

FARM PROFILE

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With a passion to farm, young couple Hollie Blockley and George Sturla have built up their business bit by bit. **Emily Ashworth** meets them to find out more.

New entrants build meat box business

Sometimes, as the saying goes, you have to take what you can get, and in this case, it has worked out well for new entrant couple Hollie Blockley and George Sturla.

Both have farming connections, but nothing has been handed to them from family.

Hollie grew up on a beef and sheep farm in Flint, Wales, and George's uncle farms nearby.

But the pair, who live in Holywell, have set out on their own path, which has seen them take on various parcels of land and establish a successful meat box business, Beeches Meats.

Hollie had a small involvement at lambing time at home on-farm, but apart from her horses, was not really involved.

She says: "I went to Cambridge to study psychology. I only got back involved with farming when I met George and I had to come along otherwise I would not see him."

Hollie has recently left

her role in the NHS and, alongside the meat box business, she is a maths tutor. But you could say that she has come full circle.

She says: "I was not enjoying the NHS job, but

I was enjoying the farm so decided to prioritise it."

George, on the other hand, has always wanted to farm, spending much of his childhood with his uncle and grandad on the tractor. After studying



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land management at The Royal Agricultural University, he worked as a surveyor for a while.

He says: "I thought there was no way into farming until I went to university and realised I could rent."

"I also went to New Zealand working as a shepherd and came back and did some contract shepherding."

"But I needed something to support myself and grow my flock. I had 10 sheep which I kept on about 10 acres at home."

He has since worked at KW Feeds as a rep and, in the meantime, built his acreage up slowly.

It began with another four hectares (10 acres) which family friends let him have, in return for some lamb in 2017. But in the last four years, they have secured a further 16ha (40 acres) on a local estate.

The couple now rear beef and sheep and have switched up their processes over the years to suit their farming needs. With each having full-time jobs, flexibility is key.

George says: "We used to rear calves from local dairy farms. We kept some for fattening and some to start our suckler herd."

"Last year we got a pedigree Longhorn, so the goal is for the sucklers to turn into Longhorns eventually."

The end goal is, of course, to farm full-time. They have toyed with the idea of fully renting a farm, but the numbers, they say, do not stack up and they would be leaving themselves at a disadvantage.

Prices

In their area, prices are high. George also loves the idea of a farm shop, but with thoughts on cost, their meat box enterprise serves them well. They focused on lamb to start with.

Hollie says: "We were fed up with fluctuating prices, so one weekend we just thought let's try meat boxes."

"We shared it to Facebook groups and local community groups and the lamb boxes went really well."

"With the beef boxes, we did not know where to start

really, so we had help through Farming Connect and used its mentorship scheme. We had one-to-one sessions and started beef boxes in August this year, with our Aberdeen-Angus crosses. Next year will be our suckler bred ones."

Most boxes are sold in advance – people can send a deposit and reserve.

Whole lamb boxes are sold at £175, including delivery to North Wales, and beef boxes are sold at £140 for 10kg.

It is the business' 21- to 28-day-aged produce which is always something receiving positive comments.

They deliver from Wrexham up to Anglesey and have just launched a website and are hoping to deliver further afield.

Marketing is key too.

Farm facts

- About 24 hectares (60 acres) in various places
- Both work off the farm to be able to fund their farming and meat box venture
- Most stock now goes into their meat box enterprise, with cull ewes, rams and cows going through local markets
- Business runs Lleyn cross ewes and produce own Beltex rams

Customers get information about Hollie and George's story inside the meat boxes, and they are part of the Welsh protected geographical indication scheme, which gives them marketing materials such as recipes to include.

Hollie says: "We are convenient – you do not have to go to a farm shop, people can message me on Facebook and get it delivered to their door."

"There are some misconceptions and people ask me about




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HOLLIE BLOCKLEY

George Sturla and Hollie Blockley have established successful meat box business, Beeches Meats.

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baby lambs. It is a 40kg animal, not a cute little lamb."

Connecting to consumers is something they both enjoy. They even appeared on Channel 5's hit series *On The Farm*.

For the boxes, they use a local family-owned abattoir in Wrexham, which is a butchery too, and cull ewes and rams go through Ruthin, while cattle go through Mold.

George says: "They are family-owned and so grateful for your business. Marts are still important, even though we do not use them for everything. As a farming community, we cannot do without them."

The couple run around 120 Lleyn cross ewes, using a Beltex ram. George has a small flock of Beltex and produces his own rams.

About 90 per cent are lambed outside, which suits them given their extra workloads, and the Beltex is a good lamber, says George.

Hollie also has her own flock of her beloved Blue Texels; most of which run to her when she enters the field and they all have names.

She says: "The boys I do let go into the meat boxes, but with the girls, I have sold a few privately. It is more of a hobby now I do not have horses."

Most cattle are Aberdeen-Angus crosses, which the couple have reared themselves, and they have been put to a Parthenaise bull using artificial insemination.

This has partly been down to their easy calving traits. They calve outside from May.

Genetics

George says: "I got a Longhorn and now have three, so gradually want to increase those genes. The meat is known for its taste."

"Being native bred they do well from forage too. But previously we



Some of Hollie Blockley and George Sturla's Highland and Longhorn cattle.

would have been producing cattle for the market to be sold as stores."

Hollie and George have reseeded with red clover, so when cattle are inside in winter, they are just on red clover silage with barley which comes from just five miles away.

All the fields have also been soil tested and a lot need lime spreading on so they can then look at rotational grazing.

Both have made their situation work, with sheer determination and by adapting their business, but they have also had support.

George says: "We have very good neighbours. The amount of times

I have rang someone up and asked for this or that.

"I would always say to new entrants that if your neighbour asks for help, never say no because you will always need that help back."

Security

The hardest thing, they say, is getting more land and then the security with that. There is also the logistical side of things – moving from selling store cattle to finishing cattle means a break in cashflow and they have to manage a steady stream of lamb and beef all year round to meet customer needs.

But they enjoy it. Hollie says: "It makes you feel proud. You also feel a bit more appreciated when people eating your produce say thank you."

"They send you photos and it is almost like they know you and become connected with the farm."

"I have a bit more of an outsider view and it felt frustrating with so much fluctuation."

"The meat boxes mean we can plan more for the future, because we are not dictated by prices. Ultimately, George and I have jobs off-farm and we run our farm and meat box business alongside this."



The ewe flock consists of mainly Lleyn crosses.