



IN CONVERSATION WITH JIM CAMPBELL



Jim Campbell's approach to the stewardship of Welton Farm brings an expansive career to Cumbria. As a former farm manager for estates across the UK, Jim began experimenting with innovative techniques and sustainable interventions in the pursuit of a smaller carbon footprint. His ambitions to farm with minimal inputs and to become self-sufficient in power and nutrients are second only to his love of farming.

In the fourth instalment of our **In Conversation With** series, we meet with Jim at Welton Farm, who has recently taken on a 10-year Farm Business Tenancy to rear Wagyu cattle and sheep across the holding. From fertiliser, to soil, wastage and conservation, Jim walks us through responsible farming practices, his attraction to the farming community, local engagement, and honesty in how we farm now and in the future.

What first attracted you to Welton Farm?

Welton Farm is in every sense a wonderful holding to be a part of. The setting is beautiful, the farmhouse is attractive, the infrastructure is vast and adaptable and it has proven to be perfect for our vision of a calf-rearing and paddock grazing enterprise to demonstrate a sustainable business with low inputs.

Naturally the farm required a lot of work to get our new Wagyu enterprise set up and running, but a holding like this rarely comes on the market. When we put the tender application in, we emphasised simplicity of approach precisely because we thought Welton Farm would thrive if we preserved and enhanced, rather than overhauling existing assets.

How did you get into the farming industry?

I had a different route in than the traditional multi-generational farm because my parents were not farmers. Instead, it was my aunt, and my uncle, that introduced me to farming and to the way of life.

They were the type of people where their door was always open. Their bonds to the local community were strong, and as farmers I used to watch and admire them early in the morning as they went up the fell together. I thought: 'one day I'll be old enough to do this too.'

It got into my blood at that point. Farming became a part of me. I went to agricultural college and it all took off from there. I'm privileged to say that my family is also following in the same footsteps. Both my daughter and my son regularly help with calf rearing, lambing and the day-to-day management of Welton Farm.



What do you expect of your landlord? How can they help you improve your practices and approach to your farm holdings?

Collaboration, and confidence.

To get where we want to be, we're fully aware that we need active support, not just from the Church Commissioners for England as a landlord but also from co-operation with public bodies and conservation agencies. It's reassuring that the Church Commissioners are also of the same mind.

We're at an early stage, but I look forward to how the relationship develops and the opportunity this 10-year term presents to me and my family. I'm excited to have so much support in our sustainability initiatives, and recognition from the Church Commissioners that the approach is both pragmatic and forward-thinking.

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What does your approach look like from a sustainability perspective?

For starters, we run a low input system. We don't use artificial fertiliser or other chemical inputs. It's not productive in the long-term to be supplementing the land with nitrogen. Instead, we compost the farmyard muck and utilise the slurry that is produced and spray microbes, produced by Agriton Group, that supports soil health and vitality. Whilst this is not a common farming method, I believe it is the way forward.

Understanding the structure of the soil, its composition and organic matter is everything. To do this, we've undertaken some soil organic matter readings to see how deep rooting the plants are and undertake worm counts. This testing across our tenanted farms has been done in association with the Cumbria Farmer Network and Eden River Trust.

To ensure that we are using land and any other inputs efficiently, we undersow our fields to layer our crops, which we have recently done in collaboration with our neighbouring farmer. Getting our rotations right is part of running a tight ship, but it's important to search for compatible crops that aren't always readily apparent. We also have experience managing a variety of different ecosystems, including wetlands, which provide opportunities to improve biodiversity, in the form of wildlife corridors and other restorative wilding programmes.

Do you feel that you can meet the Church Commissioners' 2050 Net Zero ambitions?

Yes, I am positive that we can. I have recently been interviewed by Radio Cumbria who have also shown an interest in my ambition for Welton Farm and I will be working with Farm Carbon Toolkit, who will assist with quantifying our carbon footprint throughout the duration of the tenancy.

"Our ultimate ambition is to be self-sufficient in both power and nutrients in the next ten years."

Before you became a tenant you used to be a farm manager. How did you transition to being a tenant?

I've managed farms for a long time, and because my parents weren't in the profession it's been a gradual process.

I've always questioned everything, from fertiliser use to wastage, and sought out unorthodox solutions. Arriving at farming from a different path to most meant that I haven't been constrained by what's 'traditional', and when the opportunity presented itself to be my own boss, I took it with both hands.

Being able to make decisions allows me to put sustainability at the forefront of our approach. When I was a farm manager in Scotland, I used to question why we were using so much fertiliser on silage ground, and while I couldn't change that as a farm manager, I can as a tenant.

What are the challenges that you and the farming community more broadly expect to face over the next decade?

I suppose it depends on your stage and set-up. In our case, it's the resilience of the farm and ensuring that we have a suitable buffer in a time of market volatility. We decided not to renew our tenancy on our other tenanted farm, to focus exclusively on Welton Farm, with the hope of expansion in the future, in part because of these reasons.

If you're a new farmer it's increasingly difficult to get a foot on the ladder, especially if you don't have the finances behind you to get through the first few years. This is evident in both the owner-occupier and tenanted sectors. Support payments are dwindling, and input costs are spiralling out of control, which is pervasive across the community, with broad-based impact.





What do you see as the big opportunities at Welton Farm?

We have never had a farm with the infrastructure to establish a rearing unit like we have developed here. In time we would like to be able to sell and market our own beef through a farm shop, and the economics seem to stack for Wagyu to form a material part of our operation. This could then create further diversification opportunities down the line.

We believe through responsible farming in a sustainable manner, we can produce quality beef and lamb in commercially viable numbers without the use of artificial fertiliser. This will involve a mob or 'strip' grazing system using composted manure, with good microbes mixed in.

Our ultimate ambition is to be self-sufficient in both power and nutrients in the next ten years.

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How do you engage with the local community?

We have always been very open about our farming system and our business. We want to maximise our positive social impact, together with the local community, which means personally building relationships with our neighbours. This has helped us to get to where we are today; to learn, and sometimes even to help shape our future farming industry.

Of course, community initiatives and education are important. We aim to conduct 25 school visits a year. Speaking with the younger generation is vitally important to establish the link between the field and the fork, and everything that happens between those stages, such as hedge laying and

tree planting. We have an extensive planting scheme in place, including planting 70 oak trees on the farm as part of the Queen's Green Canopy to commemorate the Queen's Jubilee.

What will the future of British agriculture look like?

I believe I have never worked a day in my life so maybe I'm biased, but I see a bright and fruitful future. We are steadily realising as a nation just how important British farmers are, as the backbone of our country's food security. I hope this continues to be on the Government's agenda.

What advice would you give the next generation of farmers?

It's as I've said to my children. Be honest. Don't look at the final price, but study the margin. Constantly review costs, communicate with the wider community, and don't be afraid to look at alternative ways of doing the same thing.

For the farming industry to survive and go forward, we all have to be honest about how we farm and share knowledge of what works and what doesn't. Sharing information with other parties so that they can improve their own business, is the lifeblood of a sector which has thrived for thousands of years.

