Highland cattle on a dairy farm in Scotland. Photograph: ArtistGNDphotography/Getty Images

The long read

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'Farming is a dirty word now': the woman helping farmers navigate a grim, uncertain future

In a moment of crisis for the industry, Heather Wildman tours the country helping farmers face up to the toughest of questions – not just about the future of their business, but about their family, their identity and even their mortality

By Bella Bathurst
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In a hotel conference room in Shropshire last winter, a group of people clustered by the coffee machine. Others were just coming in, undoing scarves and coats, most in branded sweatshirts or fleece gilets. Families scattered and bunched, finding others they knew, holding their cups awkwardly and sharing out croissants. Heather Wildman, the host, moved from group to group, making introductions: an arable contractor to a vineyard manager, a poultry farmer to a cheesemaker. The mood was subdued and a little apprehensive. Everyone stood by the edges of the room, watching the food and the door.

Wildman positioned herself at the front, offered more tea, thanked everyone for taking the time, knew it was difficult with production schedules and school runs. She is 50, with a ready, open smile. Her introduction was friendly, practised, self-deprecating. She explained what the day would hold and made clear that she was not from the ministry, the Environment Agency or HMRC, that she was not an accountant, a lawyer, a snitch or a nark. “None of that,” she said. “I’m a farmer, and I help people.”

Wildman is one of a very rare British breed. She describes herself as a succession facilitator – a role combining professional consultancy, financial advice, legal mediation, succession planning and life coaching to people working in agriculture: a farm-business counsellor, if you like. She works to unknot the snags of identity and inheritance, using group meetings and individual sessions to help farmers work out the easy questions ("Who's doing the soil sampling?") and the hard ones ("Do your children really want to inherit this business?").

In the UK, Wildman's job has only really existed for the past 15 years, and there are just a handful of others doing the same work. When things went wrong on a farm in the past, lawyers dealt with the legal parts, accountants dealt with the finances and bureaucrats dealt with the regulations, but no one dealt with the people. As Wildman explains, she meets individuals who are on the brink of selling up/divorcing/shooting themselves/shooting each other, sits them down in a neutral space and gets them to talk about things they never usually talk about. "Heather," she quoted one of her previous clients telling her, "the only way we'd ever talk about any of this succession stuff is if we're doing 70 down the dual carriageway and the central locking is on."

As she pointed out, farming isn't the same as other jobs. It is the only profession in which everything is everything: history, identity, livelihood, direction, purpose, culture, money, sustenance, site of work and place of rest, unfinished business and last resort. The average age of a British farmer is 59; the hold of the older generation is seen as so deadlocked that in 2019, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, began offering lump-sum payments to older farmers to persuade them to hurry up and get out. But retirement is a tricky subject: how exactly do you retire from your own home? According to 2010 research by Matt Lobley at Exeter University, 84% of UK farms are family businesses – meaning that at least two generations of the same family are involved. Of the 688 farmers Lobley surveyed, 21% expected never to retire and 27% of those aged over 65 had not yet identified any successor.

But if the workforce is static, the global economy is not. The result is that much of British farming no longer makes financial sense. The price of food is low but the cost of land is high. So at the smaller end, a traditional farm with land and assets worth, say, £1.8m, may be struggling to sell what it produces – lamb, wheat, beef – at break-even point, let alone take a bare-bones income for those who live on it. Which almost certainly means that someone in the family is out there propping up the finances with another job, and may also mean that for the next generation, the prospect of working 24/7 to produce potatoes or apples or sausages or milk for a truculent public and an underpaying supermarket chain doesn't seem all that alluring.

In the conference room, Wildman outlined the issues that most often caused problems: dividing the farm unequally between children, making a will, arranging

power of attorney, figuring out where the future is and how they might get there undamaged. Then she put questions, subtle and broad, to her audience: in whose image is the farm made and shaped? What – or rather, who – is the retirement plan? What happens if that retirement plan is meant to be funded by the pedigree herd but something like BSE or foot and mouth happens again?

A pause. “Think about it. What is your reputation as a farmer? Honestly now, would you want to work for you?”

A scatter of rueful laughter.

“How many of you feel excited about the future of farming?” she asked.

No one in the room raised their hand.

“Farming is famously miserable,” Wildman said. “Even when it’s good, we look miserable.” She looked round. “So who stole the fun out of it?”

The session widened out. Some of the attenders started to talk, drawn by the evident sympathy in the room. A son in his 30s, recently returned from the city to the old farm: “You cannot underestimate the dullness of Shropshire compared with London.” A woman who the following week would be handing back the keys to a tenancy she farmed for 20 years: “I’ll be leaving with two tractors. And pride.” A man in his 80s, still in overalls: “If you’re wanting money and holidays from this, you shouldn’t be in farming.”

Brian, in his late-70s, solemn, haggard, wearing a shirt so often washed the collar had frilled like puritan lace, explained that he ran a cider apple orchard, some sheep and an agroforestry business with a daughter (who is married) and a son (who is not). At present, the son was managing the forestry and the daughter was running the sheep, though it was clear that they, their partners and their children all had divergent ideas about the farm’s future. Brian understood that he was the only thing holding the whole place together. If he handed it over to them, resigned his role as peacekeeper and retired, the farm would be on the market within months.

Wildman went to the whiteboard and drew a series of boxes, labelling each one: farm, land, outbuildings, cottages, any other properties/businesses. The final box said “debt”. Then, with Brian providing the answers, she filled in a rough value for each: £700,000 for the farmhouse and two of the outbuildings, £1.2m for the land, £350,000 and £270,000 for the cottages, maybe £400,000-£600,000 for other properties and assets. She waited, her hand raised over the last box.

“Three,” said Brian, wiping his hand over his mouth.

£3m, wrote Wildman under debt. She looked at the others, inviting them to speak.

“What do you want?” asked a farmer at the other end of the room.

“I want my children to get on,” said Brian.

“And if that’s not possible?”

Brian looked down at the table. “To keep farming myself.”

“Is that realistic?”

Wildman waited, and then said: “This isn’t easy. These are all really hard conversations. Sometimes, you think the elephant in the room is: ‘What if we sell?’ But really it’s: ‘What happens if we don’t sell?’”

She pointed to the words written down one side of the whiteboard. “So what are your dreams? What do you want to have or to be? Are you ready to change?” A pause. And then finally, “If you’re not enjoying what you do, then why are you doing it?”

Heather Wildman comes from a farming family in Cumbria. She has one brother, who took on the farm, near the market town of Cockermouth, and she left school at 15. “The farm was never offered to me,” she told me. “Not bitter.” Instead, she went to work in a bank, married a dairy farmer, moved to Galloway in south-west Scotland, had two kids, worked in contract farming for a while, and then, when her kids had grown up, in 2012 spent a year on a Nuffield scholarship in Australia, researching succession and change in agriculture.

Heather Wildman at home.Photograph: Bella Bathurst

When Wildman returned to Scotland, she met up with some of her farming contemporaries. “I was buzzing, positive, and I went to catch up with people I hadn’t seen for 25 years. I was shocked. They were tired, they were broken, they were depressed, miserable.” Many had remained there in the fields, penned into farming jobs they didn’t want, finding it impossible to say what they meant.

So now, nearly a decade after her return, Wildman travels all over the UK, whirling between farm visits and group sessions in the “fun bus”, the mobile home she uses as portable office and accommodation. Over time, she has developed an ability to gauge the emotional temperature of a room. Much of her skill lies in her almost musical sense of timing; knowing the right moments to ask the incendiary questions, sensing the tender spots and inflammations, finding the best way to begin the healing. As one farmer who knows Wildman’s work well puts it: “Sometimes you can’t get it right, but the real trick is not to get it wrong. Heather’s a pleasure to watch when she’s playing a room.”

After public meetings like the one in the Shropshire hotel, Wildman holds private family sessions. These are two-hour sit-downs, always held at the farm and involving as many members of the family as can attend. There, over tea and snacks, Wildman gets them to talk about all the never-spoken high-stakes stuff, the slammed doors and unasked questions: who carries on only because carrying on seems less exhausting than stopping, who secretly wants to just take the money and run far, far away? Who only keeps going for fear of waking the ancestral gods, the cold generations who ploughed in the old lesson: however bad things get, never sell, never sell, never sell?

In late July, I spent three days shadowing Wildman on some of her farm visits – nine farms, all in the Scottish Borders, all sizes, all family businesses. These meetings were part of a series of scheduled farm-business health checks. (Wildman’s work is supported by a charitable fund, and this service is offered for free. I was allowed to tag along on the condition that I would anonymise the names of the families she met.)

Most of the farms Wildman visited had stock (dairies or beef cattle, sheep), and most had also diversified (architecture, glamping, wind turbines). All of them were determined to keep farming. In this, they were unusual. Just at that moment, everyone in southern Scotland seemed to know of a farm for sale, or was next door to a farm about to come up for sale, or had considered maybe selling some of their own least-good fields. “It’s been the talk of all the shows,” as one local agent put it.

Farmers who would never have thought of selling five years ago are now having that conversation. Anecdotally, the most common reason is succession. The older generation – those in their 70s and 80s – are retiring or dying, and the next generation – those in their 40s and 50s who have worked on-farm for decades – are concluding that it might be nice to get out more.

A farm sale, any farm sale, is a big deal. Sell your flat and you're selling a place to sleep and eat. Sell your farm, and from one day to the next you'll have lost your job, your home and your identity. Often the reasons for selling are personal (no successors, siblings who want to be paid out, health issues). Sometimes it's global (cancellation of a big contract, rising repayment debt, red tape). Prices for beef and sheep have held up unexpectedly well post-Brexit, but there is the sense of an ending. Interest rates are going up, but the price of milk is going down. Again. Not all kinds of farming receive subsidies, but beef, sheep and dairy (the mainstays of agriculture in the Scottish Borders) do. The basic payment scheme, the main form of government financial support available to farmers, is being phased out, which could push many into putting the farm on the market. And cumulatively, the consensus is that many farmers are done. Done with the insistence that food must always be cheaper, done with the debt, done with the effort of pushing a boulder that just keeps getting heavier up a hill that just keeps getting steeper.

But the picture is mixed. If there is movement in some local areas, then it's business as usual in others. Around 20-25% of all UK farm sales go through Savills estate agency. It and its competitors remain adamant that nationally there is no significant change in either the overall acreage coming to market or the numbers of individual farms up for sale. The only change, it says, is in who the buyers are. In the past, at least half of all farm sales were farmer to farmer. Now, depending on the area, farmers who might once have been interested are vastly outbid by people "from off".

Those farms in the Scottish Borders coming up for sale will probably be snapped up by corporates and investors buying land to plant trees for carbon offsetting, hobby farmers who have made their money elsewhere and now want to see if they can make their ideas grow, private individuals who fancy a grouse moor, land-bankers hoping for the chance of residential planning permission or future wind turbines. Often when large acreages have been released, the people buying have been investors treating land as an asset class: forestry, development, sporting estates, buyers who won't ever get closer than a real-estate video shot by a drone. Very few, if any, will physically farm the land themselves. Even if they do retain its agricultural use, they will almost certainly either let it out or contract the work to others.

Doug Linton is a cowman through and through. He may only be 10 years old, but he is already as dedicated to the health, welfare, breed genetics and championship potential of his parents' pedigree dairy herd as they are. In the Scottish Borders, the Lintons are well known; their farm's frequent wins at agricultural shows boost the price they can charge for calves, and the profile of the farm.

At teatime on a windy summer's day, Doug stood in the farm kitchen flipping through pictures on his mother's phone, reeling off names, dates, shows, dams, sires, traits: ayrshire heifer, heifer, heifer, top-of-class holstein, holstein from slightly different

angle, Highland show, ayrshire, ayrshire, holstein, holstein, holstein, Jersey, back of Jersey, side of Jersey, front of Jersey, trophy, rosette, Doug grinning, collie, collie, collie, collie glaring at pissed-off-looking cow, top-of-class holstein. The display was rounded off with 97 eyelash-by-eyelash closeups of Taylor, the champion ayrshire calf they were taking to the Telford dairy meet.

In the Lintons' kitchen, in addition to various school awards ("Excellence in Reciting Scots Poetry"), there were cows on the mugs and sheep on the walls, milk churns on the windowsill and bulls on the plates. Pushed to the back of the kitchen table there was even an old Waddington board game, Elite Cow, and when Wildman and I both refused milk in our coffee, Doug's mother, Kelly, said reproachfully: "That's not much of an advert for us, is it?"

Wildman pulled the laptop out of her bag and started on her questionnaire. She knows the family socially, and Kelly, who is in her early 30s, had already been to one of her group meetings, and the mood was informal, cheery. For the first few minutes, they were catching up on news and family ("Oh, you should have seen her back in the day! This is Wild Heather you're sitting beside") while Doug fretted from foot to foot, afire with impatience to be back out on the hill.

Doug's father, Iain, came in and sat in the corner leaning against the wall, a man in his late 40s with exhausted eyes and gale-force hair. Beside him, Doug scrolled back to one of the ayrshires. "She's a bit grumpy the day, but she's mine." He flipped forwards and back between several dozen identical portraits of a friesian calf. "Right from when she was born."

A farmer driving a herd of cows on the Isle of Mull. Photograph: Rachel Husband/Alamy

“Why don’t you fetch her in?” Iain said.

Dougie turned and hurtled from the room. WE. NEVER. STOP, said the back of his Celtic shirt.

The room went quiet. “Ten minutes,” Iain warned Kelly. “That’s all.”

Kelly sat facing him, a plate of freshly made bread and jam between them. She, like her son, was ready, fizzing, urgent. There were things she needed to say, and Wildman’s presence made it easier to say them.

What had she made of the previous succession meeting, Wildman asked.

“Oh, that was great, I loved that!” said Kelly. “You make a difficult, divisive topic into something …”

“Worse?” said Wildman.

“No! No. I mean, fun.”

Wildman started going through her questionnaire until she got to the bit about wills and power of attorney.

“Do you have a will?” Wildman asked Iain.

Iain closed his eyes. “Aye,” he said, “but it’s old. Done before my dad passed away.”

He knew he ought to update it but he and his mother had just spent six years dealing with local solicitors over a straightforward farm inheritance from father to son, an experience that had done nothing to strengthen his appetite for lawyers, lawyers’ fees or legal paperwork. Besides, he said, he’d not got time for all that succession stuff when he was “away dealing with the big things”.

“But if you die,” said Kelly, looking at him, “that’s not like a small thing, is it?” She turned back to Wildman. “And we’re not married.”

“Do you want to be married?”

“Yes!” said Kelly.

A quivering silence. Iain’s face was far down in his mug of tea. “Aye, well. A hundred per cent of divorces start with a marriage.”

“God,” Kelly snorted, “I’ve only heard that a thousand times.”

Wildman explained the urgency of settling the succession issue. If Iain was to die tomorrow, his two brothers would have an equal claim to the farm and its assets.

Which meant that Kelly would probably end up having to fight Doug's cause in court. It could be years of expensive uncertainty. At the moment, Kelly did the accounts and the admin, while Iain – with Doug and some part-time help – did most of the physical farming, bringing the cows in for milking twice a day, feeding and watering them in winter. But if something were to happen to either of them, that would change overnight.

There had been moments recently when the family had thought about selling. Things were difficult, which was not unusual; things are often difficult in farming. What was different this time was that there was very little prospect of things getting less difficult in the near and far future. Around the time of Doug's birth, Kelly had a health scare and Iain knew then that if it ever came down to a choice between family or farm, family came first. The farm's continued existence depended on both adults remaining fit and able to work. Iain and Kelly had talked about either reducing the size of the herd or putting the farm on the market. With their cows winning championships at national and regional shows, they could charge a premium for any stock they sold. But even so, selling up was not some far-distant question on an impossible horizon.

At the end of a couple of hours, Kelly was only just getting started. There was so much to figure out. More importantly, Iain had stayed for the whole session.

Back outside in the sun and the wind, Doug had gone to fetch his calf.

"Take pictures!" he shouted to me, flinging his arms around her neck. The calf – possibly the most well documented calf in Scotland – stared blandly into the lens.

"Can we do the others?" Doug was halfway to the shed even as Wildman was racing through hasty goodbyes and starting up the fun bus, already almost late for the next appointment.

Two sessions on, the following day, we were 30 miles from Kelso, south of Edinburgh in the Scottish Borders, on a first visit to David and Sara Gemmell, their daughter Erin, and two one-eyed dogs who raced joyfully out of the house to greet Wildman's terrier, Pickle. David is in his late 60s and until recently farmed with his three brothers, each of them managing their own land but running as a four-way business partnership – "an astonishing brotherhood", as Erin puts it.

The Gemmells have a son and two daughters. Their son Patrick has learning difficulties and though he's still involved with the farm, it will be one of his sisters who makes the choice about whether to take it on. One sister, Lorna, is a vet at a practice in Kelso with a partner who plans to take a farm tenancy in Sutherland. The other, Erin, 32, had just got back from travelling and was helping out at the farm, buttering lunchtime buns and listening with half an ear. Once Wildman had started on the questionnaire, Erin brought over the plate and sat down at the other end of the table,

facing her father. The current of love and respect between the three of them ran almost at the edge of audibility in the room, but in Erin there was a restlessness, too, a fitting offhand briskness when it came to questions about her ongoing role in the farm.

David talked about his heart attack last year. He was out with Patrick and leaning over a gate to pull up a bag of feed when he felt his chest clutch. When he straightened up, he saw his own emergency in his son's eyes. It took him, and the rest of the family, a while to recover.

Wildman asked Erin what would happen if either parent was injured or ill, or, in time, was to "go doolally".

Erin got up again. "I don't want to think about that." She is not sure what she wants to do next; her degree is in psychology and she doesn't really see farming as part of her future. And anyway, she said, sitting back down: "The farm will always be here."

Wind turbines near Douglas, Scotland. Photograph: Andy Sutton/Alamy

Over the next couple of days that same idea would keep recurring, that the farm rolls always on, too big to fail, too old to die. Several people I met with Wildman talked of the farm as a character, as though these places at the end of all roads were not merely clods of land but entities charged with destiny and force, each with its individual culture, benign or autocratic, abundant or blighted. Which means in turn that over time each farm begins to behave like the nation state it has become, taken by its own

internal history and grudges, its diplomatic crises and border skirmishes, its sovereign debts and old contaminations. Bring a group of farmers together in a room and their farms swagger in before them, each individual taken by the place and landmarked, shaken and branded with a reset hipbone or a cow-kicked shin.

“Sometimes,” Erin said, not looking at anyone, “I think, what am I doing here?”

The Gemmells talked of farming’s fall in public favour, its 30-year hurtle from high-status centre-of-the-village to the current media image of farmers as semi-criminal benefit scroungers who hate the nature they harrow.

“Farming’s just about a dirty word now,” said David. “If I was starting again, I don’t know if I’d be a farmer. It’s a hard life.”

Neither parent was pressuring Erin to take this place on. Through hard work they had built it up from not much, but if it all had to be sold because no one wanted it, then so be it. Sara and David would rather three happy children than one child roped to a millstone.

“You do what you do,” said David, “and when you’re gone, you’re gone.”

“What do you two want?” asked Wildman.

Sara looked at David, who looked back, giving her some kind of invisible authorisation to speak.

“To cut back the stock a bit,” she said. “Cut back on our borrowings.”

“I want to do all this better,” said David. “But with less stock.”

Wildman went through the figures with them; assets, debts, balance. The farm along the road from which they rent land was under offer, meaning they would probably lose the use of it. If the Gemmells lost that grazing, it might be a good moment to cut back, they thought – though, “there’s maybe that bit of reluctance about selling the cows”, said Sara, glancing again at David. An understatement. They love their cows; selling even a portion of the herd would be a wrench. But when Wildman had rendered down all the numbers – buildings, machinery, stock, land – to one cold figure, something significant started to move, a kind of vertigo in their eyes. They were richer than they thought, and freer – and more tired.

“When was your last holiday?” asked Wildman.

“We had a night off a few months ago,” said Sara.

David laughed softly at himself. “It’s in farming’s DNA,” he said. “You’re still not working hard enough. You’re never working hard enough.”

A while back, the Gemmells had hosted a visit for residents at the community where Patrick lives and had enjoyed the experience of seeing the animals through new eyes. Wildman mentioned therapy farms, school groups, forest schools – all the potential for diversity, diversification, new income.

Erin was still in her chair, listening. A lot of this information was new to her. As Wildman tapped through the questions, Erin said quietly to me, “That was silly. The idea that the farm will always be here is almost childish; that wasn’t what I meant. You think because it’s always been there, it’s always going to be there. But I know that’s not real. It can all change so quickly.”

By the end of the morning’s meeting there was an action plan, a series of undertakings of varying urgency. As Wildman left, Sara and David came out to say goodbye. As they did so, Erin slipped past them to the back of the pickup where the sheepdog was sleeping. She stroked his ears and buried her face in his fur.

At the end of the third day, Wildman and I stopped for a catchup. She talked about the things that linked all the nine farms we’d just been to. “I love my job!” she said, her face alight. She is energised by the skill and instinct in what she does, but also by its importance in people’s lives. Each of the families had their own succession challenges and the farm its own sense of health or foreboding. In every kitchen there was a huge clock staring from the wall, and home baking, and phones that buzzed the whole time like drones. And in every single one, it was not possible to pull land apart from love. All of those farmers do what they do for money, for home, but most of all for each other.

Some version of family farming – dysfunctional or harmonious, exhausted or exploitative – has shaped Britain for 7,000 years. The land worked the people and the people worked the land. But does that subcutaneous bond between a parcel of land and a person have a value, or just a market value? And if you take that away – take the family farm away – what does Britain look like then?

Some names and identifying details have been changed

https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/09/farming-is-a-dirty-word-now-the-woman-helping-farmers-navigate-a-grim-uncertain-future