



Watch out for
the sleepless
anaesthetist
in Dorchester
Page 52

Anna
Whitwham
escaping
into boxing
Page 42



Andrew Chater
unravelling
the complexities
of America
Page 44



FREE
COMMUNITY
Magazine

THE Marshwood



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Robin Mills met Sophie Gregory at Thorncombe, on the Dorset/Devon border



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After two years living in Bristol my family lived in the village of Oakhill, near Shepton Mallet. Mum's a vet, and my dad was a supermarket buyer amongst other jobs. I lived there until I was 18, enjoying a childhood surrounded by animals—rabbits in the kitchen, hedgehogs, guinea pigs (on leads) and always had a horse in a field nearby.

I met my husband Tom when I was 17 at Glastonbury Festival. He's from a farming family, and until we met the thought of my involvement in farming never entered my head. His dad had given up dairying when he was 10, the farm had been let, so although he was desperate to farm, there was no farm in his family for him to go to.

Initially I had other ideas. We had our first child, Harry, when I was 19 (we now have 3 children) and I then trained as an accountant. I worked for a rural accountancy firm for a while, but we were soon looking for a farm to rent. Home Farm at Thorncombe wasn't the first we looked at, but as Tom was a cattle foot-trimmer, working for Steve Poole, he was in a good position to find out about farms which were becoming available, and knew many of the owners. We were also calf rearing for Mike Tizzard at Corton Denham, who runs 8 organic dairies. Mike then became our share-farming partner when Home Farm

Sophie Gregory

became available; we put in 20% of the equity to his 80%. The milk price was quite high at the time, so there was a lot of interest in the farm, and we didn't think our bid would be successful. But the combination of a young family backed by an established business worked in our favour, and within 4 years we'd built up to 50% of the equity. Last April we managed to buy Mike out.

Since we came here the farm has grown from 280 cows, all spring calving, on about 600 acres. We're now 1400 acres, contract farming 3 further farms in addition to the original Sadborow Estate tenancy. We keep 400 milkers, 150 beef cattle, and 200 replacement heifers. We also have 300 acres of arable land, and farm most of the land organically. The organic decision was originally a financial one, but over the years I've become passionate about how we farm. We have a lot of acres and not many buildings, so we need to maximise as much production as we can from grass, keeping the cows leading healthy lives outdoors for about 10 months of the year. We calve about 300 in the spring, and 100 in autumn to help balance milk production through the year. We have 2 full-time and 2 part-time staff, and our landlords are all enthusiastic about farming organically.

I never knew I could be involved in farming. Although my skillset probably ticks all the right boxes, it was never suggested at school or college, which maybe reveals a lack of insight or imagination in education. Among my friends were those who thought that dairy farming was "bad", and so I began sharing my farming experiences, helping friends to get to know the cows and their characters. I also think it's no good complaining about farming woes and poor prices without actively trying to educate people about the way their food's produced. It's a disaster that kids have so little idea about what happens on farms. How can we expect them to make good choices about either healthy food, or a potential career in agriculture, if they haven't been presented with the facts about farming?

I enjoy being able to communicate the realities of farm life. If you put yourself out there, as I do, then you have to expect the negative as well as the positive, but by now I'm used to that. I belong to a great organisation called Women in Dairy, which facilitates meetings for groups of women across the country to meet and share ideas. I also run a mentoring group for younger women in farming, through face to face and online meetings, to try and encourage them in making decisions about starting their own business or taking a share in an existing one. The mentoring experience for them has been really powerful, and I get a lot out of it too.

We sell our milk through Arla, a farmers' cooperative of around 7000 producers, both conventional and organic. A lot of the organic milk goes to Macdonalds, whose fresh

milk is all organic, to butter and cheesemaking, and to own-brands, like Tesco's organic which comes from Arla. I like being part of a cooperative within which you have some influence. There's a profit share twice a year, and they try to achieve the best price possible for their members. I hold an elected position on the organic committee of the board of representatives. We meet in Denmark 3 times a year, have monthly milk price calls, and it's fascinating to be on the inside of how the coop works.

There's a lot of interest around the word "regenerative" as applied to farming. As organic producers we are in a sense already farming with regenerative principles, but I'm excited by the movement because it's creating greater interest in agriculture and where food comes from, and it's encouraging some farmers to change practices which aren't great for the environment. It's for organic farmers to own and maintain the integrity of their practices, but I'm open-minded about all farming systems. It's important that consumers have a choice.

Through Women in Dairy, in 2021 I won Dairy Industry Woman of the Year, which has opened a lot of doors for me. Then in November 2023 I was awarded a Nuffield Scholarship. The Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust is a charity organisation whose aim is to bring positive change to agriculture by sending young farmers overseas to learn from others, and to then share the benefits of their experience on their return. I applied for the award because at the time the organic sector, especially dairy, was under a lot of financial pressure, so it was the perfect time to travel abroad to study other countries' organic dairy industries. I will have to write a 5000-word report about my experience and give a 12-minute presentation.

Last year I spent 12 weeks travelling. We went as a group of Nuffields to Brazil, then to Australia and New Zealand. In Europe I've visited Austria, Denmark, France and Hungary. Then in Asia to Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Taiwan. On an atlas on our kitchen wall, we've marked all the places I've been and those I hope to go to, including Australia next week, where I also have family. Before the travelling I was spending a lot of time milking cows, which I loved—and still do—but it has forced our business to cope without me, which is a healthy thing. The farm had one of its best years when I wasn't involved!

The estate team are currently hard at work converting a shed next to the cattle buildings into a classroom. This will be for local schoolchildren to come and see the cows close up, learn about how milk is produced, to smell the smells, to get the full experience, and spend time in our classroom developing their knowledge. We are hoping it will be an enriching experience for them, as nourishing as drinking milk.