

Interview

# “We’re entering a new phase of our lives”

For many, abandoning the city for a rural retreat became a happy by-product of lockdowns. But this beautiful sheep station owned by veteran newsreader Mark Ferguson and his wife, Jayne, is far from a hobby. We talk to the couple about their changing family dynamic and rekindling childhood passions.

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## Interview

Six-year-old Freddy the giant chocolate Labrador is certainly no farm dog – despite being born on a country property. In fact, he appears mortified to find himself three hours south-west of his comfortable urban digs in Paddington, Sydney, with nothing but rolling hills and the occasional distant sheep to stare at. Not that he'd see much if he left his spot in front of the fireplace to explore outside this pretty renovated former shearers' cottage. Even at 9am, there's a blanket of misty white fog, or maybe stubborn low cloud, blocking any view of the stunning rural vista. So Freddy does as any self-respecting pet would do – he focuses on *The Weekly's* crew, who have affectionate hands and a propensity to drop morsels of morning tea pastry.

"He's a city dog," concedes the familiar baritone voice of his owner, veteran television journalist and newsreader Mark Ferguson. He and his media executive wife of 27 years, Jayne, have owned this beautiful 750-hectare piece of rustic heaven, Hazeldean, in the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales since 2015. Previously owned by five generations of the same Irish immigrant family, it features a large woolshed, sheep yards, machinery sheds, ramshackle workers' cottages, and a four-bedroom homestead built in the late 1800s that the Fergusons modernised four years ago.

"It always interests people that this place is not a typical weekender," says Jayne, who grew up in the equally picturesque Peak District in England. When in work mode, she sits on the board of Commonwealth Games Australia, but right now she's at her rustic kitchen table wearing jeans and clutching a mug of English Breakfast tea. "The first question everyone asks when I say we have a farm is how often we get down here, like we just come to hang out at the house. But that was not the dream for Mark. He wanted this place with a view to connecting back to something that

was important to him growing up – agriculture. For him, it had to be a working farm first and foremost."

Indeed, hearing Mark chat buoyantly about sheep farming seems a far cry from the 6pm hard news we are all used to him reporting on the Seven Network. By the time the fog lifts at 11am, all present have learned the farm has 3000 ewes (specifically Merinos), that 'spring lambs' are a romantic but incorrect notion (ideally, they're born in winter so they're weaned off milk and onto fattening grass when the weather warms), and that thanks to the farm's handful of rams who are set to work on Valentine's Day each year, his stock has doubled to 6000. To the layfolk present, he sounds like an expert.

"Yeah, possibly to city people," he laughs, "but if a real farmer was here, he'd tell you I didn't know very much at all. Farming is a very complex

business and you are dealing with the impact of everything from the climate to international politics. It's amazing how your view of the weather report changes once you've got a property and you're running livestock."

### A lifelong affair

"Deep down I've always been a country boy," Mark explains. "I grew up in Tamworth and in my teens the only thing I wanted to do was be a country vet and stay in my hometown. But to be a vet you have to do physics, chemistry and 3 Unit maths, which I chose but failed. On the other hand, if it was written down, like history and English, I was pretty good. In Year 12 my teachers came to me and said, 'Mark, this vet science thing ain't gonna happen. Have you thought about journalism?' That's the way my career went, but that kid who wanted to look after livestock has always been there."

**"This place is not a typical weekender ... it had to be a working farm first and foremost."**

*—Jayne Ferguson*

**Mark and Jayne have filled their four-bedroom homestead, which was originally built in the 1800s and recently renovated, with furniture and items of sentimental value that they've collected over their marriage.**



HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY ALLISON BOYLE. PREVIOUS PAGE: JAYNE WEARS UNIQLO KNIT. SCANLAN THEODORE SHIRT, FRAME JEANS AND R.M. WILLIAMS COAT.



Local farming expert Rowan Medway lives just 15 minutes' drive from the Ferguson property. He's spent his life around agriculture and is operations director of AgScope, a local firm that specialises in managing investment farms, including Hazeldean.

"Mark's brief to us right from the start was that it needed to make money and be a proper, full-scale agricultural enterprise," Rowan recalls. "He is very passionate about farming and while our number one job is to run the farm to best practice, it's also to educate him, involve him and teach him as we're going along. We have a lot of time and weather restraints but if we can line things up for him to be here when specific procedures like dipping are happening, he's more than happy to spend the day in the trenches."

"Dad's done more or less the same job his entire life, so I think learning something completely different was really satisfying for him," says Mark and Jayne's eldest son, Jack, 25. (His brothers, Ted and Paddy, are 22 and

18 respectively). Like his mum, Jack studied communications at university, and after working every television shift possible for experience he now has a job he loves scripting rugby league news at the Nine Network.

"Dad's always come up with wild, far-fetched ideas, ever since I was young, but once I saw [him on] the farm, I understood. He seemed really happy there. The fresh air and lack of people was a real escape ... even if Rowan was yelling at him for doing something wrong. Now, I think the satisfaction comes from being able to do a good portion of it by himself, being able to use some of the new skills he's learned and put them into action."

### Million miles from media

A large part of the district's magic, according to Mark, is that it's close enough for weekend visits, but far removed from his Monday-to-Friday

routine. "It's a business but it's also a lovely change of lifestyle here. I can remember having a stressful week in Sydney, getting in the car and within a few hours I was on a motorbike rounding up 50 beautiful Black Angus cattle through a paddock going, 'Oh my God, how lovely is this?' We're 240 kilometres from Sydney but it could be a million miles."

It was the farm's natural assets that convinced Mark that Hazeldean was a smart investment: good pasture, good fencing, good water, great potential. "When I found it, Jayne was very kind in letting me proceed, for her sight-unseen. I was all about the paddocks and pastures, but the first thing she wanted to look at when she got here was the house, which made me nervous because it had been the shearers' quarters for quite a few years and needed a lot of work." Her initial reaction, though, said it all. "There were quite a few seconds of silence, and eventually her first remark was: 'Well, it is a little bit disappointing'."



## Interview

It was definitely a project, an amused Jayne interrupts to add. “I started getting excited about the place when we finally started the renovation a few years later.”

Now that run-down residence is a charming, lovingly-restored country home filled with practical but sentimental items they’ve collected over their union. The scarred but beautiful eight-seater wooden kitchen table was the first they owned as a married couple. The two 1920s leather chairs cost 100 pounds each at an outdoor market in Bordeaux, France, while Jayne was pregnant with Jack. The cups we’re drinking from: wedding gifts. Most special of all, the antique bread bin and kitchen scales in pride of place on the bench belonged to Jayne’s late grandmother.

### Local knowledge

Every year, the Binda Picnic Races marks the biggest social event on the Southern Tablelands calendar. In nearby Laggan the day starts and ends at the local pub, with buses organised to ferry merry locals back and forth. To date, Mark has joined the Binda shenanigans four times, bus ride and all. Jayne has been once.

“He has a very good name in the community,” says Rowan, who was also president of the local rugby club. “People probably didn’t know he was the property’s new owner for the first 12 months because we were running the place but it became pretty apparent when he got involved with the club. He wasn’t just some bloke with a name from Sydney who bought here but was never seen.”

Not one to miss an opportunity, Rowan had suggested to Mark that the Seven Network might be good for a grassroots rugby sponsorship. “I was able to talk our marketing department into it, so for the next few years they ran out as the Seven News Crookwell Dogs,” Mark notes. “Not that I did it for this reason, but it was a fantastic way to connect with the locals. The team’s second rower was breeding the best Poll Dorset sheep in the district, so it was good to get to know him. Networking, country style.”

“Maybe,” says Jayne, turning to her husband, “after a few drinks they’ll want to talk to you about TV, but mostly they want to talk to you about properties and stock, right?”

“I mostly want to talk to them about farming,” Mark answers. “If I do get the chance to have a beer at the golf club or pub with the locals, I’m usually the one asking all the questions.” Is that the seasoned journalist in him? “No, it’s the frustrated sheep farmer! I have a big gap in my knowledge so I love to talk to them about what they do, and hear the passion they have for their family farms and the generations that have gone before them.”

### When stars collided

It’s been almost three decades since twenty-something Mark first set eyes on a tall, blonde British tourist in the neon glow of the Pink Panther pizza parlour on Hamilton Island. He was there covering Race Week for the Seven Network during his first stint at the station. She was taking a gap year away from her London magazine job. Both were in other relationships at the time. But sparks still flew.

“We only met briefly, but we definitely made an impression on each other,” Jayne recalls. Ten months later, when now-single Mark arrived in London for work, they happened across each other again through mutual friends. Suffice to say, when he returned to Australia after that work stint, the reporter wasn’t flying solo.

Several years later, in 1994, they boomeranged back to England for four more. Jayne had been offered a career-changing role heading the launch of Australian teen magazine *Girlfriend* into the UK market under new masthead *Sugar*. The Nine Network, where Mark now worked, let him pivot into a foreign correspondent role based in London that saw him cover countless major stories.

Once baby made three, though, they packed up and moved back to Australia for good. Life since then has been a constant whirlwind of successfully juggling high-pressure work with home life, homework and Saturday

“For someone who delivers difficult news ... Mark has a great sense of humour.”

— Jayne Ferguson

sports drop-offs. If there’s a secret formula to their long and happy marriage, though, they’re yet to put their finger on it.

“I once read a funny interview where the person said, ‘the reason we’ve been married so long is that we never wanted to get divorced at the same time,’” Jayne jests. “In honesty, though, we’ve got a very similar sense of humour and really get each other. That is what’s made it a successful marriage in a way. For someone who delivers what is often difficult news every night, Mark has a great sense of humour, which he doesn’t get to show in his day job.”

If it was a mutual love of media, laughter and travel that united them, it was a shared sense of family that kept them that way. When Jayne first met the extended Ferguson clan – Mark is one of seven children – his values and moral compass suddenly made sense.

“Mark is a really good father and I think a lot of that is how he was raised. He decided early on when we got back to Australia that he wanted to be a hands-on dad and didn’t pursue another big job that would take him overseas a lot.”

Do they share the same parenting style? Usually not, Mark says. “We agree on most of the overarching stuff,



but I think it’s fair to say I bring down the law and enforcement when required. I’m police prosecutor and Jayne’s defence lawyer.”

### Gifts that keep giving

Jack, Ted, and Paddy have all spent time at the farm, though none has caught the agricultural bug from their dad. “I’m certainly now of the belief I don’t have any future farmers – there’s no-one to hand it on to when I pop my clogs,” he concedes. “The three of them are definitely city boys. The two older ones like to come down with mates, have a beer and chill out, but they’re certainly not too concerned about whether the pasture’s growing in the top paddock.”

That said, their mum isn’t at Hazeldean as often as dad, either. Several years ago, on a milestone birthday, Mark and the boys surprised her with a beautiful horse after breakfast near the Centennial Park stables. She hadn’t ridden in 35 years and had to learn again from scratch,

and teasing: “Or maybe I should have got you earrings?”

Jayne ignores him. “When Mark and I met, we didn’t have anything, not 10 cents to rub between us. We’ve worked pretty hard our whole lives, raised our kids, so the horse was something back for me. And I’ve embraced it, don’t you worry. I never dreamed that, at 50, I’d be taking up a brand-new sport. It’s been a joy.”

### On the horizon

During the drive down from Sydney last night, while Jayne slept in the passenger seat, Mark pondered on the first photo shoot he ever did with *The Weekly* in 2005, soon after he started in what he calls ‘the big chair’ reading news at the Nine Network. His very young boys appeared with him, crawling over him happily. “My God, life has changed so much since then,” he says. “Now we’ve got two grown-up boys who’ve left the nest already, and one young fellow who’s about to finish school and go off in a new direction. We’re proud of the young men we’ve raised but now we’re entering a new phase of our lives. Soon it might just be the missus, me and Freddy.”

“But we’re certainly not planning to slow down,” Jayne adds emphatically.

Mark agrees. “I have a wonderful job I really enjoy and hope to continue for as long as possible.” But the upside of empty nesting is “we’ll have a bit more freedom to do things. A bit more farming, a bit more horse riding, a lot more TV.”

“We’d better get the conversation cards ready,” Jayne says to Freddy, who just carries on snoring at Mark’s feet. **AWW**

Mark and Jayne (below, with their sons, Jack, Ted and Paddy) are looking forward to the next chapter of their life, now that they are becoming empty nesters.



JAYNE WEARS SPORTSCRAFT PANTS. MARK WEARS M.J. BALE KNIT AND SHIRT.