

Case Study: Patricia Sutherland Women in Agriculture



Patricia Sutherland is a crofter in Caithness, producing soft fruit which she sells at Wick Market. Alongside her husband George they have built up a successful business, selling direct to the consumer, as well as to local B&Bs. Here, she tells us about her croft and her life in farming.

Introduce yourself and tell us about your involvement with farming.

'I grew up on my parents mixed farm (Todholes Farm) with my brother, Ian Campbell. Ian still runs the farm. I farm with my husband George on Roadside Croft, which we took over in June 1986.'

What enterprises do you have on your croft?

'We started off with a couple of cows. George built the original shed and byre with help from family and friends. We grew brassicas for about 10 years before changing to fruit. In 1991 a sales man came to visit us to sell us the idea of growing strawberries in a tunnel. To give you an idea of how unusual the idea was in the early 90's, when I went into the department to ask about crofting grant, I had to talk to three different agricultural officials before someone would even consider coming out to the croft, let alone consider a grant application. We continued to build 7 more tunnels over the next 7 years. In 1998 we also received a H.I.E. Grant for upgrading our irrigation system and for a wooden packing shed.

We also started having market stalls in 1998, in Wick Market Square. I started making preserves in 2003 due to low prices for strawberries from the Co-op. George also built a lean-to packing shed.

We had tried growing strawberries and raspberries in the ground but found it not to be successful. The field tunnels were erected in 2000 with grant from A.B.I.S. Wick Market Traders was also formed. We lost our baker at the market in 2008, and so I, along with my daughter started providing baking alongside our produce every week.'



Describe yourself in 3 words.

'Resilient, Organised, Motivated.'

Describe your croft in numbers.

'Achunabust is 250 acres and we rent an additional 80 acres. We have 30 cows, 2 bulls, 8 replacement heifers, 168 ewes, 2 tups, 60 ewe lambs, 2 dogs and a cat. We also have Berry Croft which is 6 hectares, of which the fruit area is 1 hectare. We have 9 tunnels covered for 12 months and 6 multi-bay tunnels covered for 24 weeks.'

Have you ever come across sexism in farming?

'Yes, especially sales people. I find it very annoying. They normally ask for "the boss", so I tell them they're looking at her and 9 times out of 10, I send them packing!'

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

'The balance of work load between couples is improving, but some partners will have to accept they will need to share and vary their roles depending on the seasons and for changing family commitments.'

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What are the biggest challenges for Scottish farmers at present?

'Brexit, it's the same challenge for all businesses.'

What are your goals and aims for your business?

'I'd like to set up a web site for online sales. We'd like to give customers information about the croft and to sell preserves online. I'd like to retire within the next 10 years. Ideally I'd like to sell the croft to someone who will take it to the next level.'

How important is sustainability and the environment to you?

'It's very important; it's my "Grandberries" future. We have always recycled or reuse when it is possible. The packaging we use for our products has always been recyclable. We have a pond which is full of frog spawn in the spring. We have solar panels to produce electricity and solar thermal panels for hot water.'

What are you particularly proud of in your croft?

'The improvements we have made to the croft over the years.'

What are the constraints to where you are farming?

'The changing weather patterns and Brexit are challenging. There is also a shrinking market place due to less local shops.'

What is your favourite part of farming?

'I love seeing new life, whether it's the animals or plants. The last few years have been, at times, the most rewarding but also the hardest. But it's too easy sometimes to say or listen to "It'll never work" but it's harder to think "If only we had" for the rest of your days.'