

Case Study: Heather Brockie

Women in Agriculture



Heather Brockie farms a croft above Kiltarlity, to the west of Inverness. She recently took over the croft and has expanded the enterprises to bring in additional income. She describes herself as a combination of farmer, wife, mother of 4, a jack of all trades and a master of some! Here she tells us about her life in agriculture and future intentions for the business.

Tell us a bit about your background and farming career.

'I wasn't sure when I left school whether to study agriculture or art. After I left school I worked half a week as a farmworker, and the other half as a designer. After a year I decided to go to Clinterty College where I did a NC. After college I was self employed, working as a lamber, harvest worker etc. As I had left college at the height of the BSE crisis, farmers were more cautious with their money due to the uncertainty in the industry, and those that gave me seasonal work were slow to pay. Having an irregular income forced me to rethink my career choice and so I decided to go back to college to complete an HNC in Construction Management. Those studies and contacts have come in very handy as after working in the construction industry for a few years, I was able to renovate the croft house. I also have an HNC in business studies, and have worked in hospitality management. For several years I home schooled our four children, which was great, but I just don't have the time to do that anymore.'

"Going to the Women in Agriculture meetings was great for networking. Meeting other women doing the same thing is encouraging."

Describe your croft.

'Its just over 100 acres of upland grassland and rough grazing and woodland. I make silage and hay, and—if they grow—turnips. I took over the croft from my parents a few years ago. I have been lucky to get a Young Entrant grant and have expanded the enterprises here, and built a shed and a polycrub.



My parents helped with a flock of sheep and I now have Cheviot mules and Lleyen mules with replacements kept and some lambs going fat. I recently bought 6 pedigree Gascon cattle; 2 in calf cows and 4 in-calf heifers. They are really quiet and easy to handle, which was one of the main reasons for choosing them. I will probably put them to an Aberdeen Angus as the breed itself is not well known, so an Aberdeen Angus cross should make the progeny more saleable initially. I

also have a few goats, which were originally purchased to provide milk for us and also for feeding lambs. Plus I have 30 hens and sell the eggs, and several bee hives for selling honey.

Do you think there are equal opportunities for women and men in agriculture in the UK?

‘Yes if you take on the opportunities. I think if you work hard, folk treat you with respect. Except sometimes from sales people or machinery dealers who tend to address the male, even though I’m the one writing the cheque. I juggle family life of school runs and cooking and washing, with the planning and management of the business, the book keeping and bill paying, the animal and crop



husbandry, nurse and vet... It’s a constant juggling act, where spinning plates is my forte! But because I’m at home, people don’t always perceive what I do each day to be a job. A male farmer in most situations doesn’t have such responsibilities, they can just get on with being a farmer and be viewed as such!

How do you think things are changing in UK agriculture for women?

‘There are more women in agriculture. Looking round at farmers I know, about 50% are female.’

What are the biggest challenges for Scottish farmers at present?

‘Markets. I feel there is a lack of choice. Although

there is a local livestock market, there are a limited number of buyers, and sometimes the differences in prices obtained makes no sense. I try and sell through other outlets, such as selling livestock directly, through FB or to contacts. I’m not worrying about Brexit as I think we have to find solutions and be open to changing the way we farm. It would be great to be in a position of not relying on subsidies, and think of farming in a more business-like way as they do in NZ.’

What are your goals and aims for your business?

‘I’m just doing an ILMP to look at all the enterprises and work out what’s the most profitable. Then I will be able to fine tune it. Having said that, even if the cows aren’t profitable, they will be staying! The polycrub has been a success and I’d like to build another and be more self-sufficient. I’m working on new ideas for alternative income. We also took on a bouncy castle business last year which provides additional income.’

Are you interested in the environment? If so, what measures do you have on the farm to encourage biodiversity?

‘I brought the cows on to help open up the sward and allow wildflowers a chance, which is important for my bees. I also make sure that the woodland is managed to provide additional food for the bees. I am also looking into water harvesting as we are on a private water supply. My biggest environmental issue is plastic waste; I hope a biodegradable wrap is invented soon, as the measures put in place for recycling are costly from both a recycling and logistical perspective.’

What are you particularly proud of in your farm?

‘I’m trying new things and am willing to do things differently.’

Describe yourself in 3 words?

‘Positive.
Pragmatic.
Pernickety!’