

AS we restart our Women in Agriculture features, there are few names better to kick us off, than current Women in Agriculture Scotland chairman, Heather Wildman.

A succession and resilience business consultant explains she loves her job, and has a reputation for 'soft skills with a sledgehammer', and saving and kicking asses, she has decades worth of industry experience both in the UK and overseas. "other words I'm getting old!"

We found some time in her packed schedule to talk about what she's been up to, how she got to where she is, and what her plans for the future are.

Can you tell us a bit about your background?

I was brought up on my parents beef and sheep family farm in the lake district, leaving school at 15 I entered full time employment and I also became actively involved in Young Farmers. My life is and always has been involved in and around farming

I've lived in Scotland since 1999, I have two daughters – Charlotte, who's 21 and at uni in Newcastle, and Nicola who is 20 and working in childcare.

How has your career played out?

I started work with the Nat West Bank in Cockermouth when I was 15 and moved into sales with Delaval then became an area manager for First Milk and in 2012 I was working for Dairy Co when I could feel myself getting frustrated, so I applied for a Nuffield Farming Scholarship. That changed my life – I travelled all over the world, Chile, Peru, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Canada & America and met a huge number of people and experienced all sorts of businesses and sectors. I've been locked in a prison, sailed up the Amazon and mustered cattle in Montana all before Yellowstone was a thing!

How did that change your career?

In 2013 I had the ambition to become 'the saviour of the Scottish dairy industry' – I've never been one for setting myself small challenges – and things snowballed from there.

I started the concept of the Scottish Dairy Hub. I wanted to build a one stop shop that would allow people to access the industry, create a directory, who companies were, and what they had to offer. I broke the industry down into four sectors. I took the concept to the Scottish Government in 2013, and they said they would provide 50% of the funding I needed if I found the rest.

Dairy Co and the NFU got involved, and long story short, The Scottish Dairy Hub was born and I lost my involvement but I am still incredibly proud of this.

What happened then?

I knew I had to leave my job at Dairy Co, I felt lost. In hindsight it was a good thing I didn't get the Dairy Hub job, but at the time it was a really difficult situation. It hit me hard and affected me mentally.

In 2014 I was down and in a dark place. A friend from the industry called and said people were worried about me, and we discussed setting myself goals.

That made me think, and I realised had a lot to offer and I wanted to be recognised as an industry specialist. I wrote it all down, and I still have the piece of paper.

When I lost the Dairy Hub, the industry support was incredible, and I think I realised that my value was my ability to network, so I looked at where I wanted that to take me.

I took on several industry franchises and set up Saviour Associates in 2014.

How has your work progressed?

Initially, my work was all in the dairy sector, but I'm now involved in many sectors – the NHS, big estates all over the UK and overseas, land agents, accountants – I work with all sorts of people and businesses.

It's the people that matter, regardless of job, sector, age or background.

A lot of people try to jazz things up and use a lot of technical jargon, but I find keeping things simple works best.

What do you tell your clients?

I always say I look at vision, communication, and collaboration. It doesn't matter if I'm talking to a young farmer or a huge corporation, I ask the same of them. It's really simple, and when I keep to that message, it's amazing how people respond and buy into it.

Then no matter how small it is, do something every day to achieve your goal.

What have you learned over the years?

Through my travels, I've learned that businesses large or small face challenges and can fail, but failure is not the end it's what you learn and how you react following this. When I work for my clients, I challenge them and I ask questions which possibly make them uncomfortable, but it's what my clients want.

I might be a bit marmite, and I'm not a yes person.

I'm good at seeing strengths and opportunities in others. I can help to drive and enable positive changes!

What are you proud of?

That neither of my daughters are shrinking violets, which I love and am very proud of. They're both farming daft, I love to see them interested in the industry.

I wrote the SAYFC Cultivating Leaders, programme, and that's one of my proudest achievements. I wish 24-year-old Heather had had something like that. We've had approx. eight groups go through the programme now, and they've all been awesome.

I realised in 2016 that succession was becoming more of an issue and at that point few people seemed to be addressing the people side of it, so after a study trip to see what other countries were doing on the topic, I came back and wrote the Saviours guide to Succession, and that side of my work has just grown and grown.

It's a huge issue, and my goal is to help people before they have problems. It doesn't always have to be about conflict resolution. Many people navigate succession successfully.

My ambition is to make the topic accessible and break down barriers. I give people the tools they need. It's probably one of the biggest areas I work in, now.

How do you approach day to day life?

At full speed and with the breaks off....I was told to never say no, but I've come to realise that sometimes you must.

Life is not always about work, it's also about people and making time to live, be happy and content.

What have been your biggest challenges?

As it was for a lot of people, COVID was a massive learning curve. It challenged my business, but in hindsight it's made it stronger.

The period before starting Saviour Associates wasn't an easy one.

If someone had said to me ten years ago, that I would be where I am now, I would never have believed them. I've realised though, that tough times don't last – tough people do! At the end of the day, it's not about what happens to you, it's about how you adapt.

Can you tell us about your involvement in Women in Agriculture Scotland?

I was involved in the task force and spoke at one of the conferences, and felt strongly about the set up, so I joined the committee.

Women in Agriculture have a huge role to play. Women are very good at sensing what's said as well as what's not said. You need a diverse mix of people in companies and on committees— age, gender, experience, it's all important.

I've been chairman of Women in Ag since 2022. You only get a year, and it's going so quickly. We've got some really exciting things coming up.

Overcoming diversity in Agriculture is the theme of this year's Highland Show Breakfast meeting 8.30am 22nd June, and we have some real inspirational stories for people to hear.

Do you have any spare time? How do you like to spend it?

During COVID, we got into e-bikes, and I love walking and swimming, too.

I like to find time to read, socialise, and travel. We've just bought a property in Cumbria – which was a lifetime's ambition

I just love spending time with people. I love getting back to the shows, and it's well known that I enjoy a glass of red wine or two!

I also do a lot of voluntary work. I'm an RHS director, and do mentoring and coaching for the Young Farmers, Tesco Futures, and Nuffield.

I also love to help out on my partner Fergus' dairy farm. He has 1200 cows, milking three times a day.

What are your plans for the future?

I'm doing the Institute of Agricultural Managers (IAgrM) Leadership Development Programme. It's been amazing. Challenging, but amazing.

Overall, I want to be viable, fit for purpose, and on point. I always want to ensure I leave a positive legacy, that's driving positive change.

My work has busy spells where I'm working seven days a week, then quieter times. My ambition is to manage this to a robust three-day working week.

Do you have any final words?

Have lots of fun. For me, everything I've had, I want to give back. I want to keep well and be a positive, active, role model.

You must put your hands up and admit when something has gone wrong. You're only human.

You don't have to get it all right the first time, people make mistakes.

I want to hand Women in Ag over in a stronger place, and make sure it has a good, secure future, that exciting and ambitious industry that women want to be involved in.

I want people to aspire to work in our industry – never feel like your voice isn't worth hearing.

If you really want something, go for it it'll be worth the risk.

If I could give my younger self some advice, it would be that you're better than you think – and just fucking do it!