

# SRUC MATTERS

The SRUC Alumni & Friends Magazine / 2020



SRUC

# Welcome Alumni & Friends of SRUC

'SRUC Matters' is the new name of the Alumni and Friends magazine, reflecting not only the numerous stories and news from across our alumni community, but highlighting the significant role many of SRUC's former students are playing on national and global stages.

SRUC does matter. At a time when Scotland, along with the rest of the world, is trying to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, while also facing global environmental challenges, I think we can agree that SRUC matters quite a lot.

In this edition, you will find stories of inspiring alumni who have studied a wide range of subjects over the years at SRUC. They have something really important in common.

They are all tackling what I call the Wicked Challenges, some of the most difficult and complex issues we face as a society, such as Climate Change, Biodiversity and Food Security.



Another term you will come across as you explore the magazine is Natural Economy. It is a relatively new term, but one that is at the heart of what SRUC does. The Natural Economy is an economy fuelled by responsible use of our natural resources: people, land, energy, water, animals and plants.

I do hope you enjoy reading about the wonderful ways SRUC alumni are contributing to a sustainable future. As one of the articles puts it: "The future is green".

**Professor Wayne Powell**  
Principal and Chief Executive  
Scotland's Rural College

## STAY CONNECTED

If you studied or worked at SRUC, SAC (North, West and East of Scotland Agricultural Colleges), Barony College, Elmwood College, or Oatridge College - we welcome you to the SRUC Alumni & Friends Community.

It's free to join, so stay in touch to:

- *Keep up to date with SRUC news*
- *Promote your business*
- *Reconnect with classmates*
- *Find out about job opportunities*
- *Get invites to SRUC events*

Update your details at [www.sruc.ac.uk/alumni](http://www.sruc.ac.uk/alumni)

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## Tell us your stories!

- Do you have a story to share?
- Have you launched a new business?
- Have an amazing reunion planned?

Got an idea your alumni community might be able to help with?

We are always delighted to hear from SRUC alumni and find out what people are up to.

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# LESS WASTE LAURA: A VOICE FOR THE PLANET

by Laura Young

Like most environmentalists and activists, my passion for the environment began at an early age, loving the outdoors and spending countless holidays around our beautiful country in any weather.



This passion grew throughout school and ultimately attracted me to apply to study Geography and Environmental Science at university. This allowed me to take my environmental passions and implement them in an academic sphere and deepen my love for, and knowledge about, our wonderful world. After completing my undergraduate degree, I transitioned into my Masters at SRUC with the University of Edinburgh, studying Environmental Protection and Management. It is safe to say this course and year was instrumental in my journey as an environmental activist.

Just before I began my Masters, I set up an online platform called *Less Waste Laura*, which was a small, fun way of documenting my personal journey to live sustainably, treading

lightly on our planet. It all began as a New Year's resolution to cut down my waste but has grown enormously from that. This was a space for me to share tips and tricks for eco-friendly living, while incorporating the academic knowledge I was receiving during my Masters course. It has also transitioned into 'real life' spaces allowing me to speak at conferences, give a TEDx Talk, and take my work into schools and community groups across the country.

**My platform covers a whole host of social media spaces, however I mainly operate on Instagram. This is such a wonderful place to share photos, videos, articles and more about sustainability. A community of over 40,000 people has joined me on my journey over the last two and a half years and provides so much advice for every element of holistic environmental living. There is almost no cap to the creativity you can express on these platforms, while still being able to share news stories, science, or simply your favourite tips. Through finding others who share my passion, a little bit of hashtagging and authentic posting, I have been able to build up this community which amazes me every day.**

Since graduating from SRUC, I work for the international development NGO, Tearfund, in their campaigning team looking at how we can have an impact on COP26 being hosted in Glasgow in 2021. Throughout the world, people who contribute to environmental degradation and climate change the least, are impacted the most. Through the work of Tearfund's partners, we are seeing firsthand the impact of climate change on so many already vulnerable communities globally, highlighting our responsibility to use our resources to support them and campaign for change. Based in Glasgow, I work in a team which operates across the UK and links with more than 50 countries across the world, campaigning for a green and fair economy, which is particularly important when thinking about transitioning out of lockdown.

I was extremely privileged to visit two of our partner organisations in Uganda just over a year ago, where I learned firsthand about the devastating impacts climate change and plastic pollution is having on people and the environment in this part of the world. This trip highlighted just how important it is for every individual, business, and government to take seriously their responsibility to our planet and to those who live in environmentally vulnerable regions. In Uganda specifically, changing rain patterns due to climate change are drastically, and rapidly, affecting the agricultural systems which people depend on for income. A rapid response is needed to turn steep valley regions into terraced farmland to avoid landslips and extreme rain washing away fertile soils, while at the same time it is essential

to implement gravity flow systems and rainwater tanks to collect clean drinking water.

Long-term, I will continue to fight for environmental justice, and everything that intersects with it. What my job, platform, or day-to-day life will look like I am not sure, but I know that I will continue to push for change within the systems we all operate to bring a fair world to all. We can all play a part, no matter how small, to influence the world around us. I have faith in the power of people when we come together for collective good, and it comforts me to learn about fellow alumni from SRUC in other spheres fighting for environmental justice in their own ways.

Follow Laura on social media: [@LessWasteLaura](#)



Jill Brown, Moray Distillery, Rural Business Management, SRUC Aberdeen, Class of 2008



Niall Macalister Hall,  
Beinn An Tuirc Distillery,  
Rural Resource Management,  
SRUC Edinburgh, Class of 1996

# THE SPIRIT OF SCOTLAND

by Julie van den Driesche

The ginaissance is going strong in Scotland. Bottles of gin from unique, small-production Scottish distilleries are now widely found in drinks cabinets across the country. And it's not just gin – there is also Scottish vodka as well as the traditional whisky market which remains an attractive proposition for spirit producers. SRUC alumni are creating a splash in the sector and we spoke to five of them.

## Community and Collaboration

"This year has gone a bit wonky, hasn't it?" says **Jill Brown**, owner-founder of *Moray Distillery*.

Covid-19 has thrown challenges at everyone in Scotland, and we can now only imagine how an article about aspiring and established spirit producers who all studied at SRUC might have begun were it not for a global pandemic. Yet these challenges have also shown how resilient Scottish producers are, with many of them turning to producing hand sanitiser for use by key workers and the public. Within 48 hours of being given the go-ahead, alumni **Jill**, **Jenny McKerr** (owner-founder, *The Wee Farm Distillery*) and **Niall Macalister Hall** (Director, *Beinn An Tuirc Distillery*) were producing hand gels.

"Pretty much all of our stock in the first two weeks went to healthcare, community care, care homes – they had just been left high and dry with nothing, no supplies, and they still needed to do their jobs within the community," says Jill.

Groups of spirit producers were set up across the country so that people could help each other.

"You couldn't be more thankful for the co-operation in the Scottish industry," says Jenny. "You are isolated at the best of times, so being able to go to that group to bounce questions off and share information about sourcing some of the ingredients was great."

Resilience is a key trait seen across Scotland's rural community, and the spirit producers are no exception.

"The one solace is that everyone is in the same situation," says Jill. "We all had business plans, products, customer routes or export markets that we were developing, and everything has just gone in a completely different direction. But it's about having the resilience you learn from your courses at SRUC to pivot and look at something else and see how you can get the business going."

## Selling a story

In a sector that has grown exponentially since the turn of the century – from only two gin distillers on the market in 2000, to more than 100 companies now operating within Scotland – it is important to stand out from the crowd. Storytelling is one method in which producers can reach consumers.

Jenny's farm may be small, with only ten suckler cows and 100 sheep, but this is part of their story and why she chose to produce gin. "As a small farm, and as new entrant farmers as well, we need to think about things a bit differently. For us, it's all about how we can add value to the products we have. There's no point in following the traditional beef/sheep model, because we're not big enough to do that.

"We decided to get into gin production because it doesn't need a lot of space to get

*Continued over*

Graeme Jarron,  
with his wife and business partner,  
Caroline, Ogilvy Spirits,  
Agriculture, SRUC Aberdeen,  
Class of 1999



started. Two and a half years ago we converted an old bull pen, bought a 30-litre still and started experimenting.”

Jenny’s passion is food and drink, and she has started farming a Wagyu cross beef that they will be bringing to market within the next couple of years. “Food pairing was important to us, so having a good gin you can enjoy while having a steak dinner promotes the Scottish beef aspect as well as the gin.”

### Sustainability

**Graeme Jarron** (Director, *Ogilvy Spirits*) says sustainability is an important part of the Scottish producer’s story, especially to his brand of Scottish potato vodka. Most of Graeme’s potatoes grown on his Angus farm go into supermarkets, but the Maris Pipers that don’t make the cut are used to make vodka. “It’s the ones that are too big, too small, too green – I don’t like saying ‘waste’, because they’re not waste, it just doesn’t meet the specification.”

This circular economy is increasingly important to today’s consumers.

“Gone are the days of it just ending up on a supermarket shelf,” says Graeme. “People want to know the back story, they want to know the foundations, where their spirits come from. It’s very much about the sustainability. We’ve



played on this from day one – we feed the waste from the vodka distilling process back to the cows and the waste from the cows gets put back on the field for the organic matter to create healthy soils for us to grow our potatoes in.”

Sustainability is also a key part of Niall’s strategy for *Beinn An Tuirc*, having established a hydroelectric generator on the estate in Kintyre, powered by water from the hill from which the distillery takes its name.

“We wanted to invest in something that would in turn generate more money,” explains Niall. “It was a catalyst for allowing us to do all the other things. We thought, ‘what can we do using power that is sustainable?’ So we got in a three-phase electric gin still that we could use directly from the hydroscheme.”

### Business growth and diversification

To ensure longevity, diversification is just as important in the spirits sector as it is in farming. Jill, Niall and Jenny have all taken the opportunity during lockdown to work on plans to attract more visitors to their distilleries. Distillery tours, pop-up shops, tasting classes, cafes and accommodation for ‘gin weekends’ are all being incorporated to increase business and secure livelihoods. “Gin sales are still growing,” says Niall.

“However, there are a lot of gin producers in the market, and there might be a squeeze in the future because of that, so how do you protect yourself? We want to appeal more to the visitor market with tours, gin school, café, gin weekends. You are keeping a core

income so if things become tight in the future you’ve got that to fall back on – there’s always a business here.”

Creative producers are also quick to explore other opportunities. Graeme’s future plans involve a spin-off business on the back of *Ogilvy Spirits*. During the design process of a new food and drink product, it transpired a key ingredient was not available in Scotland. Graeme is now developing a new product to fill this gap. “We’re in the midst of setting up another business which has come off the back of this,” he says. “We’re aiming to have it out by the end of 2020.”

### New Entrants

**Lily Reade’s** extended family run the well-established *Isle of Mull Cheese Company* at Sgriob-ruadh Farm, with cheese made from the family’s own herd of 130 dairy cows. The business currently produces 16,000 litres a week of spent whey, the by-product of the cheese-making process.

This whey is currently being mixed with slurry and spread across their fields with a small amount being fed to their pigs. A solution to reducing waste output and making use of the sugar in the whey presented the spirits sector as an

opportunity for diversification and growth.

“It’s really exciting,” says Lily. “We’re going to turn whey into alcohol. Because we’re making the base spirit ourselves, which isn’t commonly done at the moment, we’ll have the opportunity to extend our product range down the line.

“We’ve got the building constructed and most of the equipment to handle the whey. We’re working with Kerry Allison from the Food and Drink team at SAC Consulting, which is part of SRUC, on market research and branding. It has been a long process – actually figuring out the alcohol production method, because not many people are making alcohol from whey. Using whey for ethanol is a process more common in other countries such as India and New Zealand, where it’s used as fuel.”

Lily feels the product could be pitched to similar markets as grain-based spirits. “Sustainability, our family farming story, our unique production method, including the fact we will be making our product wholly from scratch ourselves here on Mull, will all be key factors.”

**So the next time you’re restocking your spirits shelf, why not pick up an alumni-made bottle and taste the story behind the products of these talented entrepreneurs?**



Lily Reade,  
Sgriob-ruadh Distillers,  
Rural Business  
Management, SRUC  
Aberdeen, Class of 2018

**WIN a bottle from the Beinn An Tuirc Distillery, Moray Distillery, Ogilvy Spirits or The Wee Farm Distillery.**

Entry forms can be found on the reverse of the address sheet in mailout, with stamped return envelope supplied. Alternatively, email [alumni@sruc.ac.uk](mailto:alumni@sruc.ac.uk) Entries drawn 28 February 2021. Strictly over 18s.



Jenny McKerr,  
The Wee Farm Distillery,  
Agriculture, SRUC Ayr,  
Class of 2004

# WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

by Rachel Edwards

He has catered for Louis Vuitton, Aston Martin and Rolls Royce, worked with Nigel Slater, Waitrose, and Nespresso, and is considered one of Scotland's top chefs. Not bad for someone who, in his own words, wasn't the best student SRUC has ever seen.



@chef.caterer.edinburgh

“What I've done is have a much broader training throughout the industry... you never stop learning.”

Like many teenagers, **Barry Bryson** didn't know what he wanted to do when he left school. He did know he liked food and when his career adviser suggested he might be best suited to a “practical” option after school, he enrolled on the Food Studies course at Elmwood College, now a part of SRUC.

“While I was never a grade A student,” says Barry. “I did apply myself without knowing whether I was going to do anything with it. I was very much about getting to the city, all I cared about was having as broad an experience as possible.”

After two years in Elmwood, he did a spell in London restaurants, working in a range of positions around the capital before returning to Scotland. His career took off when, aged 22, he was offered the opportunity to take over the cafe in the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh. Running the business and creating a kitchen team was a baptism of fire. “It was then the time at Elmwood became more important to me,” says Barry. “Because I was finding I was having to go back to things I hadn't done since I was at college.”

After seven years, he moved on to create *Circles Bistro* in Canonmills, which he ran for a

further seven years before starting his business, *Cater Edinburgh*. Working primarily for luxury brands, Barry provides restaurant experiences in locations around the country. He is also a private chef, cooking in “some amazing homes, in some spectacular locations”.

Even with his growing success, Barry says he continues to “rely very much on that foundation I received at Elmwood. I remember college so clearly, every single corridor, room – it's probably not changed very much”. And it's the people who taught him who also had a big impact on his career.

Barry is passionate about creating more diverse, supportive kitchens for young chefs to work in. “Kitchens need to become more diverse, more accommodating, more accepting, and there needs to be a much greater level of mentorship and support for young people coming into the industry,” he says. “Certainly, when I started, it was sink or swim, and it was brutal. I don't know how many great



chefs have been lost to another industry, simply because the kitchen that they walked into was so wholly unsuited to have a young person in it.” He remembers one lecturer, Jim Taylor, who encouraged him early on in his studies.

“I think about three months into my course I told him I was going to quit, because I didn't fit in, and I felt out on a limb with it all, and he talked me down and said, ‘No no no you're fine, you've got skills, just get back in there, focus, ignore it.’ You then look back later and realise that somebody by being kind and supportive, changed a really important decision. Jim Taylor was a bit of a gruff giant. You wouldn't necessarily think he was going to be that guy. There was also a lovely lecturer called Christine Ellis. I'm now 25 years on from leaving Elmwood, but I remember them all.”

While he may not have been a star student, Barry never stopped wanting to learn. A willingness to keep learning he feels has been key to his success. “What I've done is have a much broader training throughout the industry. A lot of it, I'm proud to say, is self-taught. So, my point is, you never stop learning.” Top of his list of current interests is sustainability, focussing on where food comes from and what conditions it was kept in, and in what season ingredients should be eaten.

“We could do an awful lot of good in Scotland, because we have so much amazing produce, and we are such an incredible produce supplier. Sustainability and growing are conversations that are only going to get louder and broader as the industry develops. And that's a good thing.”



## WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

Today's Professional Cookery students at SRUC Elmwood work closely with students in Horticulture and Gamekeeping. Sustainability is key. Fresh, seasonal vegetables, herbs and game is supplied to Cookery students throughout the year by their peers. Students **Lee Colbert** and **Kym Stirling** created these recipes for you to try.

### Game terrine

Recipe by Lee Colbert, HND Professional Cookery

#### Ingredients

##### Terrine

Streaky bacon	16 slices
Game meat, finely diced	500g
Sausage meat	300g
Chicken liver	200g
White breadcrumbs	2.5 handfuls
Egg, beaten	1
Garlic cloves, finely chopped	2 large
Finely chopped fresh parsley	4Tbspns
Splash brandy	
Splash red wine	
Few sprigs of thyme leaves	

#### Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F.
2. Line a terrine mould with cling film and lay the slices of bacon in the mould with the bacon overlapping. Keep some of the bacon aside for covering the top of the terrine.
3. Put all the other terrine ingredients in a bowl and mix until combined.
4. Gently fill the terrine mould with the filling and place any remaining bacon over the top. Tightly wrap with cling film before putting in the oven.
5. Place the terrine in a deep baking tray and pour in boiling water until it reaches two thirds of the way up the side of the mould. Bake for 1-1 ¼ hours. This creates a gentle way of cooking.
6. Check the temperature towards the end of cooking, if the middle is 75°C, carefully remove the terrine and press something heavy onto the terrine to make the terrine denser then place it in the fridge on a tray to cool.
7. Serve with a fresh green salad and toast.

### Summer vegetable and bacon quiche

Recipe by Kym Stirling, HND Professional Cookery

#### Pastry (short)

Flour	200g
Butter	100g
Salt	Pinch
Milk powder	10g
Water	60ml

#### Method

1. Sieve together the flour salt and milk powder.
2. Add the butter and rub together to resemble breadcrumbs.
3. Add water and mix together to form a dough.
4. Wrap in cling film and leave to rest.



#### Filling

1 Bacon rasher, fat removed	
Red peppers	½
Leek	100g
Tomatoes	2
Onion	½
Baby corn	1 packet
Eggs	4
Milk	125ml
Cheese (grated)	50g
Chives	10g
Seasoning	

#### Method

1. Turn oven on to 190 °C.
2. Finely chop the bacon and vegetables to the same size.
3. Fry the bacon and vegetables in a little oil until veg is soft.
4. Crack the eggs into a bowl and add the milk and seasoning beat together well.
5. Roll out the pastry on a floured surface and line a flan tin.
6. Blind bake till lightly coloured, about 15 minutes.
7. Place the vegetables into the pastry shell add the bacon and cover with the egg mixture.
8. Sprinkle the grated cheese over the top and bake for 15-20 minutes.

SRUC alumni fill many vocational niches across the 'natural economy', perhaps the most well-known being farming. However, not all Agriculture graduates go on to become farmers. **Kathryn Dick**, who gained her HND Agriculture in 2018, tells us about her unique career pathway.



## KATHRYN'S JOURNEY INTO JOURNALISM

by Kathryn Dick

Well this is certainly a funny feeling being asked questions about myself... it usually works the other way around!

I was born and brought up on my family's arable farm, in Falkirk. I was very close to my papa and uncle and it was through them that I found an interest in livestock, particularly in sheep farming.

Knowing my future lay within the farming environment, I decided to study agriculture at SRUC Edinburgh.

“My initial thought on my induction day was how amazing it was to be surrounded by so many likeminded students. I soon made friends – many of whom I am still close to today.”

I enjoyed the various field trips, from farm visits to practical lessons, I loved it when we could put our classroom learning into practice. While studying, I began to think about potential careers and was still undecided about what route I wanted to take. It was by sheer luck that, while scrolling

through Facebook one afternoon, I came across an advert for a job at The Scottish Farmer.

The job was advertised as 'agricultural journalist for the business desk' and I was in two minds as to whether to apply. I thought it would still be good interview practice even if I didn't get the job, so I applied and had two separate interviews with Ken Fletcher, the editor, and Patsy Hunter, editor of the business desk.

I was offered the job and I took it eagerly. I've now been with The Scottish Farmer for just over a year and I'm loving my job.

I'm very much a people person so I find travelling to shows or sales and doing farm features very enjoyable. I would say the only challenge I face sometimes is understanding certain accents when doing interviews... I struggle to understand the Aberdonian accent for example! For not having a journalistic background, I really enjoy writing and it helps if you have half a clue what you're writing about!

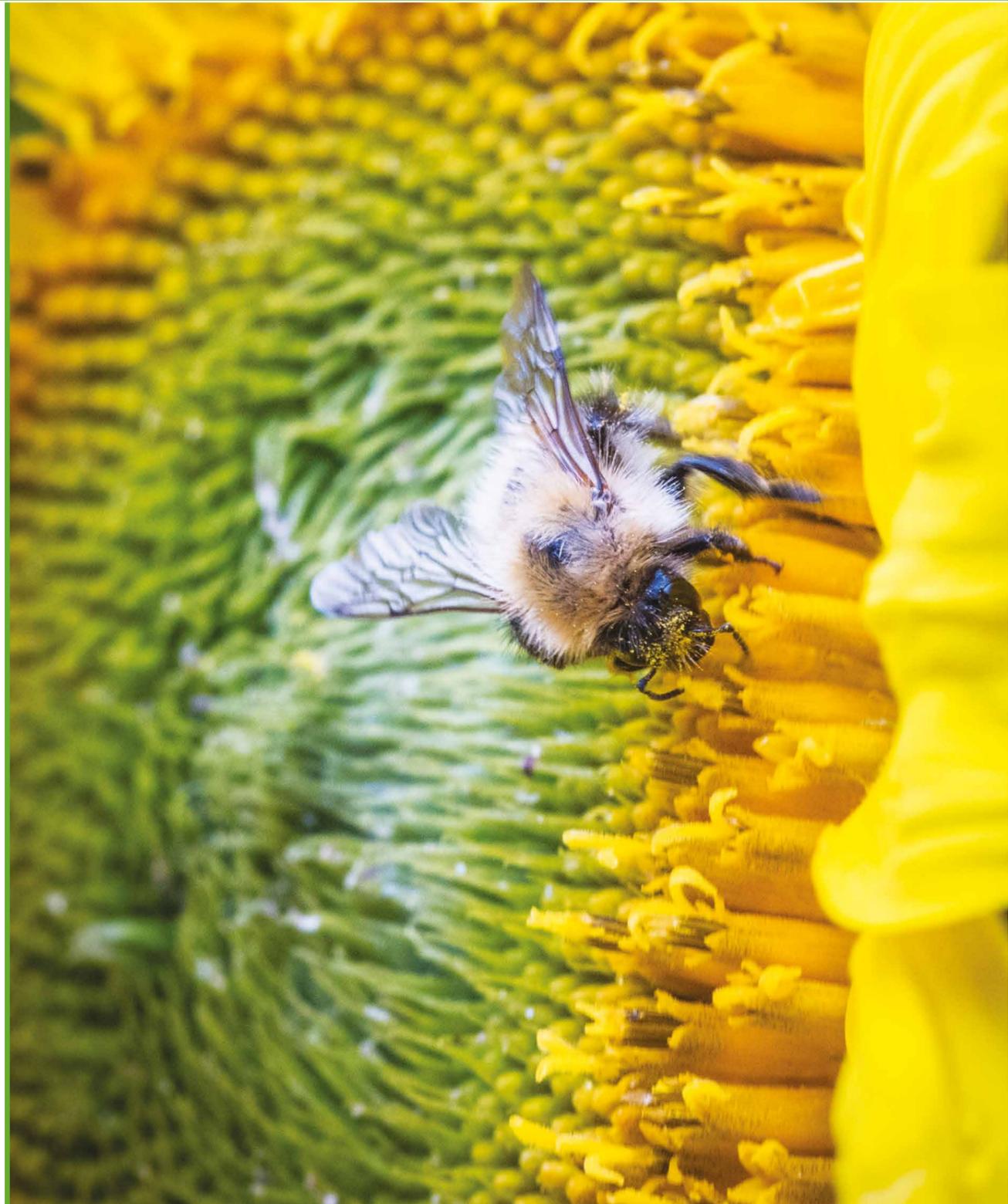
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At the start of the national lockdown in March 2020, SRUC's Alumni team sent out 400 sunflower seed packets to alumni and friends. Murray Elliot took this buzzing photo of one of the sunflowers he grew.



# SUNFLOWERS PROVIDING A RAY OF HOPE IN AFRICA

by Michael McGarvie

**Ruth Vichos** – SRUC alumna and Lecturer in Horticulture – helping AIDS widows in Tanzania.



Between the third and final year of her SRUC Horticulture degree, Ruth Vichos visited Tanzania on a trip which changed her life.

“My mum is involved with the Eleanor Foundation, a Guernsey-based charity,” says Ruth. “I accompanied her on a site visit. I became really interested in food security, which led to my honours project topic and me deciding to go on to do the Masters degree through SRUC and The University of Edinburgh. I have been involved with Tanzania ever since.”

Ruth is working with one particular group – the Lusahunga community – which consists of ten or so women whose husbands have died due to AIDS. The widows have taken over the agricultural land and have been trying to move into cash crops, growing sunflowers to produce oil for sale.

*“I am helping them realise their goal,” explains Ruth. “Sunflowers are not the easiest crop to grow. In their first few years, 90 per cent of the community’s crop did not produce any oil. Partly it was the result of poor seed and also because the women were harvesting the seeds from their own flower heads, which were not viable. There are also problems with the slash-and-burn technique normally used in Tanzania depleting the soil, and sunflowers do need a good, nutrient-rich soil.”*

During subsequent visits (Ruth has visited three times in total) and regular WhatsApp contact with the Project Officer from the charity, Ruth has been working with the widows to improve matters, to the extent that last summer they produced their first sunflower oil.

“The ultimate aim is to make the Lusahunga community self-sustainable. So we are looking at ways to improve the soil nutrients by introducing a herd of local goats which, as well as supplying dung for the soil, will provide nutritious milk for widows with younger children. We have also had beehives built by a local carpenter which will help with pollination of the sunflowers, as well as providing another potential source of income through honey sales. In both cases, a local goatherder and beekeeper are training the widows with the skills needed. And as new widows join the community, those already trained can pass on their skills.

“Having successfully harvested their first oil, I am very keen to ensure that the yields will increase year on year to the extent that the community will eventually need its own oil mill. This in turn could become another source of income for the widows as other communities could pay to use it.”

Ruth gives freely of her time and expertise in helping the widows of the Lusahunga community in Tanzania. Her ‘proper’ job is as a lecturer in Horticulture at SRUC’s Edinburgh Campus, where she is helping to teach and inspire the current crop of students – hoping to sow her love of the subject.

# THE FUTURE'S GREEN

by Rosie Free, Michael McGarvie & Julie van den Driesche

The Covid-19 pandemic has rocked the global economy. Governments the world over have their best minds on economic solutions to the disaster. In Scotland, a 'green recovery' has been identified by the Scottish Government as key to securing the country's future. Net zero carbon targets and other lofty sustainable development goals are on the table.

But what about changes that can be made by individuals who are trying to carve out a living from the natural economy? We spoke to four innovative SRUC alumni who are making a difference through their work and businesses.

## Sustainably harvested seaweed

Skye born-and-bred entrepreneur **Ben Oakes** (below) is busy juggling two jobs – one with the family business of supplying the island's restaurant industry with scallops, and the other half focused on keeping his fledgling seaweed skincare business, *The Isle of Skye Seaweed Company*, up and running. Ben studied Sustainable Environmental Management, graduating from SRUC in 2013.

Sustainability has always been at the heart of Ben's motivations, with the family scallop business already adopting sustainable scallop diving techniques to directly supply the island's restaurants and chefs. Ben's new business sustainably hand-harvests Skye seaweed to be

used in creating his skincare range, that was launched in 2017.

"Sustainability is always at the forefront of my mind," says Ben. "It is really important to me. My definition of sustainability is if you walk away tomorrow, things carry on as before and there was never any sign that you were there."

Despite the impact of the pandemic on his skincare business, Ben is continuing to innovate and aiming to add another string to his bow by creating finished products for the food and drink industry.

*"There are a couple of companies along the east coast of Scotland that harvest seaweed for food, which ends up on Skye. With my connections to the island's restaurants through the scallop diving, and harvesting seaweed already for my skincare products, why not sell them seaweed while I'm at it?"*

Ben is currently working hard to see his dream through to fruition. However, uncertainties around Brexit, and the economic downturn from lockdown, make it a difficult time for a one-man business that is just starting out.

## Red deer for a green future

"Deer take a lot less management than sheep – it's often a case of leaving them to get on with it and just enjoying them," says SRUC alumnus **Stuart Mitchell**, (right) who

two years ago sold all his sheep and moved into the emerging red deer market. Based at *Whitriggs Farm*, near Denholm in the Borders, Stuart's family farm is one of just 30 deer farms in Scotland. Deer consume mainly grass instead of grain, therefore much like sheep, are a good livestock species in much of Scotland's hilly terrain, on land not suitable for producing crops or other herds.

The family's decision to move away from sheep was made after they discovered 82 per cent of their

flock had the viral disease Maedi Visna.

"We sold them all when they were in good condition. The money we got wasn't an awful lot but we weren't prepared to put that back into sheep in uncertain times," explains Stuart, who has been farming with his dad since graduating from SRUC in 2013. "We had started looking at other enterprises in the previous year, including pigs and chickens, but venison production suited our skills a lot better."

*Continued over*



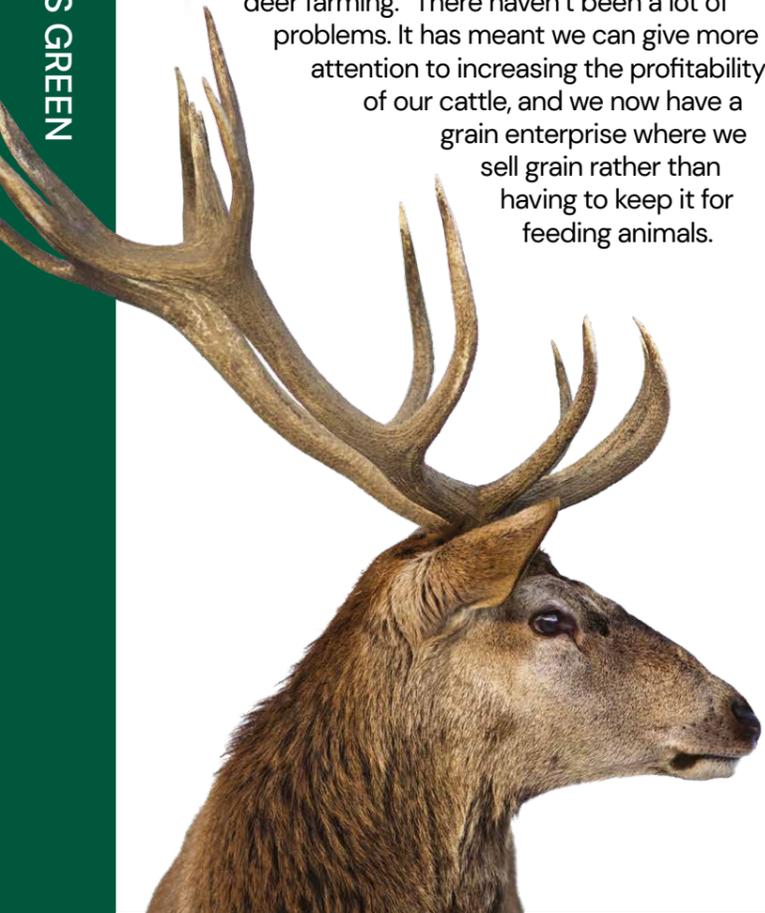
The move from sheep to deer coincided with the farm's inclusion in the monitor farm programme which aims to help improve the productivity, profitability and sustainability of farm businesses. After being grilled about their plans at a monitor farm meeting, the consensus was they should give it a go.

During this time, Stuart became the main partner in the business, enabling him to access a new entrant's grant to pay towards the cost of erecting more than 8km of deer fencing.

One of the first steps in the journey towards setting up the deer enterprise was securing a contract from the First Venison co-operative, which sells meat to Waitrose supplier Dovecote Park.

*"That gave us the confidence to do it," said Stuart. "Dovecote have built a venison line in their cattle abattoir and they need it to work. It is designed to take 20,000 a year. They were looking for farms to start farming deer."*

Stuart has no regrets about their decision to buck the trend and branch out into deer farming. "There haven't been a lot of problems. It has meant we can give more attention to increasing the profitability of our cattle, and we now have a grain enterprise where we sell grain rather than having to keep it for feeding animals.



"When you come to handling deer, they are a lot quieter than you would think. You go into a field and they all come towards you and stand and look at you. In the summer, you can just sit in a field for ages and watch them. They are really inquisitive animals."

#### Recycling – profit from waste

Another SRUC alumnus entrepreneur going from green strength to strength is **Tommy Dale**, (above) Managing Director of *Forth Resource Management (FRM)*, an environmental improvement company based in East Lothian which sustainably produces landscape and garden products as well as organic soil improvers for farms.

Tommy's business began as a student project during his HND Agriculture at SRUC in 2001. "We were given a make-believe small farm and the challenge of thinking of something to make it viable," explains Tommy. "I had read about a chap in London, who was charging landscapers to drop off their waste at night. He was mulching it up and selling it back to them as a compost the following spring. It's such a simple idea, to let nature and the microbes do much of the work for you."

Tommy approached his local council and a successful trial was run at East Lothian Waste Services with garden waste. In 2002 FRM was born, processing 1,000 tonnes in its first year. Celebrating its 18th birthday, FRM now operates out of ten different sites, processing nearly 100,000 tonnes, and has expanded its range of services.

"We now recycle farm plastics, we make biomass, and various other environmental

based services," says Tommy. "Until recently, huge amounts of plastics were incinerated on farms across Scotland. Thankfully now, that's not happening so much. We take in the chemical drums, fertiliser bags and silage wrap from farmers and bale them, and they go down south where they're shredded up and processed to go back out to make new plastic products."

Tommy's advice on how to make a difference to the environment whilst being successful at business is simple – follow your passion.

"I have a funny old selection of businesses: recycling, haulage and boat tours. People tell me that I'm an 'entrepreneur', but I can't even spell the word! It's not about academic ability, it's about finding something you're passionate about, really getting stuck in, building it up bit by bit and enjoying the journey along the way."

It is the work of these and many more enterprising alumni that SRUC believes to be a key part of the answer to Scotland's economic recovery following these turbulent times. "Ben, Stuart, Christine and Tommy are fantastic examples of alumni who are creating sustainable products, introducing greener herds, developing eco products and harnessing nature's power," explains Professor Wayne Powell, SRUC's CEO and Principal.

"The economy is facing a 're-set' and a green recovery is important for Scotland, indeed the world, as we rise to the wicked challenges, including climate change, biodiversity threats, and feeding a growing population with nutritious food."

#### Alternatives to plastics

When people enjoy a plate of lovely, deep-fried scampi, many may not be aware that two thirds of the langoustine – from which the scampi is extracted – is discarded as waste and goes into landfill. Applied Bioscience graduate **Christine Jesson** is working with the innovative company *CuanTec*, based in Oban, to put this waste to much better use.

*"The langoustine catch is worth £97 million per year, which is a lot of waste!" says Christine. "Here at CuanTec we are using the langoustine shell to create a compostable food packaging as an alternative to plastic."*

Christine, who is a Process Scientist with the company, continues, "The process involves removing chitin, a naturally occurring polymer, from the shells. Normally the removal process requires the use of harsh chemicals, but we are researching a more biological process with less chemicals which also uses less energy. This alternative food packaging is antimicrobial so shelf life of packaged foods may be extended, thereby further reducing food waste."

Christine's career has involved working in innovative, small companies, firstly with producing biodiesel from tropical oilseed plants and then on producing novel polysaccharides from micro-algae, before joining *CuanTec*. "I hope that my work and career path will help inspire SRUC students and alumni to follow different career paths. I would never have envisaged working with marine-based materials, but, in our modern world, we need to be able to adapt and use the tools we are given at SRUC to forge ahead in life and find a career that gives fulfilment and makes a difference."



# CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

## OF TEACHING AT SRUC OATRIDGE

Teaching at **SRUC's Oatridge Campus** in West Lothian began in 1969/70. 50 years on, we are still proud to be at the heart of the local community, shaping those who go on to shape the future of Scotland, UK and the world.

Our celebrations were put on hold in 2020. However, a wide range of memories were collated by current and past colleagues, students and alumni, and shared across our social media.

If you have memories to share, contact us on [alumni@sruc.ac.uk](mailto:alumni@sruc.ac.uk) or follow us on Facebook or Twitter: [@SRUCAlumni](https://www.facebook.com/SRUCAlumni)  



### Meet Oatie and Barony!

The SRUC Alumni community named two dairy buffalo cows after two of SRUC's campuses that teach agriculture.

**Oatie** and **Barony** are part of alumnus Steve Mitchell's milking herd for his new mozzarella enterprise at *The Buffalo Farm*, based in Kirkcaldy.

The SRUC Alumni Entrepreneur Network plans to hold its first event at *The Buffalo Farm* were delayed due to Covid-19, but we are looking forward to recognising the achievements of our entrepreneurial alumni soon!



Photo by John Wright.



Photo by Phil Wilkinson.



Photo from EDF website.



Photo by John Wright.

# SOARING WITH EAGLES

by Michael McGarvie

Two SRUC alumni – **Philip Munro** (top photo) and **Mark Johnston** (middle photo) – are working at opposite ends of Scotland helping to support golden eagle populations.

“Golden eagles are not seen as a species of the south so I am working at raising their profile to enable people to have a sense of pride and guardianship in ‘a southern population of eagles,” says Philip Munro, Community Outreach Officer with the *South Scotland Golden Eagle* project.

A very small number of golden eagles have clung to survival in southern Scotland, across the Borders and Dumfries & Galloway. The initiative is helping to build up the local eagle population and provide a lifeline to prevent extinction in the area by a series of translocations over a five-year period.

“We are relocating eight-week old eagle chicks to aviaries in southern Scotland where

they are released with satellite tags when fully fledged,” says Philip. “It is a really exciting project. I talk with school children about it, speak at events and liaise with stakeholders.”

Philip, a Sustainable Environmental Management graduate, continues: “Given the perception that eagles are not native to the area, I have a role in building bridges and understanding different perspectives. This is where some of the listening skills I learnt in the small group work during my SRUC studies pays off, as well as knowledge gained from meeting students from other disciplines.”

In northern Scotland, which is more traditionally perceived to be the golden

Photo by Ewan Weston.



Two tagged golden eagle chicks from the habitat management plan in northern Scotland.

eagles’ home, Mark Johnston, a Countryside Management graduate, is working as a Wildlife Ranger at the Dorenell Wind Farm in Morayshire, where he is closely involved in implementing the golden eagle habitat management plan.

Mark is employed by EDF Renewables, who run the wind farm, who have funded the tagging of 25 golden eagle chicks over five years.

“I work with a project team and a licenced ornithologist,” says Mark. “So far we have tagged eight chicks – three last year and five this year. The chicks will be followed for three years each. The data has been coming through from the tags and it is fascinating to see what happens when the chicks leave the nest.

“Once fledged, initially the chicks stay near to their nests but then start to explore further and further afield, eventually making long journeys across the north east of Scotland.

“Our work is feeding into other studies being undertaken across Scotland looking at the challenges the eagles face, what territories they are not occupying and why, and how best to manage land to support golden eagles. This will allow the development of a conservation framework for golden eagles in the north east of Scotland.

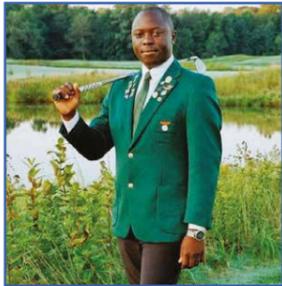
“As a ranger for a wind farm it is particularly interesting to see that the eagles stay very clearly away from the wind turbines. We are therefore creating an eagle-enhancement area, a land improvement project equivalent in size to the wind farm, to provide optimal living and breeding conditions for them.”

From changing the perception of the public through education to tagging fledglings to get a better handle on the behavioural ecology, it’s fantastic to see SRUC alumni making a real difference to the future of this important species.



# DRIVING AMBITION

by Rosie Free



Golf alumnus Vincent Kabaso's inspirational story began in Zambia – a country of 17 million people and less than 5,000 golfers. One of eight children growing up in a two-bedroom house in the small mining town of Luanshya, Vincent was introduced to golf – and a whole new world of opportunities – by his dad at the age of ten.

Prior to that, his after-school activities consisted of shooting birds and mice with catapults or swimming in a nearby snake and disease-infested stream.

Fast forward to the present day, the USA-based golfer is Zambia's first elected member of the Professional Golfers Association of America, has been selected to the national PGA leadership development programme and has written a book about his inspirational journey of self-discovery.

Vincent, who studied for an HNC Pro Golf at SRUC's Elmwood Campus in Fife, has also set up the foundation Raised by the World to empower young people in his home country by facilitating access to education and career opportunities.

The foundation also organises the Albert Kabaso Junior Series, a golf schedule of events across Zambia.

Like many people across the world, he has been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic this year – spending five days in hospital after contracting the virus.

"I had shortness of breath and got really weak," he said. "It wasn't terrible, but scary all in all and I'm happy to have got through it."

However, as befitting one of his other roles as a motivational speaker, he is upbeat about the future.

"Life is good overall," says Vincent, who lives in San Antonio, Texas, with his wife Hannah, daughter JoAnna Zawadi and baby son Jabari Alcott who was born in October.

"I am taking time to promote my book *Raised by the World*, which has just been published on Amazon.

"The next plans are to create a documentary, then hopefully a movie out of my story."

**"Our aim is to increase participation in the game and at the same time, use it to promote core life skills and values amongst all participants."**

You can read more about Vincent on his website: [www.vincentkabaso.com](http://www.vincentkabaso.com)



Photo by Peter Tarry.

# LEADING THE FIELD

Professional jockey Nicola Currie is blazing a trail in her field, in keeping with her ambition to achieve things as a female jockey that haven't been done before.

by Rosie Free

The 27-year-old from the Isle of Arran became one of the first women to compete in the Jockeys' Challenge in Saudi Arabia and was the first woman to ride in Europe's richest mile race – the Queen Elizabeth II Stakes.

Her racing career started after she completed an NC in Horse Management at SRUC's Oatridge Campus.

"I have always been around horses and initially wanted to pursue a career in show jumping or buying and producing youngsters," she said.

"Some of my family had attended Oatridge and I wanted to follow in their footsteps. I had my own horse with me so when I wasn't studying, I was able to use the amazing facilities. The teaching offered at Oatridge is second to none. You are working with teachers with bags of experience in different elements of the equine industry. It's also hands-on – you're able to learn whilst doing tasks."

Her first job after graduating was with Ron Brady, a show jumper based in Fife.

"I actually got the job by approaching Mr Brady at one of the show jumping events being held on campus. I learnt a lot working there, from riding top class show jumpers to youngsters learning their trade."

"I then went on to work for George Babes in Kilmarnock, a family-run show jumping yard."

Her big break came when she was offered the opportunity to ride out for Lucinda Russell, the national hunt trainer based in Kinross.

*"The second I went into the racing yard I fell in love with the industry," she said. "They helped me progress, and after a couple of years, I made the decision to attempt to get my apprentice jockeys licence."*



"After getting my licence, Lucinda very kindly gave me my first ride, and she and her partner Peter Scudamore then helped me to make the move to Lambourn to pursue my career as a flat jockey."

Since then she has ridden 170 winners and won the All Weather

Champion Apprentice title two years in a row. After turning professional two years ago, she wants to continue improving and aim for bigger races.

"Long term, I just hope I can have a successful career and continue to build up contacts with new trainers," she said.

"Every year I set the goal of trying to ride more winners than I did the previous year and try to beat the record for winners ridden by a female jockey in a calendar year."

# COMMUNITY MATTERS

**Ewan Pate** reflects on his time at SRUC and the life-saving work of RSABI.



**RSABI**  
Supporting People  
in Scottish Agriculture

by Ewan Pate

I well remember the excitement of arriving at Edinburgh's King's Buildings back in 1966. It was the start of a journey into the fascinating world of Scottish agriculture but beyond that I doubt if any of us embarking on the two-year Scottish Diploma in Agriculture that October knew what was in front of us. There was however a definite feeling that the industry was on the cusp of great change. Even the building itself, nearly new at the time, seemed to have been designed to embody confidence in the future.

In most respects the confidence has not been misplaced and we are all stewards of an infinitely more efficient farming sector. My own career, although always rooted in farming in Angus, was much enhanced by a late diversification into agricultural journalism, firstly for 11 years as farming editor of the Courier in Dundee and now as a freelance working for the Farmers Guardian and Farm North East.

*“To say it has been interesting would be an understatement – it has been truly fascinating.”*

But what I really want to write about is my nine years as a Trustee of the farming charity RSABI. For the last three of these years I have chaired the Board of Trustees and the whole experience has made me realise what a uniquely important organisation it is. It was founded back in 1897 and known then as the Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institute, a suitably Victorian name for a charity that pre-dated state pensions and health care and when the majority of farm and estate workers lived in tied accommodation. Well supported by landowners and larger farmers the charity

existed to help mostly elderly beneficiaries who had no other source of help or income. The modern RSABI is a very different organisation. It does still proudly help people that can no longer work due to age or illness – as ever on a completely confidential basis – but the service is now much wider offering emotional, practical and financial support wherever needed. I am always humbled to read feedback from clients who have used the service – individuals and families who have made their living from farming and have been struck low by misfortune not of their own making. People who have been working diligently in our industry can be suddenly hit by illness, bereavement, and loss of income or home. Sadly, all too often these misfortunes coincide. The welfare team at RSABI is however well-trained and experienced and can offer the combination of services deemed appropriate.

Many cases nowadays involve working farmers and farm workers and RSABI has been successful in helping them move forward. The trustees have been aware for some time that a business appraisal is often a crucial first step to recovery and RSABI are there to help with that. I am grateful to SAC Consulting for often providing this service. It is a reminder that Scottish agriculture is a community and works best when it acts like one.

If you are asked in the coming months to become an RSABI supporter please consider it and cement your place as part of that community. The **#RSABI500** campaign is looking to increase supporter numbers by 500. You can sign up from just £2 per month. For more information: <https://bit.ly/SupporterScheme>

**SRUC is proud to be a Corporate Supporter of RSABI.**

The RSABI Helpline operates from 7am to 11pm every day of the year and is open to those from across the agricultural sector. Tel: **0300 111 4166** / [www.rsabi.org.uk](http://www.rsabi.org.uk)

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**Rory Magorrian,**  
Kildinan Farm, Ireland

### Why did you choose your postgraduate course?

I chose Organic Farming for the great access and information that can help improve our farm practices. Research on my own felt very hit and miss.

### What do you do for a job?

We are a certified organic farm growing and supplying local supermarkets with four key high value products.

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