



A background that will ring true with many - having a family member at the helm of the family's farm and feeling somehow rudderless - set Stephen Mackenzie on a remarkable adventure.

Many will remember the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race stopping in Scotland for the first time in its 27-year history last summer. Led by professional skippers, the famous biennial sailing race takes amateur crews on one or more legs of its circumnavigation of the globe and huge crowds gathered to cheer them into Oban last summer.

Farmer Stephen Mackenzie, 57, had more reason than most to welcome the sailors ashore. For the previous November he had waved goodbye to his traditional 700 acres at Auchmore Farm, west of Muir of Ord in Ross-shire, and taken a turn onboard one of the 11 identical vessels. He joined the race in Cape Town, South Africa, and took on legs including Australia, Vietnam, China and finally disembarking and flying, in April 2024, home from Seattle in the United States.

Stephen studied aeronautical engineering at Glasgow University, where he met his wife Sheena who was a maths and physics student and went on to work in renewable energy, and it was a friend from his early career working within engineering before returning to the farm who had suggested the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race.

"I was having a pint with him and shared how I was feeling on the farm, frustrated at a point in life where decisions had been made with business partners about future direction, but had not been followed through. It's not an uncommon situation, just the way it is on so many farms - family dynamic and partnership inertia lead to a cycle of nothing happening," recalls Stephen, who says he immediately put the idea of taking part in the race to the back of his mind.

"But then I had to go to London and was in the Tube when I saw a poster advertising the Clipper and I thought 'this is an omen' and found out more. It's not my proudest moment that I had been offered a place before I told my family. My wife was shocked, worried and - of course - angry with me that there had been no consultation. I had filled in the forms, done the telephone interviews and got accepted before I mentioned it.

"I have never done anything so selfish in my life and have always tried to be honest and open. But, I felt in need of a challenge before I was too old and didn't want to be swayed by anybody else's opinion - I wanted to make my own mind up rather than being influenced by others."

Sheena and the couple's children, 30-year-old Ewan, 28-year-old Donna and 22-year-old Eilidh flew out to Australia to see Stephen sail into port.

It wasn't long into the challenge when the withdrawal of a crew member left him filling the role of ship's engineer, helping the yacht tackle some of the most challenging conditions that Mother Nature can serve up such as 40-foot waves.

"While my wife was worried about the dangers - at one point as we were crossing the North Pacific, we were 500 miles from the nearest other vessel and those on the International Space Station were our nearest neighbours - my concern was the social side of being in a confined space with 18 strangers. But we were all literally in the same boat and I've made some lifelong friendships. Being used to getting up in the night to calve cows and lamb sheep meant the disturbed sleep didn't bother me like it did some of the others. A highlight was having my day on galley duty, cooking for 18 people and feeling right at the heart of everything."

Stephen says while he knew the farm would manage without him, with his brother Donald and wife holding the fort at home, the race was an opportunity for him to test how he would manage without the farm.

"For a lot of farmers their whole identity is tied up with the farm," he explains. "I learnt that I could let go of the farm - to not worry about it because I couldn't do anything about it in the middle of the ocean.



"Instead, I learnt to worry about things that you could influence, like not falling overboard. Basic survival took over, we were all in no doubt that if something went wrong, we would have had it; we would have died. While this in itself is quite frightening, there is something liberating about living in the moment, not worrying about things you can't change like getting the silage in before it rains or a dead calf."

Stephen enjoyed using some of his old skills to take on the role of engineer and the focus it gave him. "The medic kept us well; the cook kept us fed and I kept the engine working so the skipper could read the radar and do his job; taking us in the right direction. While not everybody would want to - or be able to - disappear to the other side of the world and take part in a yacht race, I can see that there are elements of what I have learnt that might help others.

"There is something very liberating in realising you can manage away from the farm and - of course - the farm can manage without you. Also to push yourself to mix with people from different walks of life, not just agriculture, is very healthy. "Farming is a physical job, but getting some other form of exercise can really clear the mind, as can simply just getting off the farm.

All the worry and work will still be there, but you might find that even just taking the odd afternoon away helps you look at it differently and feel more able to cope.

"The often-isolated nature of farming lends itself to farmers having an insular attitude. I believe very strongly that it's vitally important for wellbeing to get hobbies and make some time for them.

"Before the Clipper race, I decided I didn't like what I was becoming and realised I had to change things for the better. I'm not saying everything in the garden is rosy now, but I'm so much more aware and definitely not the same person I was before I went."

Stephen returned to the farm from the engineering career he'd pursued after university in 1994, when him and Sheena were expecting their first child. The 700 acres is made up of 150 acres grass, 100 woodland and the remainder hill and heather. The farm has 70 suckler cows and small pedigree Beef Shorthorn herd, along with 200 ewes. He has always relished work away from the farm, such as an involvement in licensing when Foot and Mouth Disease struck and consultancy projects like renewables and electronic sheep tags, along with mentoring young business people.

The farm has been used as a Climate Change Focus Farm and hosted Royal Highland Education Trust (RHET) visits.

"There's been such a lot in the news recently about farm succession and the Inheritance Tax changes. If one of the children want to come back and take over the farm that's fine but if not, I have independently made the decision that I don't want to be an old man working here. There are plenty of young people out there who would jump at the opportunity and it's a relief to have worked that out for myself and be able to now plan around it. Many want to work on the farm until they draw their dying breath, but I feel pleased and relieved to now be able to openly say that I don't want to."

Stephen has set himself the challenge of passing the practical day skipper test and has plans to go "somewhere warm and charter a yacht" with some of the other crew members from the race.

"I often think how my father would have laughed at me leaving the farm to go off sailing," concludes Stephen.

"But it's so important we don't just become clones of the generations that have gone before. I have learnt that you have to push yourself to be able to finally be yourself, to find your own identity..."

TRIO & TESTED: Three simple wellbeing suggestions from Stephen Mackenzie:

- Don't waste time worrying about things that you can't influence
- Push yourself to mix with people from different walks of life, not just agriculture
- Make time for people, for hobbies and getting off the farm

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