**Owl Farm Podcast transcript**

Hi, I'm Will Evans. Welcome to Ahead of the Field, from NFU Mutual, where we aim to bring you farming stories from around the country, updates on what's happening in the industry, and relevant help and advice. Today we're going to be talking to Hayley Adkins and Ian Kemp, who run Owl Farm in Cardigan, West Wales. We'll hear their diversification story, how they keep a large number of different rare breed animals, and the challenges they have running a small farm.

Welcome to you both, and thank you so much for joining us.

Ian: Hello.

Hayley: Thank you.

Will: Let's start with telling us a bit about the farm. What have you got going on there?

Ian: Well, primarily we're a holiday cottage business. We have five beautiful Welsh stone cottages that we let out to paying guests. But when we bought the farm it came with 48 acres. So when you've got 48 acres you've got to do something with it. We were never going to farm it commercially. Some of your listeners might not like to hear, but we are vegetarian. So we're not going to start rearing animals for meat. So we decided to move into rare breeds, help with some rare breed conservation, that sort of thing.

Will: Fantastic. So what kind of animals have you got there, Haley?

Hayley: Well, once we decided we were going to have rare breeds, as we were in Wales, we firstly decided we ought to have some Welsh sheep. So we got some Balwens and some Badger Face sheep. When we started looking into rare breeds a bit more, we found quite a number of the sheep breeds and goat breeds that are vulnerable. So we decided we'd add some more. And we've gone down the lines now of having a variety of sheep and goats. So we've got things like (inaudible) , Soay, (inaudible) , Wensleydales, various rare breed sheep. And we've got Bagots, Golden Guernsey goats as well.

Will: Wow. Wow. That's awesome. So lots of different breeds of animals. Which is your favourite?

Hayley: Oh, that's a (crosstalk) .

Ian: (crosstalk) .

Will: We put you on the spot.

Ian: We haven't even mentioned the pigs and the ponies and the alpacas and all the other things we've got. Yeah.

Hayley: I don't think we're allowed favourites.

Ian: No, we're not allowed favourites.

Will: All right. Which is the most challenging to look after?

Hayley: Originally, I would say probably the Bagot goats.

Ian: Yes.

Will: Yes. I thought you might say the goats.

Hayley: Just for one reason.

Ian: Yeah. The Bagots can be quite semi- feral. So they took some getting used to. They can-

Hayley: They can jump.

Ian: They can jump very high. We now have deer fencing around about 11 acres of our farm because of (crosstalk) .

Will: Yeah. Well, I suppose it makes it fun. So what are the challenges of keeping so many animals essentially as pets?

Hayley: I think probably for us, because we have so many different breeds, it's the stock rotation and separation that is a big challenge for us, especially obviously keeping different rams away from ewes of other breeds and that kind of thing. So lots of enclosures to keep different animals separate. I suppose, obviously, as they are pets, like you say essentially, there's financial challenges that go with that. They're not really used commercially, and exacerbated this year by our particularly wet and long winter, things like the additional feed costs. Yeah. That's probably the main challenges, I would say.

Ian: Yeah, yeah.

Will: You mentioned the fact that neither of you are from a farming background, and not from that part of the country either. What brought you over there to Cardigan? Was it something you always dreamt of, or?

Ian: Well, Haley loves the outdoors. She's always loved her horses. And she'd worked in an office for-

Hayley: 20 years.

Ian: 20 years. And she'd basically come home and watch Escape From The Country again and again. And we got to the point where I said, " Look, if that's the sort of thing you want to do, we'd better get on and do it before we're too old." So here we are. Why west Wales? I always came to Wales as a child on holiday, because my mother's Welsh. So it was one of the places we thought of looking first, and just fell lucky on finding the right place.

Will: So tell me how the holiday let work, in combination with the animals.

Hayley: Well, exceptionally well, really. We found that it's now pretty much our USP. A lot of people come to us, especially to interact with the animals. We encouraged guests to meet them, and we do guided tours. So lots of people around the farm where we can answer their questions, and they take photos of themselves and their children with the animals. And we've also got quite a large following on social media. We do regular posts about the animals. So a lot of our guests kind of follow us longer than just their holiday because they kind of make friends with the animals and then like to keep in touch.

Will: That's lovely. And I suppose, at the moment, I don't want to sort of talk about COVID because everyone's sick of it, but there has been a lot of talk about the importance of connecting with the outdoors and the importance of wellness. And a lot of people stuck in their house for so many months wanting to reconnect with nature. I suppose that fits in really well with that as well, doesn't it?

Hayley: It does, very much so as. As animal lovers we're keen that people that don't know much about animals have the chance to get out and actually meet some. And they also see their individual personalities and so on that they have. Obviously we can walk around the farm and enjoy the fresh air and the outside space. And whilst we don't try and indoctrinate people and turn them vegetarian, we do believe that maybe if they actually see the animals are more than just a food product, then whilst they're here they get that opportunity. And maybe then they'll think more about animal welfare and where their food comes from when they go back home.

Will: Sure. Are the animals used commercially at all? Like do you use the wool or anything like that off the sheep?

Ian: Because the animals attract the guests, that obviously has a financial impact being that we have more guests come, but that's incredibly hard to quantify what that return is. We do sell the occasional lamb or kid to other rare breed programs. And as you say, we've found that a number of the rare breeds do have exceptionally good fleece. So we have started producing specialist knitting yarns, just in small batches. We sell those to guests and Haley sets up a little Etsy shop where she sells a few things like that.

Will: Fantastic.

Ian: She's actually started doing weaving classes and things like that for guests, because we've got so much fleece around she decided to have a go at weaving and got quite good at it. So we now run little classes in traditional (inaudible) .

Hayley: People were always asking what we did with the fleece, so it was nice to be able to do something that they can join in with and maybe take something home that they've made while they're here.

Will: (inaudible) . Fantastic. So given the focus on people having to holiday in the UK this year, and I know we don't really know how it's all going to pan out over the next few months, but how are bookings looking at the moment?

Ian: We have a lot of regular customers, a lot of people who return each year. So sort of the summer season's pretty much booked up well in advance anyway, but this year we're simply finding that that summer season is just growing exponentially in both directions. So if people are allowed to come, we'll be pretty much full from Easter to November. Rather than just the June, July, August, it's sort of spreading across the year. We have got people already booking for 2022. I think they think that maybe things will be a bit more normal by then. So they're starting to book well in advance. They're worried that everywhere will be booked up, I think. But at the moment we just don't know when people will be able to come or not.

Will: No, no. Well, God, I hope things are back to normal by 2022. So you mentioned social media and how you use that as a way of connecting with people. What other ways do you use to market and promote the business?

Ian: We've got a very good local agent. So basically they do all the work for us. They get almost all our initial bookings. And then after that it's returned customers, recommendations from people who've been. And people who find us far as social media, we don't do any advertising as such. We don't need to any more.

Will: No. So where can people find you on social media? What are your handles on the-

Hayley: Facebook.com/owlfarmcottages, and you'll see us and our many posts of our weird and wonderful creatures.

Will: Okay. So as well as the diversification with the animals and the holiday lets, as you've mentioned you've got the rest of the land. What do you farm on that?

Hayley: The majority of the land is really grazing for the animals. We have in the past been able to cut some hay in good years. Obviously it depends on the weather. But the other thing that we have done, we set aside when we got here a large six acre field, we planted a traditional orchard in that. So over a 100 heritage apple trees with a view to possible cider making in the future.

Will: Fantastic.

Hayley: The other thing that we did also was to create a large wetland wildlife reserve area on the farm to attract birds and other wildlife. We've set up a bird hide tied up there for the visitors to use so that they can enjoy that area with us as well.

Will: Fantastic. So what kind of improvements in the biodiversity have you seen since you did that? Have you seen dramatically more birds and animals and insects?

Hayley: The insect population, I would say, is the most impressive. The amount of dragonflies and damselflies and different butterflies and things like that on the farm are really good.

Ian: We were pretty good here for that sort of thing anyway, because the hedges had been let overgrow for so many years before we got here, and we've sort of cut that back as little as we can.

Hayley: Yeah. There's lots of rough pasture around the farm and sort of natural wetland and springs.

Ian: So we have quite a lot of barn owls, tawny owls, buzzards, kites, all sorts of things who are residents on the farm.

Hayley: And quite a few wading birds as well.

Ian: Yeah. Yeah.

Will: That's really exciting. We actually put a couple of owl boxes up at the start of this year on our farm. And the other day I was going past and there were signs of owl in there, feathers and things like that. So my daughters are extremely excited.

Hayley: Excellent.

Ian: We put two or three boxes up, but they don't really seem keen on them here, because we've so many big old oak trees that I think they're quite happy where they are.

Will: They've got enough. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So what are the challenges of running a smaller farm, from your perspective?

Ian: I think mainly the fact that it's just the two of us, which means that there's just not enough hours in the day sometimes to get everything done. And I suppose the biggest challenge of being a small farm is that you don't have the infrastructure. We don't have tractors, we don't have big plant machinery. So every time we need something done that's more than just bare hands and brute force, we need to hire in contractors. And obviously that has a financial implication.

Will: Yeah. No sick days either, I guess, is there?

Ian: No. No, Haley's been manfully getting about the place with the broken ankle for about the last three weeks.

Will: Oh no. Oh right. Okay. Dear me.

Hayley: (inaudible) .

Ian: Yeah.

Will: Yeah.

Ian: So no, we don't stop for much. No.

Will: No, no. Okay. So your business is very much about connecting those who come to stay with you with the animals and the kind of farming that you do. Is that something you're passionate about, that kind of education and connection aspect?

Hayley: Very, very much so. I think the more that people can learn about the animals whilst they're here, and share. They're always surprised, for example, that a sheep isn't just a sheep, and that they come in different shapes, sizes, colors. The same with the goats. I mean, we've got everything from Pygmy goats through to Angora goats and Anglo- Nubians and the Bagots and the Golden Guernseys and things. I think just the diversity of things like that, that people are really surprised by. Similarly with the apple orchard, we've got over 50 odd varieties. And I think people think of going to Tesco's and there's perhaps six apples to choose from. They come here and they read each tree has its variety recorded on it. And I think just things like that, that we can help, in some ways, to educate people a little more about what they eat and what's out there. It's really very interesting for us as well-

Ian: Yeah, because we're learning as we go. We're not from the countryside originally. We've learnt as we've gone along.

Hayley: No, I was primarily a horse person. So the livestock has been a nice learning curve since we've been here.

Will: So what are the most common questions that you get asked by guests? Because I guess a lot of them will be people staying with you who've never encountered animals before. So what kind things do they ask?

Ian: The main thing is, " What do you do with them?" So, " You don't send them to market, so what are they for? What do you use them for?" And obviously we can answer about the fleece with some of the breeds. But others, we just have to say, " Because we like them. Basically, I mean, things like the Bagot goats. I mean, they're critically endangered. The reason they're critically endangered is that pretty useless for meat, and they're pretty useless for milk, so people don't keep them. But they're beautiful creatures. And if people don't keep them, then they'll be lost forever. So it's just educating people to the fact that that's the sort of thing people like us are doing. Not necessarily for an end goal other than to keep the species alive, like with elephants and tigers.

Will: Yeah. It's been nice to see people been having those conversations over the last few years about rare breeds and traditional British breeds. I know the Rare Breed Survival Trust obviously does loads of work in that area. And a lot more people are ... Whereas sort of 20, 30 years ago, everybody was focused on the continental breeds and things like that. Over the last, well, noticeably over the last few years, I've seen a lot more conversations and people looking to those breeds. I mean, I guess that's quite a heartening thing-

Ian: Not wanting to lose them (crosstalk) .

Will: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Well, a really important part of our heritage, aren't they? Rural heritage.

Ian: Yeah. Yeah.

Will: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Okay. So what's next for the farm and your business? What have you got planned?

Ian: More of the same as regard the animals. Try to keep the breeding in check. We've only got so much room. And with the emphasis well and truly moving towards staycations by the look of it, I think our main focus will be on the cottages, making sure that we're providing the best rental cottage experience we can. And hopefully bring in some money to pay for all these animals that we (crosstalk) .

Will: Yeah. Is there any animal or breed of animal that you haven't got yet that you would like? Is there anything that you've sort of got your eye on?

Hayley: You talk about Clydesdale, that’s…

Ian: Yeah, I'd quite like a Clydesdale. But...

Will: Okay. Well, I can put you in touch with someone who breeds them if you want.

Ian: Yeah. I'm not quite sure we've really got the space.

Hayley: What's held us back so far is-

Ian: Because Haley does love her horses, and it would be nice to help a breed that's endangered like that.

Hayley: I'll stick with my fell ponies.

Will: Fantastic. All right. Well, thank you both very much for your time.

That's it from this edition of Ahead of the Field. From me, Will Evans, and everyone at NFU Mutual, it's goodbye until the next episode.