

MANAGING CATTLE, SHEEP AND PEOPLE IN NZ!

BACK home on the family farm near Newtownards after four years overseas Jenny Martin, 26, has brought home wide experience of managing livestock and people.

Formerly assistant manager on the world famous **Walter Peak High Country Station** in New Zealand Jenny is now marketing and communications executive with the YFCU. The Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster being the largest rural youth organisation in Northern Ireland for those aged 12 to 30.

As Jenny explained this NZ hill station along the shores of Lake Wakatipu, South Island is home to 20,000 sheep, 2,000 cattle, mainly Herefords and a tourist business. This is based on bringing travellers across the lake from Queenstown using the TSS Earnslaw, an Edwardian vessel powered by two triple expansion steam engines. Since 1912 she has cruised Lake Wakatipu with stokers shovelling a tonne an hour of coal.



The scenery in NZ is large scale! As are sheep flocks; 20,000 ewes roam the Walter Peak High Country Station near Queenstown



Jenny and colleague head out to work at Walter Peak High Country Farm on South Island

"Until recent decades the ship served remote hill stations around the lake transporting livestock, wool, people and all their needs to and from Queenstown," Jenny added, "As the road network improved this trade faded and the TSS Earnslaw became a tourist attraction helping draw people to Walter Peak High Country Farm. This is 155ha of the main station developed as a massive attraction for visitors from all over the world.

"As assistant manager my varied role included ensuring sheep and cattle used in demonstrations such as shearing were in the right condition and the right place at the right time with the help of three stock hands. At the same time managing the flow of tourists from dockside to tour farm attractions that include quality meals prepared using food mostly produced on the station. Beef, lamb and even pork from a pig unit are the far end of the 100,000 ha station." A multi faceted role that matched Jenny's degree in agricultural business management from Harper Adams University College in Shropshire.

“On leaving Uni I was awarded the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society travel scholarship to attend the Commonwealth Agricultural Conference held that year in Singapore. Harper Adams also chipped in supporting onward travel to gain farm business experience. Hence I ended up in New Zealand and first worked on the **North Island at a dairy farm running 500 Friesians near Lake Taupo**. These were milked through an old fashioned herring bone parlour. In NZ folks either seem to have state of the art modern parlours such as rotary or they are eking a few more years out of existing equipment.

“First sight of a dairy unit in NZ is a bit of a shock for an agricultural graduate from Co Down! No fancy buildings or acres of concrete and slurry tanks! Instead a parlour under a roof with open sides plus nearby a basic machinery shed and workshop.

“The climate means that even in winter stock are out in the fields so no storing and hauling slurry, cleaning cubicles, feeding stock in sheds or making huge amounts of silage. All silage made is big baled and fed in the fields during winter time. I spent eight months on the dairy unit and even got used to dipping frozen clusters in hot water before putting them on a cow's udder during frosty winter mornings. All in a parlour with no walls and no heaters!



“One major difference was the attitude of farm families to work life balance. The farmer and family will all have other interests beside their livestock. The guy I worked for on North Island rode to hounds with the local hare hunt. Others would take a three day fishing trip with their mates or head away with family sailing or trekking. How many Northern Ireland farmers would admit to making time for an interest off their farm be it fishing, sailing or golf? Almost none. Yet the Kiwis seem to come back from off farm fun with a renewed passion for farming. As if they had taken time to stand back and see the way ahead.

“So this better life balance generally in NZ compared to NI impresses. Though in rural communities, as work at Lincoln and Massey Universities has highlighted, mental health illness is still a problem. Mainly due to loneliness and financial pressure, bad weather, changing world markets and red tape. Though rules that do not match reality are still much less of an issue in New Zealand than in the UK.”

Keen to see the country, Jenny with pals then toured north and south islands before she became assistant manager at the iconic Walter High Peak Station.

"It was certainly a place with a great buzz and I had a house in Queenstown, which is a brilliant centre for outdoor sports. Again the attitude of farming folk seemed more relaxed than in Northern Ireland. Though the remoteness of many farms takes some getting used to as does the distance between settlements; down the road is more likely 70km not 7km.



"In the UK we have easy access to mobile phones and the internet yet where I worked that 100,000 ha station had virtually no internet or mobile connection. Coming back to my family again was quite a shock. Everyone here seems to be constantly using mobiles, tablets or laptops. They also seem to be constantly in a hurry and to see friends one almost has to make an appointment.

"I found Kiwis tended to be very friendly and obliging. In some ways they appear to have more in common with folks from NI than those from southern England. Perhaps a common strong dose of Scottish ancestry makes us more akin?" Jenny also noticed other differences in life back home. People here seeming more style and status conscious.



"When heading out socially with the gang in NZ a girl would happily attend in jeans, T shirt and light trek boots. In NI one has to revert to the high heels and make up. For weeks I was wobbling and straining the ankles!"

"But as ever getting back to be with family and friends is brilliant. As is my new YFCU role, which was much more home based than expected due to the COVID-19 crisis. A role that re-awakens links with other young farming folk province wide."

However, Jenny notes the pressure COVID-19 has put on farming businesses. For example, her family run one of the longest established and respected British Blue Cattle Herds in the country. "We had as usual planned to sell top Springhill bulls at the British Blue Society sale in the Borderway Mart, Carlisle, but instead turned to online sales until the mart re-opened."

Looking back on four amazing years and experiences Jenny admits to missing that Kiwi spontaneity and can do attitude; yet with time to enjoy a stunningly scenic landscape in a country where some good aspects of life are more like a Britain of 50 years ago.



A tractor Jenny found fit for the rugged landscape of a New Zealand Hill Station

“But NZ has one major draw back. 36 hours flying time home to see the folks that count most of all in our lives; our family and closest friends. That was the key reason I settled home again in a place that is very like NZ, but with more people, less space, less time and far more technology. A place that I now appreciate even more after four years of adventures overseas.”

Thanks to Rodney Magowan for linking up with Jenny to produce this article.