

Robin Mills met Rachel Rich at Glanvilles Wootton



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I haven't moved very far at all so far, having been born and brought up at Goathill, near Milborne Port. That was my family's farm, my grandfather having moved there from near here. When my mum and dad took over the farm we were dairy, with a few sheep, and we had hens; I spent quite a lot of my younger childhood collecting eggs.

I have two older brothers. Alan, the oldest, took over my family's farm after my parents retired, and Clive, my younger brother, became a farm accountant, (which we find quite useful now).

I went to Osborne village school for a short while, then Bishops Caudle. I finished school at St Aldhelms in Sherborne. I didn't enjoy school that much; all I wanted to do was help on the farm. So, every weekend I was joining in with whatever was happening. My dad was an old-school countryman; I loved spending time with him checking the animals, picking nuts from the hedgerows and fruit from the huge garden, and learning about nature, but because I had two older brothers I don't think he saw me as a successor for the farm. My destiny, from his

Rachel Rich

rather traditional view, was to be a farmer's wife, not a farmer.

My parents were very community minded, raising money for charity through open days on the farm, and showing coachloads of kids from inner London schools (many of whom had never seen a cow) round the farm. It seemed a lot easier to do that kind of thing then, with fewer rules and regulations. We would receive huge piles of thankyou letters from the children afterwards.

I started going to Sherborne Young Farmers when I was 11, the youngest age you could go. I did a lot with them; I'd show my own calf at the calf shows, and joined in with everything I could. Young Farmers is sometimes jokingly called a marriage bureau, but it was there I met Tony, and we started dating when we were about 18.

At the time we got married, in 1993, I was working in IT for Plessy's. I left school at 16 and had to work my way up to working with computers. I enjoyed the social side of office work, although I would have preferred an outdoor job. I left work just before Alec, our first baby, arrived in 1995, and I didn't go back. Two years later, Ed, our younger son, arrived.

At that time, here at Round Chimneys Farm the dairy was the main enterprise, typical for a Blackmore Vale, predominantly grassland farm. We also had a lot of pigs then, in buildings dotted around the farm, some surprisingly close to the farmhouse. The farm was being run by Bernard and Jackie, Tony's parents, with Tony as a partner. They, and Tony, were living in the farmhouse, an historic manor house built by John Clavell in about 1590. Although much altered over its life, on one of its notable round chimneys, carved into the stone, can be found a date in the 1590's. Clavell had a colourful life, known as being untrustworthy, and financing his lifestyle as a highwayman. Arrested and sentenced to death, his luck held, and he was freed after an amnesty from Charles 1st. Emigrating to Ireland, he became a reformed and popular citizen, practicing as a doctor and lawyer. In 1630 the house was sold to John Churchill, an ancestor of wartime PM Sir Winston Churchill.

Tony's parents moved into a newly built farmhouse just before our marriage, and I moved into Round Chimneys with Tony, who had never left the house he was brought up in.

The fortunes of pig farming have always been a

rollercoaster, and after one downturn, we decided to get out of pig keeping and concentrate on dairying. We were then able to keep all the young stock from the dairy, rearing them and selling at Candlemas sales in early spring every year at Frome market. We had a good contract supplying milk to Waitrose, and as a multi-generational family farm things were working well.

Tony's parents, Bernard and Jackie, after many years of hard work, were thinking about taking life a bit easier and handing over the reins to Tony and me. The dairy buildings were old and in need of major investment to bring them up to date, and our sons, aged 10 and 12, were too young to decide to dedicate their lives to milking cows. So, as a family we made the very hard decision to sell the dairy. It was everything Tony and his parents had known, and they'd spent most of their lives building it up. We decided to keep all the young stock to rear and sell, and become beef producers, with a small flock of sheep producing fat lambs. After the dairy cows were sold at auction, the farm was for a short while horribly quiet and empty, but we soon began building a herd of beef suckler cows, which now numbers around 100. The cows are mainly British Blues, using Aberdeen Angus bulls as sires.

After the boys were born most of my time was obviously spent looking after them, and for a while I drove the school minibus, and I helped at Buckland Newton School working one-to-one with a special needs child. But at any opportunity I was helping out on the farm. In those days we had a dairyman, so I was only milking occasionally. Over 20 years ago we split off one end of the farmhouse, which was unused, and formed a holiday cottage. As it was listed it was a challenge to get the necessary permissions for the alterations; there was decorating and curtain making to do, and I did all the changeovers. And then about 5 years ago we converted the old buildings, which used to house pigs, and then calves when I first lived here, into accommodation for Tony and I and the boys. That allowed us to move out of the main part of the farmhouse, which is now another holiday let.

Ed helps me with the changeover days for the holiday lets, which are popular. I think what makes a difference is that I always try to show people round the farm, to show them the pride we have in our farm. We have donkeys and goats, and I let guests help lead them in



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or out of their sheds where they spend the night, or if there's calving going on I'll show them that too. Most people come to stay on a farm because they want to be involved in what's going on. We lamb the sheep in December and January, when most people are quiet, so our guests can see what we call "Lambing Live". We are booked up every weekend; many of our guests re-book year after year. The Covid pandemic hit us for a while, particularly for the main house which accommodates larger groups, but mostly the smaller lets kept going.

We've always encouraged the boys to choose their own career path, which might not include the farm. Alec went to college, then worked for an e-commerce business in Yeovil. He picked up web design and marketing skills but was always involved with the farm at busy times. It took him a few years to realise that the farming was what he loved, and 4 years ago decided to work here full time. But we had to find a way to pay him. We looked into

glamping, but in a wet summer, on a wet farm, it didn't seem that good an idea; nor was there sufficient space to increase the beef herd, so between us, during lockdown, Alec and I came up with the idea of the café. We had always sold some of our own beef to local people who would come to the farm to collect it, and the holiday lets were also attracting people. The farm is fairly isolated, so we felt that a café offering coffee, cake and light lunches would be helped by the fact we were already attracting visitors. People come here for the same reason the holiday makers love it. They come to see a real farm at work, with real animals close up, plus Alec's brownies and my flapjacks, and baking by Hannah, Alec's partner.

I enjoy explaining to people about where their food comes from. It takes me back to the coach parties of children coming to my mum and dad's farm. To the ones that want to know about it I can rabbit on for ages. And I do. ,