effect on me. He is a tenant farmer that farms 500 acres in Scotland. He has a flock of 850 ewes and 200 hogs, also shepherd's 450 ewes for the farm next door. He is also the creator of the best podcast around The Pasture Pod and pairs his incredible impressionist skills with his brilliant conversational ability to get people talking. The conversation with Michael gave me a lot of food for thought. He said to me find what you're good at and maximise that, even if that means that working off farm is what benefits you to get the life you want then that is what you should do. His biggest piece of advice was generate cash, invest it wisely and that will give you capital growth. I must admit that Michael was the farmer I resonated with most and believe I am quite similar to him in terms of his why's and his belief.

Why?

People's passions are ignited from the age of 3 to 12 years old. At this age he moved to the north of Scotland and lived next door to a farm and was shown this idyllic life. From then he kept dreaming about farming but was always told he couldn't. In his thirties while working as a consultant a visit to north Wales led him to just go "Lets do it!". He also wanted to be in control. Farming gives him that. Freedom also came into it. You have a chance to live a life of proper consequence and that is something he really wanted. He was told to find out your why you need to ask why five times and that will then give you your actual why. So he began, I want to farm. **Why?** Because it represented freedom. **Why?** Freedom gives me a chance to live a life of consequence. **Why?** Because it's a struggle and the challenge is a really worthy opponent. **Why?** Because I might not be good enough? **Why?** Because I'm never sure whether I'm awesome or a dick.

No Compromises?

Before farming comes the children, always has and always will. Giving up is not an option but added that it might be the better option sometimes.

What sets you apart?

Certainly didn't believe he was set apart at all, but then no actually he said we all have our differences. He went on to say that he once sat down in a nuffield conference and a real sense of imposter syndrome came over him. There was a guy there who finished 50,000 steers a year, another with 1500 dairy cows and he had 650 ewes. But you have to find the good in yourself, find what it is that you are good at. He could write better than these other farmers. He went on to say being yourself is ok, everyone has strengths. Be yourself and maximise your strengths.

Biggest challenge, how did you overcome it?

FBT acquisition. The Bank! Cash flow management has restricted our ability to borrow money to progress further. If he did things again he would try and manage it better but again you could become too cautious. There needs to be a balance.

Plans for the future? Exit strategy?

He is now 52 and is slightly crapping himself that he and his wife will have to retire to a caravan. Used the analogy that he has laid it all on red and hasn't many chips left. Always thought he needed a particular number of stock to define where he wanted to be and now is starting to come away from that. Looking for balance in work on and off farm. He has 12 years until retirement and needs to have saved some money to be able to buy a house to retire to. Wants to take his wife travelling to say thankyou for the sacrifice she gave for him to live his dream of farming. Interested in building net worth, building a herd of cows to accelerate that. Pushing his podcast on to new levels, and wanting to help people.

Tim White 25/6/2022

Maiden Bradley

Warminster

Tim is a tenant farmer and runs 600 Exlana ewes (number fluctuates throughout the year) over 280ha (which also fluctuates year on year) on short term lets. Tim helped pioneer the Exlana breed by being part of the Sheep improved genetics company. He was 40 when he established his business but had led an extraordinary life in the years leading up to then, travelling and working in all kinds of places. If you were to look at Tim from afar he doesn't come across as a forward thinking "top operator" but my god he has done wonders to the genetics behind shedding sheep, his passion for improvement has led him to where he is today. His unique way of acquiring land was also impressive, he found a niche that was going organic and offering the landlord that he would do the paperwork and they would reap the benefits of the payments and stock on their land. He leads a simple life and didn't strike me as someone who is on the hamster wheel and stresses out, there was a chilled out vibe in his presence. He had a very successful year in 2021 personally when he received not one but two awards at the Farmers Weekly awards. Sheep farmer of the year and Sheep innovator of the year.

Why?

I like it.

No compromise?

He stated that these change as life goes on. It has got to be fun. It has to wash itself, as it has to be worthwhile. Also has to be part of the original plan.

(Piece of advice, the further you want to get the least compromises you can have.)

What sets you apart?

He has been told that he is a contrarian, and admired that he is "Gobby" and not afraid to speak his mind.

Biggest challenge, how did you overcome it?

Accepting he can work with other people, without that he wouldn't be where he is today. Rationalising ambition. With this he said he always wanted to own a farm, but really all he wanted to be is a farmer. Which was a big turning point when he realised this. As he was already a farmer.

Plans for the future? Exit strategy?

Get to a 1000 ewes in his own flock. Home ownership, and data. The Exlana breed is nothing without the data, and he is working towards capitalising on this.

Rhidian Glyn 30/06/2022
Rhiwgriafol

Rhidian is a tenant farmer and farms at Rhiwgriafol Farm 7 miles east of Machynlleth. The farm consists of 530 acres of which 300 is hill. It rises from 700ft to 1,600ft at its highest point. He also has 180 acres on a 11 month grazing licence lower down the valley. The farm currently runs 700 ewes, alongside 720 dairy heifers, which are either contract-reared or owned to be sold in calf. That number of stock is incredibly impressive. To achieve this from the humble beginnings of owning 15 sheep in 2008 gives hope to anyone that with hard work and perseverance you can succeed. He was the winner of New entrant of the year at the British Farming awards in 2018. I really enjoyed my time spent with Rhydian, he was more relatable to my situation at home and I took a lot away from the visit.

Why?

“It’s for me”. Everything he has done has been for him. In his words, selfishness.

No compromises?

Only deal with people he likes. This is hard at first when building relationships with people but is a crucial part of business if you want to succeed.

What sets you apart?

People skills. Active on social media. Know exactly the value of his stock.

Biggest challenge, how did you overcome it?

His biggest challenge like many other first gen was patience. He wanted everything now.! He understands that everything has to be gradual, but he has yet to overcome this challenge.

Plan for future? Exit strategy?

Milking. He is very proactive in his views of the future. He understands that he is at a big risk of TB with the throughput of heifers at Rhiwgriafol and until now he has been very lucky in evading TB. He is wanting to negate this risk by milking his own herd. At the moment there is no exit strategy.

Conclusion

Wow what an extraordinary couple of months, I can’t thank each farmer enough for their generosity in giving me their time. I’ve come home with more questions than answers though, which perhaps is a good thing. Am I doing the right thing for me going forward? Am I in the right area to progress? Does my business align with my values and will it going forward? Do I actually want to be “full time” on the farm? These are questions that will take time to get the answers for and I’m looking forward to my journey of discovery.

A big learning of this study for me is seeing all the opportunities out there if you are willing to move. Here in West Wales, a predominantly livestock area, there are many roadblocks to

entering the farming industry off your own back. Land acquisition at a reasonable rent is near non-existent, there will always be someone willing to pay an extortionate price due to competition. Tim White, Tom Addison and Oliver Chedghey live in or near arable areas in England where their rent was cheap or nothing (Max £30/acre). This already provides them a massive advantage on cash flow and the ability to build equity in the business. I found there was also more openness to share farming in these arable areas, and I feel that there is more of a consideration for both parties' needs, rather than greed or ego by the land owner that I have witnessed at home.

We as First generation also have to have patience! It's easier said than done. I myself am a prime example of wanting things now, I get extremely frustrated with my progression and believe I'm not in control of my own destiny. I/we all just need to sit back every once in a while and reflect. Our hard work is getting us places, keep chipping away and control the controllables (cringe). Back yourselves and get amongst it!

The biggest learning I've taken from this study is that every farmer I visited all had similar mindsets. We all shared the same drive and ambition to want to succeed and smash our goals. Based on who I've met throughout this report, I believe there is no reason why I and other first generation farmers can't reach the top and achieve all we want in the industry and in life. Find out your why, work out your no compromises and stick to them.

Here are some key points for first generation farmers and the wider industry.

First Generation

1. **Network.** Network is your net worth. Get out there and speak to and meet as many people as you can, show your face.
2. **Trust.** This is a hard one as it takes time to build with other people, but always trust yourself.
3. **Flexible.** Don't be rigid in your direction, staying flexible allows you to keep your options open.
4. **Honesty.** Be honest!
5. **Travel.** See the world, home will always be there.

Industry

1. **Business.** Farming is first and foremostly is a business. It has to be profitable otherwise what's the point.
2. **Welcome.** Be welcoming to first generation farmers, all we want is to learn.
3. **Opportunity.** Be open to giving opportunities to people that want to progress and have the drive to succeed.
4. **Collaborate.** We might have the solutions to your problems and vice versa. Teamwork makes the dream work.
5. **Negativity.** Farming can be a very negative industry at times. Lets focus on the positives that hugely outweigh the negatives.

Thanks for taking the time to read.