

Robin Mills met Sam Edwards at Cerne Abbas, Dorset



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I'm the third generation of my family to live in this house in Cerne; my son George will be the fourth. I was born and grew up here, went to the village school, and would tear around the village on my bike among big groups of my friends, playing in the river, and building dens. Such a wonderfully free childhood for which I feel very privileged and lucky.

My dad Paul's an agricultural engineer, often working very long hours. He started straight out of college, first for Bredy's, then Vaughan's, and now for Hunt Forest the John Deere people. Mum was pretty much a stay-at-home mum, and I'm their only daughter.

I had a tricky time at Thomas Hardy's school, Dorchester. At 14 I was diagnosed with scoliosis and following an operation I missed a lot of school in years 10 and 11 and had to drop some GCSE subjects. I had constant backache and missed out socially too, so came out of school at 16 rather lost about what I wanted to do. After a few fill-in jobs, I was offered a nannying job for someone in the village; so, I completed the childcare course I'd started at school, and carried on nannying for another 10 years, all quite local, for some very lovely people. I really enjoyed it.

I'd never met a sheep until I met Sam, my husband, in 2018. Never handled a sheep, never done a lambing, no experience



Sam Edwards

whatsoever. Sam was then looking after his flock of about 200 sheep kept on odd blocks of grazing in the area, as well as working for contractor Bernard Cox. In September 2019 we went to Dorset County Show, where we saw some beautiful Red Devon heifers. We contacted the owners, and by the end of the month we had 5 in-calf cows, with 3 calves at foot. We rented a shed near here to winter them in; we also reared calves there, and that was the start of our livestock farming together.

In 2020 we bought 115 Poll Dorset sheep, all autumn lambing, from some friends who were selling their flock, expanding them to about 200. That autumn was my first proper lambing. Sam was still contracting, so I was on my own, with Sam helping by phone, and dropping in after his day's work to help sort out any problems. It was a very steep learning curve, but I absolutely loved it.

During that winter we negotiated the grazing of cover crops growing on local arable farms. These crops, such as mustard, buckwheat or clover, are grown over the winter on otherwise bare land as part of the Poole Harbour Nutrient Management Scheme, to reduce nutrients like nitrogen and phosphates leaching into the rivers that feed Poole Harbour. Grazing them with our sheep gave us a plan based on autumn lambing, then turning the ewes and lambs out on to the cover crops, on which they thrived.

In 2021 I became pregnant with George, and then an opportunity arose to take on the grazing at St Catherine's Farm, Cerne Abbas. We needed to buy in more sheep. Sam had stopped the contracting work and was working for Synergy Vets, heading up their specialised shepherding service. During that work he'd come across Highlander sheep, bred for prolificacy, efficiency and ease of care by Innovis, a sheep genetics company. We thought they'd suit us, so in June 2022 we bought a flock of about 200, and now we had a spring lambing flock. George was 6 months old by then, and as he got older he accompanied us with whatever we were doing, loving every minute. Our second lambing of the Dorsets was that autumn, followed by our first spring lambing of the Highlanders. Those two flocks formed the nucleus of

our own sheep, about 400 altogether, which we still have.

All our stock are kept on land with temporary grazing agreements between us and the land owners. We own no land, nor do we have a tenancy over any land. That means we cannot produce stock which are Farm Assured, so we sell all our own stock at Kivells Auction at Exeter, where they generally meet a good trade.

Last autumn we started a breeding partnership with Innovis. Sam now works for them. They breed high index rams, and now we run their sheep as well as our own. From the Innovis-bred sheep we produce rams which are sold at specialist sales; we also grow on young rams born elsewhere for sale the following year. Our partnership with Innovis also involves grazing their own breeds of ewes, for example their wool-shedding sheep, of which we now have over 100 ewes. This is a new breeding development in response to the non-existent market for wool these days which doesn't cover the cost of shearing. The sheep are covered not so much with wool, more like thick hair, which sheds on its own in the summer. They also have a thicker layer of fat under the skin so are quite happy in the winter months. And because they don't suffer from the nightmares of flystrike in the summer, we don't need to be constantly protecting them with chemicals. Over time our partnership with Innovis has enabled us to own more and more of their sheep, and eventually we aim to own all the sheep we are contract farming for them. This year we have put 950 ewes to the ram all together.

None of this could have happened without the generosity of my dad. The banks won't lend to us because we have no security. Through the Innovis partnership, and our good relations with local farmers through grazing agreements, we have built up a significant size of business with which to step straight into a tenancy if one came up. Last September Sam and I got married in the village. We had a wonderful day, with a party in the Village Hall afterwards.

We do work hard. As well as our routine shepherding, checking and moving sheep, and electric fencing, Sam spends half the year selling rams and delivering them



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for Innovis, and I work 3 nights a week in Dorchester Hospital bank as a healthcare assistant, because we're not yet in a position to pay ourselves, and we need to pay my dad back. Keeping sheep on temporary grazing licences involves a massive amount of travel every day, is a constant juggling act, and is inevitably insecure. At any time, you can lose some grazing, so we're constantly chasing new agreements. We did apply for a council farm tenancy, but they wanted a dairy there. So, we're still looking.

Through Sam's job with Innovis, the Farmer's Guardian magazine wrote an article about us. We then got entered in their competition under New Entrants

of the Year. We got short listed, did a Zoom interview, then got invited to the awards at the NEC, leaving George overnight for the first time with Sam's mum. And then we won the award! We were told it was for our enthusiasm, determination to carry on in the face of adversity, and that despite no tenancy we're still building our business. After that, Radio Solent got in touch for a phone interview with me, and then 2 weeks ago I was on a Radio 5 Live debate for an hour about the effect of the recent budget on farming. And because we've never thought what we do is a big deal, it's actually nice to find people are interested, to get a bit of recognition. It spurs us on. ☺