

Heading for the hills: City girl who became a proud farmer

Talking to Cora Cooper, one of the latest people to be interviewed for Farmstrong's podcast Blether Together, is the gift that keeps giving.

Host Sarah Stephen, who has all the gravitas gained from her television work for programmes such as Landward but also the practical knowledge of being married to a farmer, talks Cora through her journey from Glasgow girl to life on a 2,044-hectare hill farm at Muirkirk in Ayr.

Cora, who openly admits she had never so much as stepped foot on a farm until she met her husband David, studied law at Glasgow University.

Their romance blossomed, like so many doubtless have over the years, after a chance meeting at the Royal Highland Show.

"At the time, I was doing some PR for Land Rover and was on their stand at the show," recalls Cora.

"I had never been to an agricultural show before and I can remember David walking past and then turning around and coming back to have a chat."

That was back in 2012 and within a couple of months the two of them were living together, then married in 2014 and with the first of their three children arriving in 2015.

"It was something of a whirlwind," laughs Cora.

"I do believe in soulmates, and we had an instant connection. It's frightening to think that if I hadn't taken that job at the Royal Highland and David hadn't decided to turn back on himself, we would never have met."

But meet they did, and Cora talks on Blether Together about a wide range of subjects from their farming system of 3,600 hill ewes to her love of high heels and the fact that is possible to become first generation landowners in your own right.

"I didn't expect to talk so openly when we were recording the podcast. I hope that in talking about my story others can believe more in themselves. It's possible to chart your own path in life without losing your identity or principles.

Coming from a city background I truly value the community and support that comes with rural life. I have experienced real kindness from the local community, in particular a retired farming couple."

The decision to work on the farm came quite early on when Cora's own mother was very poorly going through cancer treatment, and she was juggling trying to visit and care for her, looking after her first son and trying to find childcare to return to work.

"Childcare options in rural areas like ours can be very thin on the ground and it just seemed a natural decision to join David on the farm," explains Cora.

The couple have always made a conscious decision to have "interchangeable roles" so either of them can pick up the reins and take care of the farm as well as their children Lynton, nine, Cassian, seven, and four-year-old Sybilla.

"We worked out pretty quickly that if anything happened to David, I needed to know how to run the farm, and that it was just as important that he could run the house and the family if I was ever out of action," explains Cora, who says a pivotal moment in "thinking of myself as a farmer" was when David insisted they filled out their winning entry for the Farmers Weekly 2023 Sheep Farmer of the Year Award together.

"He said we're a team and that we should fill out the entry together," recalls Cora. "Winning the award was quite a turning point so far as my confidence in calling myself a farmer in my own right went.

"In the early days I remember going to farming meetings and not daring to put my hand up and speak in case anybody laughed at me.



But now I don't care and have been given confidence by all the people who have shown an interest in the way our sheep are delivering when it comes to improving biodiversity in the land. I'm proud to say I'm a farmer.

"As first-generation farmers we have a mortgage to pay and need to make money, but with all the current talk of de-stocking it's important to share the message that a low input system like ours supports the livestock as well as nature.

I've found it fascinating looking back at livestock sale reports from 1892 when there were high stocking rates and better biodiversity. There's a lot to be learned from the traditional methods of those times."

The Cooper's Herdwick and Welsh Mountain ewes live off grazed grass only and are Pasture for Life certified, with no bought-in feed or preserved forage used. 90% of the farm is rough hill, and in a Special Protection Area and Site of Special Scientific Interest with over 800ha of peatland restoration.

All ewes are left to lamb by themselves on the hill. Twin ewes are brought to lamb outside in bye but still with low intervention rates. With limited lower grazing, singles are preferred, and twin-born ewe lambs are never retained for breeding.

"We have been maximising production using regenerative methods and as our sheep numbers have grown so our biodiversity has thrived - producing food while increasing our natural capital," explains Cora.

"Input costs are next to nothing when you think how hardy our ewes and lambs are."

While Cora's journey to the farm is interesting, so is David's. He left home at just 17 - bringing 350 Herdwick and Welsh Mountain ewes with him - to move 450 miles north from his family's tenanted farm on Dartmoor to take on 190ha of rough former coal opencast ground in Scotland.

This first enterprise began in partnership with his family, but David soon had the confidence to go it alone. While Cora jokingly describes that the children have a more active social life than them, they always prioritise time away together as a family and as a couple. Through fencing around 100km - or more than 60 miles - of field boundaries at home David has built up a reputation as "the local fencing contractor" so is regularly engaging with his farming customers.

"The Farmstrong message of 'Be Active' with something you enjoy is vital. For me that is pilates as it helps me bring a bit of calm to a hectic day.

All I need is the space for a mat and joining online pilates, I can adapt the class to how much time I have available that day. For however long that class is, it helps me get out of my own thoughts and provides some clarity to go back with fresh perspective"

The couple watched New Zealand farmer Doug Avery's Farmstrong tour in 2018 and Cora has followed the progress of the organisation through her connection as Vice Chair of Women in Agriculture Scotland and volunteering for RHET Ayrshire & Arran.

"Building up our own farm has meant we can instigate our way of doing things and we prioritise family time," says Cora, who ensures they have two family holidays a year and regular days out.

"The children are only young once and we want to instil in them a love for the farm; not a resentment that it takes up all our life. We make sure that we are efficient with our time when working to give us that flexibility for family.

Even if it's just going down to the village and joining in a community event with them, we prioritise it."



Trio & Tested: Three ways Cora Cooper looks after her wellbeing.

- "The longer I've lived on the farm the more I realise how important it is not to take its beauty for granted," says Cora. "Taking time for myself, noticing simple things in nature like the first call of the curlew, gives me a real feeling of peace and happiness."
- "Helping others is a great way of taking your mind off any problems and getting out and meeting new people. I volunteer for RHET Ayrshire & Arran and am a trustee of a charity providing free recreational experiences after school and at holiday clubs."
- "Putting family first, even if it's just a simple walk together, is so important. Farming can take over your life and David and I are so aware that our children will only be young once."

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