



Mike and Stella Whyte with one of their long horned Highlands

Living the Good Life

It's been 40 years since *The Good Life* was on our screens, hailing the virtues of self sufficiency. One couple who are living the dream, and helping others realise theirs, are Mike and Stella Whyte.

EVER dreamed of upping sticks and moving to a rural idyll, growing your own veggies and rearing your own beasts? With the economy in freefall, job opportunities scarce and food and fuel prices soaring, the idea of switching to a self sufficient rural lifestyle seems the perfect escape.

The fantasy is fuelled by memories of TV show *The Good Life* and modern docu-shows like *River Cottage*, *Jimmy's Farm* and *A Farmer's Life for Me*.

The reality, as anyone who's done it will tell you, is that it takes an immense amount of hard work to become self sufficient. It's also a desperate gamble

to throw in the day job and throw your lot in with a new venture.

Mike Whyte and wife Stella have come up with an alternative - living the good life through their at-home operation near Wem, called Tartan Dragon, and keeping the 9-5 at the same time. ►

Fifteen years ago, when they acquired their new home in Northwood and three acre smallholding, they had no grand vision. They both work at an environmental consultancy over the border in Cheshire and liked the idea of growing a few vegetables and perhaps keeping a horse.

It's fair to say that their ideas have developed into something rather more significant over time.

Mike takes up the story.

"When we moved in there was a lot to do. There was a house to renovate for starters, and plans for a family. Stella's dream of a horse was soon put on hold.

"There was a dilapidated pig shed, two tired hen houses, a small orchard and a couple of acres of rough grazing that came with the property. It was a lot to take on."

The first step towards rural living was to buy 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," laughs Stella. "They were always getting caught up in the hedges and we found them lacking in personality!"

Those lambs did, however, provide Mike with the chance to develop his butchery skills, as the Whytes elected to butcher at home.

Having tasted their first homegrown meat there could be no going back. Next on the menu was beef.

"We had enough room for two cows," says Mike, a proud Scot. "But, if we were going to try cows, 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 Whytes' 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

Inspecting a Highland cow at Tartan Dragon



poached in the wetter months.

But they didn't stop there. Recalls Stella: "We realised that the calf would take two years to reach slaughter weight 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, so 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

Never be afraid to try something new. Remember, amateurs built the ark; professionals built the Titanic.



Mike Whyte with his pigs



An apple a day...



Trimming a sheep's hooves at Tartan

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,” he added.

The principle that guides the Whytes is summed up in a quote Mike posts on his website: ““Never be afraid to try something new. Remember, amateurs built the ark; professionals built the Titanic.” ■

find the time to remain in full-time employment 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 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



A happy pig

Tartan Dragon also offer 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