

The future is IN THEIR HANDS



A reflection from Alison Irwin, Kirriemuir Suffolks

Mixing young children with lambing over the New Year period, and year round sheep husbandry leads to a potent mixture of happy family chaos. But it is a chaos that if managed correctly, can lead to a lifetime love of farming and help to preserve a way of life for generations to come!

I have grown up with sheep. My earliest memories are of being out with my father from about 4 years of age to help him tend his mixed commercial flock of horned mountain ewes and Suffolk cross ewes. Dosing, dipping, shearing, tailing, lambing- it all came as second nature. So when my own children arrived it was with great pleasure that I

watched them begin to show the same interest that I had taken, from a very early stage in their lives. By the time they were able to walk and wear a pair of wellies, they were 'helping out' wherever possible. By this time however, we also had a flock of Pedigree Suffolk Sheep and at a very early age, the boys were introduced to all aspects of the sheep breeding year. They were alongside us as embryo transplants, Aling, lambing, and all the other activities of the normal sheep year were carried out. They learned quickly and very soon, many of the tasks became second nature to them. Our youngest, in particular, showed a very keen interest, wanting to examine Semen samples



Michael, Diane, Marie and Patricia Jennings with their Champion Ram, Athenry Show 1990s



Trevor Geelan, Loughrynn Suffolks with his Champion Shearling Ram, Dromod Show



Evan & Owen Hillary,
Ballymacward Suffolks



Harry Graham, Westside Flock



Dillon Killilea, Allstar Flock 2011
Novice Ewe Lamb winner NSC



Emma Burke Deburca Flock

under the microscope at AI time and he loved seeing the miracle of new life arriving on the farm. Feeding bottles to pet lambs were a highlight for him. It made his Grandfather very proud to see him show such a keen interest.

This same young man spent his birthday money at 8 years of age, on 2 X-bred commercial ewes and hasn't looked back since. He purchased 2 Pedigree Suffolks – a ewe lamb and an in-lamb hogget in 2019. He registered his Flock in 2020 with the Suffolk Sheep Society and also became a Junior member of the West of Ireland Registered Pedigree Suffolk Sheep Breeders Club. He then went on the sell a fine Ram lamb at the Club Premier Sale 2020 in Roscommon.

The Suffolk Sheep Society are actively encouraging new Youth (up to 16 years) and Young Adult (up to 26 years) members, by heavily subsidising their membership fees. In 2017, a new dual phase Suffolk Youth Programme was developed and the

inaugural Suffolk Youth Championships were held in November of that year. The National Suffolk Youth Championship is now an annual event although Covid restrictions in 2020 meant that the event could not take place. Entrants are tested on a range of areas requiring knowledge and skills areas such as medicine & welfare, stock judging, farm maintenance, shepherding, lambing and the history of the Society. The Society's foresight in encouraging these young breeders will help to play a vital role in encouraging aspiring young breeders into an industry which is currently sadly lacking in youth.

According to the CSO, Agriculture typically has an aging workforce as well as a disconnect between farm produce and the consumer. In 2016, around one quarter of farm holders in Ireland were over 65 and over. Just 5% of people were aged less than 35 years. Agriculture depends on the next generation of schoolchildren seeing it as an attractive career option.



Nicole Geelan Loughrynn Suffolks



Harry Graham Westside Flock at the Premier Sale Blessington 2020



3 generations Lismurtagh Flock



Clodagh Geelan. Loughrynn Suffolks



Dylan Hughes with some of the Lankhill Stock

Development of knowledge, talent & skill and active participation, are key to retaining youth membership and to furthering the security of the industry., It is therefore of vital importance that young people are actively encouraged to get involved in the industry or perhaps consider farming/food production as a career.

We, as the current generation of breeders, hold the responsibility of inspiring these prospective young breeders to get involved and reap the rewards that dedication to the breed along with knowledge and hard work can bring.

As a Club, we have many members who have grown up alongside their parent's Suffolk Flocks and today, these same children, now adults, are actively running their own Flocks and playing major roles within the Club over the past number of years. None more so than Michael & Marie Jennings, (Ballygarris) Tom, Mary & Trevor Burke (Deburca), Gerry & Dillon Killilea (Carragh & Allstar) & Coote & Trevor Geelan (Loughrynn) who have enjoyed numerous successes at both National and local level over the years. This is testament to how education and encouragement can help to retain youth within the industry.

Youth members, Dillon Killilea and Harry Graham, currently have their own flocks registered with the Suffolk Sheep Society and the Club, while Dylan Hughes and Emma Burke attend all Club sales contributing their time and helping out wherever possible at these events. The Club holds a Young Handler competition each year at our Club Championships which is very often the first chance these aspiring young farmers get, to show off their stock handling skills and ovine knowledge. It is possible for these young handlers to go forward to compete in the National Youth Championships if they so wish.

Youth members have enjoyed many successes over the years with Dillon Killilea winning the Novice Class at the South of Ireland Premier Show and Sale in 2011.

With continuing encouragement and guidance to our current youth members and the up-coming generation, the future of the West of Ireland Registered Pedigree Suffolk Sheep Breeders Club's future looks bright and will be in safe hands for the next 50 years to come.