

Case Study: Lesley Mitchell

Women in Agriculture



Lesley Mitchell farms with her husband Robert and son Stuart. They farm over 1050 acres in the Scottish Borders. From a non-farming background, Lesley has helped progress the business with her skills and positive attitude.

Introduce yourself and tell us about your involvement with farming.

‘I am not from a farming background, I studied clinical biochemistry after school. I first met my husband Robert at Teviotdale Young Farmers. After we were married I moved to Whitriggs near Hawick where right from the beginning I was very much involved in the day to day running of the business.

The business was a partnership between Robert, his father and his uncle. They took a step back after we married and I became a partner shortly after. At the time we had 525 acres of land with 85 cows, 500 ewes and 20-30 acres of arable cropping grown for feeding. I got involved in every aspect of the business including tractor and stock work as well as records and bookkeeping. In 1999, we purchased a neighbouring farm, Denholm Hill. We now have over 1050 acres, 160 cows, 300 red deer hinds and grow approximately 125 acres of arable for sale and feed.’

Why were you so keen to buy another farm?

‘We did it for the next generation. We have two sons and we wanted to give them both an opportunity so we reinvested in the business to try and make it work. For me succession planning began when the boys came along and our eldest son told his primary school

teacher that I had bought a farm and he was going to run it one day. From then he has stayed true to his word and has always had enthusiasm for the business. I wanted to give Stuart some responsibility in the business so when he returned to the farm after studying at SRUC and travelling, he became a partner at 24 and head of the business at 25. Our other son Alistair studied Veterinary Biosciences at Glasgow University and has a career off the farm, although he and his family live on the farm and help at busy times where possible.’

What do you bring to the partnership?

‘Although my background is not farming based, I have been very involved in the farm both practically and from a business point of view. I was able to question why things were done the way they were and how we could become more resilient. I have always been taught financial discipline and to be careful with what you earn. My family installed the importance of managing money and resources. When we bought Denholm Hill, I took the financial lead and approached the bank with a business plan. After some negotiating with the bank we got a loan which has been repaid—something that I am very proud of. It was a major decision 20 years ago with two young children (7 and 5). We

had to cut back and had some tough years especially with Foot and Mouth coming just over a year later. Although I had my doubt at the time I am pleased that we did it.

We recently added a deer enterprise to the farm and again admittedly I was nervous of such a large investment in the business so I fully researched the advantages and disadvantages as well as the impact on the other enterprises while Stuart and Robert undertook practical handling and management training. We each have our strength and work with them.'

Have you always worked on the farm?

When I first started on the farm I was very hands on and this continued until Stuart started to take over some of my roles. At this point I took a step to a more strategic role where I am able to focus on each enterprise and constantly evaluate them to look for improvements to the running of the business. I have had off farm work in a variety of roles including in a primary school, at Borders college, SAC Consulting and the Department of Agriculture in the Scottish Government.'

Have you experienced difficulties being a women in agriculture?

'I have been a farmer for a long time and for years I have attended meetings where I was the only female in the room, you just have to get on with it. I have rarely found any issues, however, recently at one conference a man asked if Robert couldn't make it assuming I was filling in for him. I enjoying seeing women in key roles in the industry and the numbers seem to be

increasing which could be due to more women being encouraged to take on more prominent positions. A huge part of farming is team work and often men and women working together can complement each other.'

"A huge part of farming is teamwork. Everyone working together can complement each other."

What do you think of Women in Agriculture?

'I have thoroughly enjoyed taking part in Women in Agriculture initiative. One meeting I particularly enjoyed was Kerry Allison's resilience meeting. She made us look at ourselves and look at what is important to us. It really made me realise that everything I do is for my family. I love working with my family and I am really proud of what we have achieved as a team. Everyone has their own roles to play and everyone is equally important in the business.'

What advice would you give younger you?

1. 'Not to worry so much, especially about things I cannot change.
2. To appreciate what you have.
3. To do the best you can with the resources you have.
4. Take time out to enjoy yourself and travel if you can.

Robert and I have travelled and seen farming in different countries including Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and more recently India and Vietnam. Our holidays revolve around seeing farming and is fascinating to meet farmers, see their opportunities and challenges and how they farm in their part of the world.'



For further information about the Women in Agriculture work being done by the Farm Advisory Service, including information on discussion groups, head to www.fas.scot or contact us on 0300 323 0161.

