

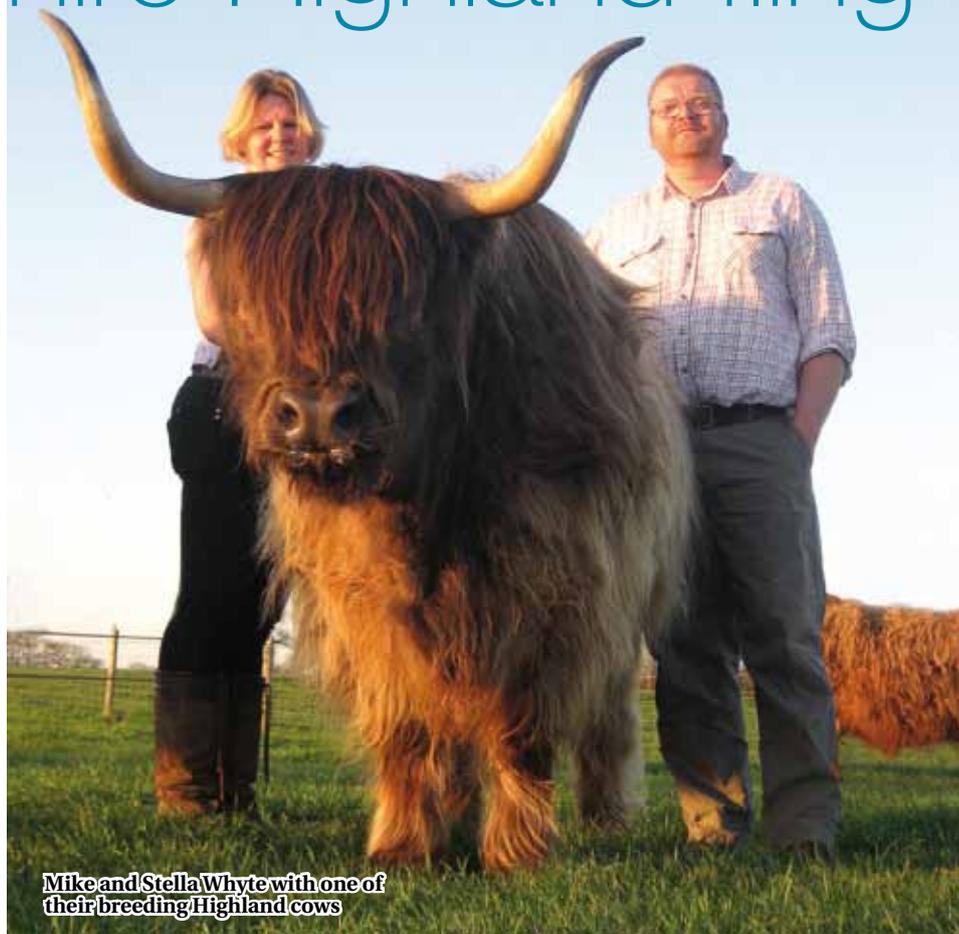
## A Shropshire Highland fling

It's been 40 years since *The Good Life* hit our screens, but more recent TV series such as *River Cottage*, *Jimmy's Farm* and *A Farmer's Life for Me* have moved small scale farming into the media mainstream and many have caught the smallholding bug. Mike and Stella Whyte explain why sharing the smallholding experience can be as rewarding as living the lifestyle

**F**ifteen years ago, Mike and Stella Whyte moved to their three-acre smallholding in North Shropshire with the plan to live the rural dream, grow a few vegetables and fulfil Stella's lifelong ambition to keep a horse. "We never imagined that our quiet life would actually turn into a business opportunity," Mike explains "but the animals came in 'two by two' and what began as rearing a lamb for the freezer gradually developed into a full-scale small-farming enterprise and more."

In the early days, with a house to renovate and plans for a family, the horse was soon put on hold. But the dilapidated pig shed, two tired hen houses, small orchard and a couple of acres of rough grazing that came with the property needed attention too, and that led to the acquisition of two lambs from a local farmer to grow for the freezer.

"After a couple of years, we decided that sheep weren't really for us though," says Stella. "They were always getting caught up in the hedges and we found them lacking in



Mike and Stella Whyte with one of their breeding Highland cows

personality!" The lambs did, however, provide Mike with the chance to further develop his butchery skills as the Whyte's elected to butcher at home.

But having tasted their first homegrown meat there could be no going back and what could be better than lamb, but beef. "We had enough room for two cows," says Mike. "But, if we were going to try cows, as a Scot there was only one breed for me – Highland cattle." Research revealed that the Highland was an extremely hardy, long-lived breed, which produced

excellent beef off poor grazing and calved well, as well as sporting those attractive long coats and magnificent horns.

The Whyte's first Highland heifer and an accompanying beef calf were purchased from an Oswestry based breeder in 2001, and the couple's love affair with these elegant bovines began. The old piggery was converted into winter accommodation as the heavy clay soils meant that the paddocks would otherwise quickly become poached (trodden up) in the wetter months.



Scratching a Highland cow on her favourite spot



Getting to know the 'fold' of Highland cows

But they didn't stop there. "We realised that the calf would take two years to reach slaughter weight," Stella recalls, "so, in the meantime, we put the heifer into calf and purchased two weaners to fatten in the orchard to give us some pork for the freezer until the beef was ready."

From here, the whole venture gained momentum and grew rapidly with some chickens completing the picture. By now the couple had two daughters, and a hobby and lifestyle that tied them to home didn't seem particularly restrictive. "The numbers of Highland cows grew to three, then four, as we bought in more stock and set about breeding the rest," explains Mike. "Before you know it, you are hooked and are renting grazing, designing purpose-built sheds, and acquiring tractors and trailers!"

The Tartan Dragon fold (the collective noun for Highland cattle) now totals eight breeding cows and their followers plus their own bull, so there may be 20 plus cattle on the by now 25-acre farm at any one time, along with the free-range traditional crossbreed pigs. The sheep and chickens are managed in conjunction with some local friends.

Mike and Stella still look to satisfy the family's meat requirements with the best home produce, but selling livestock and meat locally is an inevitable spin-off. "People have become as interested in food traceability and animal welfare as we are, so being able to come and meet our animals when purchasing meat from the gate is a real draw," explains Stella. "And, of course, our children have grown up understanding where their meat comes from, the importance of treating livestock well and why wasting food is not acceptable."

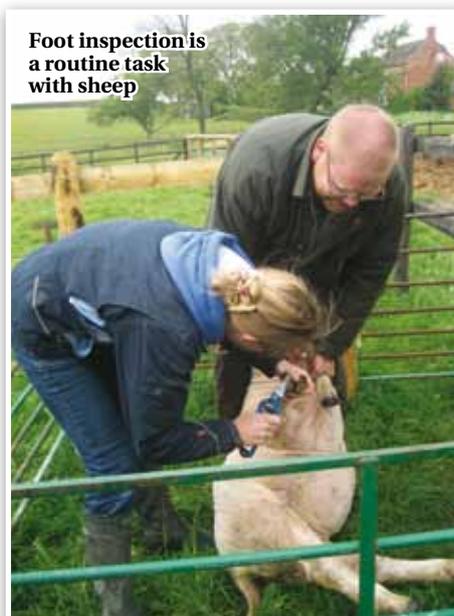
The couple openly admit to having made nearly every mistake there is in rearing their cattle, pigs, sheep and chickens over the years but, as Stella reflects: "With plenty of reading, advice from farming friends and, of course, the invaluable hands-on experience, you find your way through it all. Nothing beats living life with the seasons and putting your own homebred, reared and butchered produce on the table. We always tell guests who remark how delicious it is that it's the 'love' they can taste!"

It was the couple's many friends who simply couldn't comprehend how they find the time to remain in full-time employment (they both work for a leading environmental consultancy in Cheshire) while running a smallholding with a young family in tow that provided the catalyst for their latest venture; Introduction to Smallholding training days.

The day-long courses run mostly on a Saturday and cover all aspects of smallholding: from the practicalities, legislation and paperwork involved in getting set up, through



**Stella and Mike  
Whyte with one of  
their weaners.  
Broc the labrador  
weighs-up a  
possible lunch!**



**Foot inspection is  
a routine task  
with sheep**



**Pork with apples... mmmm**

acquiring and caring for chickens, pigs, sheep and cattle and the equipment needed to dealing with abattoirs and butchers, and marketing the produce. "The emphasis is on how you can operate a successful smallholding but still keep the day job," says Mike.

"Running the courses is great fun," he continues. "We get such a diverse range of people on the day, from doctors to foster-carers, people with 20 acres that they don't know what to do with and couples who live in cities but harbour the smallholding dream."

The day begins with tea and homemade cakes while everyone introduces themselves and share their smallholding aspirations and what they hope to get out of the day. "This insight is crucial for me," explains Mike, "as I am very much minded that it is their day and, although we have a rough schedule, we do like to address people's specific interests."

"It's great to see everyone mixing and comparing experiences and dreams as the day goes on," adds Stella. "There's lots of laughter as we sit down together for the hot Highland beef lunch that will give everyone some sustenance for the pig and sheep handling sessions that follow."

"There are also tractors to try out for those who are interested, and we walk round the cows and calves while discussing grassland management and fencing techniques, before heading back to the barn for more tea and questions. Everyone takes home a comprehensive set of notes, but it's important that people go away with all their questions answered," concludes Mike.

As well as the introductory courses, Tartan Dragon also offers more specialist courses in cattle keeping and pig butchery.

**Details of all courses, plus information on dates, fees and gift vouchers can be found at: [www.tartandragon.co.uk](http://www.tartandragon.co.uk)**