

# Case Study: Helen McColm

## Women in Agriculture



### **“Just a farmer’s wife”**

**Helen McColm attends the Farm Advisory Service Wigtownshire Women in Agriculture group. She recently attended a meeting on personal resilience, and we received this article from her afterwards. Here she writes about her involvement in farming and why she now sees herself as more than “just” a farmer’s wife**

When the email “Women in Agriculture Case Studies” request popped into my inbox, I initially deleted it, as I am “just a Farmer’s Wife” and didn’t class myself as being “in agriculture”.

When someone asks what I do, I struggle with a job title – is a “Farmer’s Wife” an acceptable role in 2020? A generation ago, few Farmer’s wives had full or part-time jobs, but it seems to me that the majority now do. After having a variety of part-time jobs over the years I decided to reduce the stress and cut back to being, more or less, just a full-time Farmer’s Wife. I work one day a week doing admin for another farmer and the rest of the time revolves around the needs of our family (both children and parents) and farm (80 suckler cows & flock of pedigree Texel sheep). When a stranger asks me what I do, why does “just a Farmer’s Wife” feel inadequate and a loss of some of my personal identity and self-worth? Many women in agriculture have a keen eye for stock and like being hands-on

on the farm – I’m not one of them! I have never had any desire to be a farmer nor do I know a good sheep from a bad one! My strengths are in organisation and nurturing. I loved bringing up our two children and looking after our home and I do all the farm record keeping, accounts and administration for the business. We don’t employ anyone so I help outside when needed –but only as the extra pair of hands e.g. I am the “auxiliary” in the lambing shed (definitely not the “midwife” - I know my capabilities!). Out with lambing and calving time, I can just about hold the fort for a day or so, to allow hubby to go to a sale or shoot day.

Life is all about choices. Being the daughter of a dairy farmer I knew how tying farming was, but the man I chose to marry happened to be a beef & sheep farmer! I assumed this type of farming would be less tying than dairying. What I didn’t realise was that the majority of stockmen don’t like leaving their stock, regardless whether

they need milked or not! So time away from the farm together is limited, and more often than not, revolves around agriculture shows and sales, holidays together are even rarer! But that's our choice.



Being a Farmer's wife doesn't help the personal finances much (the pay's not great!) but fortunately I'm not a spender, I'm quite happy to "cut my cloth" and in fact I thrive on saving money. Being at home most days allows me time to do numerous cost-saving tasks including; cook meals from scratch, mend boilersuits, negotiate better rates on services & farm expenses, as well as being on call to help outside and collect spare parts, emergency supplies, medicines etc when required. But perhaps most importantly is the mental support a Farmer's wife can offer. Farming can be a lonely environment to work in, so when a farmer's been working outside in the cold and wet, or things are not going as planned; I don't think you can put a price on someone just being there to make a coffee or hot meal, or even just to vent to!

The role of a Farmer's Wife is busy, challenging and sometimes pushes me out of my comfort zone e.g. dealing with cantankerous cattle! But I find it less stressful than trying to juggle paid employment off-farm alongside the demands of a farm and family. It also allows me time to have my own hobbies and interests too – I volunteer with our local branch of RHET (Royal Highland Education Trust) and have started playing the violin again (which had been in its case since my schooldays!)

*"...regardless of its size, a farm business needs teamwork and the Farmer's Wife is a very important part of that team."*

Writing this has been very cathartic for me. I can see that regardless of its size, a farm business needs teamwork and the Farmer's Wife is a very important part of that team. So I am dropping the "just" - I am proud and hopefully will soon be content to be known as "A Farmer's Wife" as I know it is currently the right choice for me and my family.