



Life on the farm with
shepherd Melanie Ward
Pictures: SARAH LUCY BROWN

The sheep farmer tells Danielle Lett about life on the land...
and the job she loves

MELANIE WARD: *'Women make great shepherds'*

It has to be said that spring is one of the most wonderful times of year. Daffodils sprout from the ground, the skies are slowly becoming bluer, the air feels warmer, and of course, lambs are being born.

For sheep farmers, lambing season is the busiest time on the calendar. But have you ever wondered what is it like to work as shepherd here in Suffolk?

Straddling the Suffolk-Essex border is the village of Polstead. Home to just under 900 residents, there you will find Bower House Tye, a sheep farm boasting a flock of 80.

And who's in charge of all those sheep? Meet Melanie Ward.

Suffolk born and bred, the mum-of-two has spent most of her life on the farm - and absolutely loves what she does. But how did she become the shepherd of her own flock?

Humble beginnings

Tending to animals from a young age, she's forever had an affinity for farm life.

"I've always been around animals - we used to have goats at home so I used to help my dad and nan look after them every day. We've always been lucky to have space for a few animals here and there," Melanie fondly recalls.

"My grandad also used to be a herdsman on the local farm next door to his house, and I used to help him out a lot. And my dad's next door neighbour had cattle, so I used to go there with him when I had the chance."

As she got older, she knew working with animals was the right path for her - so she took the next step and spent three years studying at Otley College, learning all she needed to know to become a farmer.

"I was the only livestock student on my course, everyone else was studying arable farming, but the college had sheep and goats that I was able to tend to."

While she the only girl on her course, she certainly didn't let that hold her back - and threw herself into both the theory and practical side of her studies.

"There were times where I struggled and felt something more to prove because I was the only girl on the course, alongside five other boys. At times, I definitely chewed some of them up - but we also helped each other out. Some of the sheep were absolutely massive, and the boys would help me turn them over."

After successfully completing her studies, Melanie was unfortunately unable to find a job on a farm straight away - and instead found employment as a receptionist at a veterinary office which allowed her to keep

working with animals in the meantime.

"After I finished my course, no one in the local area was employing, and there weren't that many people with a big flock so I worked at my local vets office which at the time looked after both small and large animals."

As luck would have it however, one of her friends was working on a nearby farm and the two managed to swap jobs two years in, allowing Melanie to finally put her hard-earned farm skills to work.

Life on the farm

"I began working as assistant shepherdess to the main shepherd at the time, Michael Mumford. He was my boss, my teacher, and someone I still ask for help even to this day."

Under the careful tutelage of Michael, Melanie threw herself right in at the deep end, eventually taking charge of the farm and its sheep.

So what does an average day look like?

"Sadly, I can't make a living out of sheep alone, so sometimes I work at a dairy farm up the road. But my day starts off with me getting the kids to school before I tend to the sheep. There's a number of tasks that need doing, such as vaccinating, feeding and worming them, and checking their overall welfare to make sure they're all nice and healthy."

At this time of year however, Melanie is also busy delivering lambs as it's currently lambing season.

"This is the busiest time of the year for me - I'm usually out on the farm by 7.30am to check on them before taking the kids to school.

"Lambing season is all about making sure they're safe and healthy, and that deliveries are as normal as can be. Sometimes the orphan lambs like to have a cuddle and a fuss with the children."

The lambs reared on Melanie's farm are bred for their meat, which is butchered at A Leeder Butchers in Boxford before being sold in locally.

"It's a hard thing to do, but they're there to be bred and eaten. That's the way the world goes. But it is hard, especially when you get favourites."

Establishing good relationships with her local butchers is key to Melanie's success and livelihood, and it's no surprise she's a big supporter of shopping as locally as possible.

"Buying your produce locally not only helps boost the economy, but it also provides health benefits as what you're eating is a fresher and tends to last longer. I have friends and family who buy my meat

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because they know where it's been reared, and they all say it tastes nicer. And luckily there's a new farm shop opening up in Hintlesham on Monday April 11, Woodlands Farm Shop, and they've agreed to sell my meat which I'm really excited about.

"And if you buy from me, you're not just helping support my family, but you're also helping protect the environment as the carbon footprint with local food is a lot less than what you get in supermarkets."

However, it's sadly a different story with the wool trade.

"There's just no money in wool at the moment - it costs more to shear a sheep than what you get in return for it. For a lot of farmers in the area, it costs hundreds to shear sheep, and you get around £73 or even less for an entire flock's worth of wool.

Melanie believes factors such as fast fashion have a part to play in the decline of wool - and adds that a surplus of unwanted wool has led many farmers to simply burn it rather than try to sell it at a loss.

"It's a fantastic fibre, and there are lots of different things you can do with it, such as use it as insulation in houses - but there's just not a demand for it right now."

A way of life

Farming has always been an integral part of life here in Suffolk, and an attractive career to those who like being out in the countryside. It's also something women can do just as well as men, as Mel has proven over the years.

"Women can do it just as much as men, and we make great shepherds. It's a really hard job, and you're out in every kind of weather, every day of the year - but seeing all of those lambs running around the field really makes it worthwhile."

For anyone who wishes to get into shepherding, Melanie has the following advice. "Follow your dreams. I started doing it for the love of it, and I always knew I wanted to do it. My passion for farming grew and grew over time."

To help get your foot in the door, besides college, one of the best things you can do is get all the experience you can and work your way up, she explains.

"Ask a farmer if you can help during lambing season, as that's when they need the most help. We actually used to have a lot of lambing students come in from all over the country, as well as lots of local people to see what it was like. People especially loved bottle feeding the lambs.

"The Young Farmers Club is also great to join, as you can have fun while learning about local farming in the area. The Hadleigh Show is another great place to meet farmers, see animals and find out about all types of local produce."

“I’ve always been around animals – we used to have goats at home so I used to help my dad and nan look after them every day”

Melanie Ward with her newborn lambs





One of Melanie's sheep dogs

