[00:00:10] Hello and welcome to episode 53 of Ear to the Ground, the Farming Connect podcast that supports Welsh farmers, helping them to adapt and thrive. I’m Aled Jones. I’ll be guiding you through today’s episode, and recently my co-producer, Jim Ellis, and I went to visit Trygarn Farm in Penrhyn Llŷn. Trygarn is home to Rhys Williams and his family. Rhys is a well-known dairy farmer and a real trail blazer in the field of share farming. He believes firmly in developing and helping people to grow, an ethos which has enabled him to grow his own venture, which now covers over 2,000 acres, milking over 2,000 cows. To hear more about Rhys and his fascinating journey, as well as the techniques he uses to help develop people and their hopes for the future, stay tuned. This is an episode you won’t want to miss. So, sit back, relax, and enjoy our chat with Rhys Williams.

Well, Rhys Williams, thank you for agreeing to be on the podcast and thank you also for the warm welcome to Trygarn. I’m lucky enough to have been here once before, and every time I’m here, I’m stunned by the view. The pasture here’s looking extremely thick, Rhys. It’s been a good year for growth then, I take it?

[00:01:25] Yes, it’s been a very good year in terms of growth and weather and everything. We’re fortunate to live in such a lovely, beautiful place, as you say.

[00:01:42] It’s amazing, we’re looking over Sarn Meyllteyrn village in Penrhyn Llŷn, and there’s a lot of milking going on in the Penrhyn Llŷn area, isn’t there? Lots of dairy farmers here.

[00:01:54] Yes, I’m sure there are more now than there were, going back twenty years, let’s say. But yes, it’s a good area for pasture, it’s fantastic. And of course, if you can grow grass, then you can convert it into milk.

[00:02:12] That’s the secret. The cheaper way, maybe, of producing milk. Using pasture.

[00:02:18]It doesn’t matter whether you’re producing milk, or meat, if you use pasture efficiently, you’ll certainly see the benefits.

[00:02:31] The purpose of this podcast is for us to get to know your business, of course, and to get to know you, and to follow your journey. You were born on a smallholding in Ysbyty Ifan and now you run several farms. In order for our listeners to understand and appreciate the extent of your success, it would be good if you could explain how it all happened. Where exactly did you start? And where are you today?

[00:02:56] It’s not a particularly long story, but I’ll tell it quickly. I was raised in Padog, on the edge of Ysbyty Ifan. It was a small place, ten acres, both my parents worked in the agricultural industry. So I was raised in a very agricultural community. To be honest, the only thing I’d ever really wanted to do, eventually, was farming. Funnily enough, I wasn’t interested in dairy cows to begin with, it hadn’t crossed my mind until I finished college and was persuaded to go for a job in the Denbigh area, as a cowman. Being able to go there, getting the job and trying that out for three months meant that I ended up spending nine years there in the end. I was in my element. In that nine-year period, I was also in New Zealand, I spent quite a bit of time there. And it was being there that opened my eyes to the possibilities of pasture, it gave me an insight into how they used pasture in New Zealand. At the time, the rotational method, the type of grazing that was being done in New Zealand, there was a bit of it happening in Britain, but I’d certainly never come across it. So that’s where my interest in milk came from. Then after that, we moved to New Zealand in 2001, I worked there for two years, full time, with the intention of going out and living there. Because at the time, I didn’t see any opportunities in the industry in Wales for someone young like me, who was starting from scratch, from nothing. And I’m sure, with hindsight, there probably were opportunities, opportunities have always been there. But I don’t think the industry was what it is today. Whereas it was in New Zealand, there’s a system there, New Zealanders are extremely open to sharing and teaching, and I was lucky enough to spend time there, and then have the opportunity to come back to share farming in Penllyn, with Dafydd Wynne Finch in 2004. That’s how we ended up in Penllyn. And Dafydd, at the time, had the idea of converting one of his farms from cows and sheep to dairy, and he was very keen to do it using the New Zealand model. Then there was a chance to come back, and Ellie and I were about to get married, and we knew we were at the stage where we wanted to start a family, so the opportunity to come back to Wales and raise a little family in Wales whilst being able to do what we’d been doing in New Zealand was an opportunity we couldn’t turn down.

[00:06:49] So it was almost by chance, in a way? Had you not had that chat with Dafydd Wynne Finch at the time, you and Ellie might have been living in New Zealand now?

[00:07:00] We would have been. As it happened, I was working for a good family in New Zealand. They were doing well too. When we went to New Zealand, my aim was to own 500 cows in five years, that’s what I’d set my sights on. The system and the family were great, and they knew that. I remember the year we went, there was an opportunity to be on a farm, they’d just bought a new one, with 500 cows. And I was going to move there and start what they called ‘law order share milking’ and then work my way up in three years to be able to buy the herd and go into 50/50 share milking. So yes, we would definitely have been there now. The moment you start having children, you start a family, I’m sure we would have done.

[00:08:09] Putting roots down. But you came back to Wales, you came back with what you’d learnt in New Zealand, those methods, rotational grazing, that way of producing milk efficiently, and you brought it all back to little Wales. Back to share farming with Dafydd Wynne Finch then, what were the arrangements between you?

[00:08:31] Yes, share farming with Dafydd Wynne in Cefnamlwch and starting in 2005. I was pretty lucky that I’d partnered up with a farmer who had quite a lot of scale. We started milking with 800 cows in 2005, calving them in the spring. We bought into the herd at 7%. So then Ellie and I owned 7% of the cows, we were paying 7% of the costs, and got 7% of the profits. This went up in the second year, we bought 20%, and by then we were milking a thousand cows. Within four years, so by 2009 I think it was, we shared the business with Dafydd, and we were milking 1,500 cows in total, maybe slightly more. By then, we’d turned to another farm. Dafydd had one in Pentregwenlais. We turned that into a dairy farm too. And by that point, we owned half the stock with Dafydd. We had really expanded.

[00:09:59] How did you manage to achieve this? By using the profit you’d made through the business to reinvest in the herd?

[00:10:06] Yes, and with bank loans. Another thing, through luck more than anything else, was that I bought a house in my early twenties in Llanrwst, and that was in the days when you could buy a house for £40,000. In fact, this one was £38,000, a terraced house. And that was in the late 90s, it must have been. And by the end of the year, when we had just gone into dairy, and were wanting to buy cows, the house went up in value to £120,000.

[00:10:46] Good timing.

[00:10:47] Well, it was luck more than anything else. It just so happened that that house really helped us.

[00:10:52] To give you some money to invest.

[00:10:57] Yes, it was a leg up. We still have the house, in fact. So we started, as you said, investing the money, then the profits that were left over, we used those to invest in more cows. Then in 2012, probably one of the biggest things that happened, of course, was that I got the Nuffield scholarship in 2010. That made me view things slightly differently. We were renting Trygan as a youngstock unit with Cefnamlwch. The opportunity came up in 2012 to buy it, we had the opportunity to buy it and we decided to go for it. It was a big step at the time. We left Cefnamlwch at that point, we left the farm we’d started with Dafydd. And it just so happened that we kept the farm in Pentregwenlais. We went into a 50/50 share milking partnership with Dafydd and we kept that farm going. And then we came here to Trygarn. And in 2012, we had the milking business, we converted this back into a dairy farm, starting with 300 cows, so the business was in 2013, we started farming here, we started milking, we were milking 300 cows here and 450 up in Pentregwenlais. So that was the business from 2012 – 2013. Then came the opportunities to expand. We have a farm in Anglesey, in Bodedern, which was shared with Dafydd as it happens, so running that as a youngstock farm. So mine and Dafydd’s youngstock went there, then we decided to convert that into a dairy farm too.

[00:13:05] Another opportunity came up in 2014, I went into partnership with Richard Rogers in Brynsiencyn to start with, doing beef. I was in charge of breeding bull calves up to a certain age and then Richard took them and took care of the grazing side of things. That worked very well. Then I had the chance to go into partnership on one of Richard’s farms. We decided it would be a dairy farm. We went into partnership with Richard in 2014. Then in 2015, we went to a farm in Bangor-on-Dee in Wrexham, on a farm business tenancy for 5 years. We started a venture with a young lad from the area, Robat, and that has worked very well. That’s coming to an end now. Robat has really thrived, he now has two units in Malpas, near Chester, milking 500 cows all on his own. That’s worked very well for him. Then we have a dairy farm in partnership with Richard, in Glasfryn, in Y Ffôr, which isn’t far from here. That one’s a tenancy. And we have one farm not far from here, in Edar, also a tenancy, and that’s changing to dairy next year. I’ve also just started a partnership with Bedwyr and Helen Jones in Gwastadannas, Beddgelert, they have a farm in Bodrwnsiwn in Anglesey. We go into share farming with them, me, Ellie and Eifion, the boy we’ve got running the farm we have in Anglesey, so that’s a new project that starts next year. There’s a lot going on.

[00:15:19] I was going to ask, where do you find the hours in the day to do all this?

[00:15:23] Lots of working together. Trying to create a system where people can progress. And people benefit at the end of the day.

[00:15:32] And the people are important. That’s one of the main things we like to talk about on this podcast. But just going back to when you came back to Wales, you established this partnership with Dafydd Wynne Finch, and since then you’ve established several other share farming partnerships with different individuals. That was a new idea in Wales at the time, wasn’t it? There weren’t many farms in Wales, or even that many in Britain, I don’t suppose, who were doing what you were doing. Maybe it was relatively common in New Zealand, but it was big risk here in Wales at the time.

[00:16:05] Of course, it’s been a system over in New Zealand for years. That’s the foundation of New Zealand’s dairy industry success, share dairy farming. I’d had a lot of exposure to it, I’d learnt how it worked, it wasn’t new to me. I was fortunate to go into partnership with Dafydd, because he and I shared the same mindset. And it was easy, once you have two people agreeing on something.

[00:16:51] And I guess the relationship is the most important thing in a way, to start with. And then working on that agreement. If you can collaborate as individuals, the agreement will come.

[00:17:00] It will, every time. The individuals are extremely important. And it was a particularly new thing in Britain. There was some share farming going on, in England, but more in the arable farming industry, there was a lot of that going on in England. And also ‘contract farming’, as they called it, there was contract farming going on in England. There still is, that system’s okay. But it’s just a bit too complex for what we were wanting to do.

[00:17:46] In general, is farming easier on a dairy farm, because of there being more cash flow? There’s more profit at the end of the day compared to on more traditional beef and sheep farms?

[00:17:59] Yes. I don’t have a lot of experience with beef and sheep farms to be honest, so it’s not really my place to say, but there is share farming in that sector, that’s been happening over the years, and some that seems to be popping up now, which is good to see. But it certainly works well in the dairy industry, and it gives young people the chance to break into the industry, to take the reins, and if they’re ready to work, the reward is very high.

[00:18:36] Which do you prefer, cows or people?

[00:18:40] I like both, to be honest. Some days I’d love just to be on my own with the cows. I wouldn’t say I prefer one over the other. It’s a big thing seeing people progressing and moving on, and feeling like you’ve left your mark, maybe.

[00:19:17] And what’s interesting is that when we were chatting earlier, before recording, about developing people, you said it was rewarding seeing people building their confidence skills and their ability, and that you’d feel proud of their success if they were to leave and set up somewhere on their own. And that might surprise some listeners. Lots of people might assume that you’d want to keep all the people in your team, but seeing people fly the nest doesn’t bother you?

[00:19:46] No, it almost makes me feel prouder in a way. I’ve always said that I want to create a system where we develop farmers into individuals who are ready to go out into the industry and who will tick all the boxes, who can do everything. And in agriculture, you have to be a jack of all trades, able to do everything. Whereas, at the beginning, I didn’t really twig this, I was trying to help develop people either to be able to milk, or to measure pasture, and then we brought in other people to handle the other skills. But if you want to take on your own farm, you need to learn how to do it all. Just really simple things, knowing how the electrics and the plumbing work, everything. And also concentrating more on developing them as people, so that they have those skills to go forward and feel ready, and also that they have the financial knowledge, that’s extremely important in terms of running a business, not just running a farm, but running a business.

[00:21:04] And what’s their journey then? When someone starts, when you take someone on as a member of staff, what’s the trajectory? What are the milestones they’ve got ahead of them? If they wanted to reach a certain goal of getting this amount of equity, or this number of cows, maybe helping to start a new unit, what’s the progression you can offer them within the model you use?

[00:21:24] It’s up to the individual which route they want to go down and how quickly they want to go through each stage. Because some do it all very quickly, and others do it more slowly. Everyone is different. Trygarn is a good place, you can get to know people, you can help people in the early years, and watch them develop. And then when they’re ready to progress. We live here, of course, I’m around a lot. And I’m sure the early years always seem long. But those early years are the most important. They’re investing in themselves, they learn, the main thing is that they learn how to run the system. And then if they’re good enough to progress, they do it very quickly.

[00:21:24] And then once they’ve spent some more time here, do you tend to give them more responsibility? What’s your way of managing people and getting the most out of people? Are you one of those managers who likes to micromanage and give specific tasks? Or do you prefer to take a backseat, give them responsibility and let them get on with it? How do you strike the right balance?

[00:22:52] I give people the responsibilities they want, that they’re happy to take on. You can ask the lads here, I’m sure they might say I’m a slight ‘captain chaos’. But that’s why I like to create a system that gives people a lot of responsibility. Especially if they want to get ahead, they need to know how to handle it. I’m not a micromanager, I’m not a control freak.

[00:23:26] It’s probably impossible to be anyway, because in order to run all the units, I guess you have to step back and put faith in people to get on with it.

[00:23:34] I’m sure Nuffield did me a lot of good, because I had to leave the business we had at the time for a long period. I’m sure I spent close to ten weeks at a time away from the business in that year and a half. Something I’d never have thought I could do before that. And it taught me how to put systems in place, and I’m sure, have a bit more faith in people too. I’m confident now that if I were to go away for six months, the farms would be run exactly as they would be if I were here. And that’s the important thing. But that’s a credit to the people who work with us. And the system is simple. Trying to maintain a simple system, that people enjoy, that’s what’s important.

[00:24:36] We hear, almost every day these days, that most industries are complaining that they don’t have enough staff, that they can’t get people out to work for them, that no one is applying for jobs. Have you had the same trouble?

[00:24:46] No, to be honest, we haven’t. We’re in a good area. We work from the Dyffryn Conwy area all the way to Anglesey. A very Welsh area, a very agricultural area, and a lot of good young people who can turn their hand to everything to tell you the truth. You have to create a system that attracts people, that’s very important. Creating a system where you’re able to retain people. We’re lucky with being able to get people into the system. I guess we’ve got a sort of template now where the young lads coming to us can see the other end, the lads who started with us and who have gone on and are now running their own farms, farming totally on their own. They can see, if they’re willing to work, and it’s not easy, there are long hours. I’ve always said, to enjoy agriculture, you need to enjoy the way of life, that’s important. I remember at the time, when I was on my journey and people were telling me no, it’s not a way of life, you must treat it as a business. And of course, you do have to treat it as a business, but I personally feel very strongly, I love the way of life, being able to bring up children in the community we live in, raising them in the business we’re in, in the farms. If someone doesn’t enjoy the agricultural way of life, the two things don’t really go together.

[00:26:52] They go hand in hand, you need to enjoy the work for it to prove successful financially.

[00:27:01] Unfortunately, the work never stops. It’s 24/7, because things happen, the world isn’t perfect, and you have to be prepared for that. And if they enjoy that side of things, it’s great, they’re going to be successful.

[00:27:23] Lots of dairy farmers are very reliant on foreign workers from Europe and this has been a problem over the last year. You’ve succeeded in creating a system that doesn’t rely on workers from abroad, you prefer Welsh talent, or from Britain, coming through the system.

[00:27:41] It’s nice. On the farm near Wrexham, where Robat is, in the Malpas area, it’s a much harder area to get people. There are lots of big industries close by, more money, easier work, to be honest. We’re just lucky in this area we’ve got plenty of young people. It’s so important to keep communities going for a start, and that they have that interest.

[00:28:28] And keeping the language alive too, it’s part of the culture, it adds so much to the community. In terms of motivating people then, how do you then go about showing your appreciation? For some, maybe, it’s money that motivates them, some are looking for recognition, others want to reach a certain target. How do you create that environment where they feel that they can work here without any specific reward at the end?

[00:28:55] Again, everyone is different. Every individual is different, there are different boxes to tick. I like to create a team environment where everyone has to do everything. There’s no ‘you do this, I’ll do that’. If there’s a dirty job that has to be done, everyone does it, that’s the atmosphere I want to create.

[00:29:30] And you’re very honest with your staff, aren’t you, Rhys? And you’re happy to be open about the figures. A registered company is linked to each unit, and they all do their own accounts independently from each other. You can read about and understand how each farm is performing, and also, you’re very happy to share the figures and the financial software with those individuals who have the necessary responsibility, so that they can see exactly how much money the business is making, and as a result, understand the business at the end of it.

[00:30:02] Yes, that’s an important step, I think. Once they’re on the farm, and running the farm, they have to be able to know how to run the financial side of things. If someone doesn’t share that information with them, it would be very hard to do what we do, so then they understand where exactly the costs are going, where the profits are being made, or where we need to tighten the belt a bit, and they also enjoy it. They like the responsibility. And it’s very important, especially if they go onto the next stage, running their own farms all on their own. These days, being able to run the money side of things and the paperwork is extremely important.

[00:30:57] So, working here, you learn how to treat animals, milking skills, and all the practical work, but also the business skills, those get a lot of attention in terms of how people work here. From looking around here, the pasture’s very thick, you’ve been part of Farming Connect’s grass growth project. Is it interesting work?

[00:31:21] Yes, it’s great, it’s just come to an end this year, or it’s about to come to an end. It’s interesting to see how different areas in Wales are performing. We’ve heard about a bigger Britain-wide project too, with another company, that’s interesting. It just shows, two of us who are part of the project are Welsh. It’s hard to beat Wales when it comes to pasture.

[00:31:54] That’s good news. And then to finish, Rhys. What would be your advice to people who manage staff, the most important principles, and also your advice to young people looking for jobs, what would you say to them?

[00:32:17] To young people, I’d say you just have to be patient, that’s the main thing. There are so many opportunities out there. Being careful and going to work for the right people in those first years. Those first years are very important because they have a big influence on someone’s life, and on what they go on to do, and so I’d advise treating it almost like you’re going to college again, going out there to learn. I’m still learning, and I’ll keep on learning until the end. But I do feel, in those early years, you’re like a sponge, you learn a lot during that period. And then for someone on the other side, employing people, you have to be patient on this side too. Being open-minded with your expectations of people, because everyone, every individual is different, different things make different people perform. And give people a chance, particularly young people, they deserve a chance. Actually, really interestingly, one of the best books I’ve ever read is Alex Ferguson’s book, and how he had that Class of ‘92. And I think about that a lot, we have the people who work for us, and they’re extremely young, a couple of them running farms in their early twenties, running big businesses, I certainly wasn’t like that when I was their age, and if they’re good enough, they deserve a chance.

[00:34:25] Age doesn’t mean anything if they’re good enough.

[00:34:28] No, exactly.

[00:34:30] One more question before we finish. Having heard about all your successes, milking across five units, over 2,000 acres, what’s next for you?

[00:34:45] To take life as it comes, to enjoy it, we’re quite focused now, Ellie and I, on our family, we’ve got five children. We have some interesting years ahead of us, so just seeing how the next ten years pan out with them. I’m very open-minded. I’ve always been an open-minded person, I’ve been in the game long enough now, you never know what will happen next week, what will come up, so just being open to everything.

[00:35:23] Well, what a great note to end the podcast on. Rhys Williams, Trygarn, thank you so much for joining us on the Ear to the Ground podcast and best wishes in the future.

[00:35:30] Thanks, Aled.

[00:35:34] And if you’d like more information about the support available through Farming Connect, contact your local development officer or service centre on 08456000813. Well, that’s it, we’ve reached the end of another episode. We’ll be back in two weeks’ time with lots more to discuss. But in the meantime, don’t forget to subscribe on whatever platform you use, to make sure you don’t miss out on any episodes of Ear to the Ground. So, on behalf of the Farming Connect team, and me, Aled Jones, thank you for listening, goodbye for now.