



The young ones

Farming is a great career for young people, as deputy editor Rosie Mullender found out when she headed to Scotland to meet some of the Co-op's dairy farmers



Some of the team at Lakehead farm: Murray Waugh, Grant Walker, Daniel Henderson and Richard Walker

Feeling jealous of a cow is a weird experience. But as Grant Walker strokes Bo Peep's head and looks into her big brown eyes, I can't help feeling a bit envious - even though she's a 107st Holstein Friesian.

Grant, 25, and his brother Richard, 27, have invited me up to their farm in Dumfries to watch them at work and to learn about the Co-op's Farming Pioneers Programme. Launched in April, it aims to help young people who work in agriculture, and who supply the Co-op with meat and dairy, to develop their skills and businesses. Hopefully, it'll encourage younger people into the industry, too - and bust a few myths along the way.

When I meet Grant and Richard, my first thought is that they don't look much like farmers. Forget Old MacDonald - there isn't a grey sideburn or flat cap in sight. These guys are young, hard-working and tech-savvy, with busy social lives and a friendly charm that's even

extended to their herd. In fact, as Grant smiles at her, Bo Peep seems almost as smitten as I am...

Rewarding work

The average age of the team of six staff at Lakehead Farm, which provides the Co-op with over 5 million litres of fresh milk a year, is just 24. But nationwide your average dairy farmer is a less-sprightly 58, and getting younger people to see farming as a great career move can be tricky. At best, it's not considered a modern job choice; at worst, it's seen as lonely, dirty and a bit too much like hard work. So, is that true?

'There are a lot of negative things written about agriculture, and yes, the perception is that it's an old-fashioned, hard-working job,' Richard says. 'But farming's fun and rewarding, and offers a huge amount of job satisfaction. It'll always need young people to keep it going. We just need to get that message out there.'

Their farm uses an impressive amount of technology to help it >

PHOTOGRAPHY: SUSAN BELL

meet the producer

run smoothly. From sensors that check calves are being fed the right amount, to automatic grooming brushes that start spinning when a cow who fancies a massage wanders over, its methods are very modern – but Richard and Grant come from a traditional farming family.

'We were born and bred here,' Richard says, nodding towards the farm's 619 acres of lovely Scottish countryside. 'Our grandpa bought the farm in 1972, then Dad farmed it for 25 years. He passed away in 1999, and after I graduated in civil engineering and Grant got his degree in agriculture, we decided to come home. Now, along with our mum, we're business partners.'

Pioneering schemes

The boys are keen to see more young people coming into the

'Farming's actually fun and rewarding, and offers a huge amount of job satisfaction'



Keeping it in the family: it's not just the farm that's been going strong for years – the herd is pedigree, with cows passing their names down to their daughters

industry, so they take part in local projects that offer children hands-on farm experience. 'Some of our staff have come to us that way,' Grant says. 'It's important to us to show young people that our farm is a good place to work.'

The Walkers are excited to join the Co-op's Farming Pioneers Programme, too. 'It'll encourage young people to see agriculture as a career, as well as giving Co-op suppliers like us the tools we need to improve,' Richard says. 'We'll get to meet other farmers and share our experiences. We're looking forward to getting involved. It's great to see a retailer showing interest in projects like this – not just in selling products.'

Balancing act

It's obvious the brothers really enjoy farming, but there must be downsides? After all, a cow doesn't know if you need a lie-in.

'When you've had a big night and you've got 50 problems to tackle as soon as you wake up, you do sometimes think, "Why do I do this?"' Grant laughs. 'You've got to really love it, or you'd never get out of bed.' And love it they do. As well as working hard, both

have busy social lives, including playing rugby for their local team.

Grant is single, while Richard is dating a lawyer – but day to day, the most important females in their lives are the herd. Each cow is related to one reared by the brothers' grandpa – but although they grew up with the cows, they still have favourites. 'Everyone likes Bo Peep the best,' Richard says, scratching her ears as she's led outside for our photoshoot. 'She's got a nice shiny coat and a great personality – she never causes us any problems.' Except when we ask her very nicely to pose for the camera – it seems she'd rather go and wander round the yard. Until Grant starts stroking her nose, that is. Not such a silly cow after all... ■



THE CO-OP SAYS...



'We're excited about our Farming Pioneers Programme, ensuring these young farmers are given the chance to flourish. We've got some fantastic young people working with us – proving farming is an exciting industry.' **Harriet Wilson**, agricultural development manager, dairy



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Richard Walker

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