



Farmstrong Scotland and the Scottish Farmer have formed a new partnership, helping promote positive wellbeing for farming and crofting in Scotland. Each month we will bring you a new story, captured by Farmstrong Scotland, offering you a small insight into one farmer or crofter's experience managing their own wellbeing. Each one will touch on one or more of the five wellbeing steps – connect, give, take notice, keeping learning and be active.

There was a very special reason why donations collected at the funeral of Ted Thomson were given to Farmstrong Scotland. His family believe that if the wellbeing movement for farmers and crofters in Scotland had been around when Ted was a younger man it could have made a dramatic difference to life for him and many others of the same generation.

Ted's son Neil Thomson says the wet harvest of 1985 and the "seemingly endless slog against the weather to get the crops in" cast a shadow over his father's mental wellbeing for the rest of his life.

The Thomson family, who farm at Caverton Mill, Kelso, on the Scottish Borders, feel that

Farmstrong's practical tips and tools, plus stories from farmers in a similar situation might have supported their father to deal better with the sight of all the wheat and barley flattened by the rain.

Back in 2018, when New Zealand farmer Doug Avery toured Scotland to talk about his involvement with the Farmstrong movement, Neil was in the audience and - apart from it being drought rather than wet weather that triggered Doug's own battle with mental health - the similarities with his father struck a chord.

"The Farmstrong way of living well to be able to farm well really hit home," explains Neil. "My brother Keith and I were only young when dad was ill, he was still at school and I was in my early 20s away working on a farm in Lincolnshire and it meant coming home to the farm earlier than I had planned.

"If what happened to dad happened now that Farmstrong is around we could all have been on a journey together; we would have had support to work through it as a family rather than each of us feeling very much alone.

"Doug spoke about wellbeing as the whole package, getting that balance with work and family. How farmers spend so much time and money on their livestock and machinery but then don't look after themselves.

"We all know that the farming life is one of highs and lows, where each plus can come with a minus. For example, getting the best price ever for a pen of cattle but then the bull you've paid a lot of money for going lame. Getting a great crop of wheat, but then not selling it for as much as your neighbour.

"If Farmstrong can help anyone to be able to get life into perspective, to see more plusses than minuses, then it's a success in my book. It's so important for us all to improve our wellbeing, whether getting out for a good brisk walk with the family, meeting pals for a pint or simply getting more sleep.

"I knew immediately that launching the movement in Scotland was going to be the right thing to do and when my father died in 2022 it seemed appropriate that his friends who attended the funeral gave very generously to the Farmstrong fund."



Interestingly, to his many friends and neighbours, Ted was the last person any of them could ever imagine being anything but the life and soul of the party.

"Back when my father was first ill, he was in his early 50s and a good businessman - people had a huge amount of time for him," explains Neil.

"He hid his illness and a lot of people had absolutely no idea there was anything wrong with him. But the following year, after that wet harvest, he was sectioned. Eventually he came back to the farm and lived to a good age, but life was never the same again really."

Neil is quick to point out that family friends were "unbelievably brilliant" at the time, supporting his mother and father. However, apart from this close circle, Neil is unsure how many others knew about his father's illness.

"The whole attitude back then was that such things weren't really spoken about," says Neil. "People were wonderful and amazing but all the focus was very much on my father and the practicalities of getting the farm work done. My brother and I were not included in any of the conversations about

what was happening to my father. We're not bitter and twisted about it; but it could have been handled so much better."

Since 2007 Caverton Mill, which Neil farms in partnership with his younger brother Keith, has been part of Quality Meat Scotland's network of monitor farms. They farm around 1,500 mainly arable acres with a vegetable enterprise and also run a herd of 130 suckler cows.

"Farmstrong suggests things like farm open days are good for everybody's wellbeing, getting to catch up and have a talk with others and I agree with that," says Neil, who says he has often wondered if seeing his father's problems made him pursue interests away from the farm, which is something Farmstrong actively encourages.

"I have no time for the mantra of all work and no play and I suppose having seen my father suffer the way he did has made me more determined not to get weighed down on the farm - although it has been tested at times," says Neil.

"Perhaps the most - to some - surprising thing that I have got into over the years was amateur operatics; something I did for over ten years.

"More commonly for this part of the world I enjoy curling, and love skiing. Laterally my involvement with the Border Union Agricultural Society and the Royal Highland & Agricultural Society of Scotland (RHASS) has also been good for my own wellbeing.

"However, most importantly, is my own family and trying to be a good dad to my own three kids."

Neil and his wife, Barbara are due to become grandparents later this year.

"That will be a whole new stage for us," smiles Neil, who is very definite in his belief that children who have been born to the rural way of life must never be put under pressure to follow in the family's farming footsteps.

"Young people feeling obliged to take over a family farm is so unhealthy; they need to follow their own dreams," concludes Neil. "With our own children - and as we go on to be grandparents - the most important thing is that we can all talk openly as a family. Having said that, I'm probably not as good as I'd like to be at doing this! Talking openly just didn't happen back in that wet harvest of 1985 ..."



Trio of tips: Neil Thomson's tried and tested ways of helping his own wellbeing

- Pursue interests away from the farm or croft, for me it's included everything from amateur operatics to curling and skiing.
- Volunteer your time, giving back to organisations such as the Border Union Agricultural Society and the Royal Highland & Agricultural Society of Scotland (RHASS) has been good for my own wellbeing.
- Talk to your children and other family members about their hopes and dreams, it's so much healthier if they can speak openly and don't feel under pressure to follow in the family's farming and crofting footsteps.

TAKE NOTICE

KEEP LEARNING

BE ACTIVE

Farmstrong Scotland Supporters

FARM STRONG
Scotland

www.farmstrongscotland.org.uk