

# Farming without a farm

Acquiring a farm is the biggest challenge for most who want to get into farming with no family connections in the industry, but by establishing *Grazing Management*, a business based on the management of conservation grazing, Alex and Emily Crawley have become farmers without a farm.





**T**he success of this start-up business, launched in 2020, was highlighted when Alex and Emily became winners of the British Farming Award for the “New entrant – against the odds” in 2023. The main focus of the business is ecology-led contract conservation grazing to restore wildflower meadows, peatlands and heathlands. Grazing Management is built on the combined skills of Alex and Emily. Alex combines a background in the military and diplomatic service with a deep desire to be a livestock farmer, while Emily has an MSc in Environmental Decision Making and has worked with environmental consultancies, think tanks and charities focused on food, farming and environmental education.

Alex had always wanted to farm and his ideal would have been to study agriculture at university and go on to having his own farm. Two things were against him: his education was sponsored by the military, which inevitably influenced his degree path, and there was no family farm waiting for him. Instead, Alex studied Arabic and Farsi and followed a career path that took him into the army and then onto the Foreign Office.

He says: “The desire to produce food was always there. I spent downtime in combat zones trying to grow tomatoes and while I was with the diplomatic service, I set up a joint venture in Jordan raising goats on some waste land opposite our apartment. Wanting to be a farmer producing food was always there in the background.”

Farming came to the foreground in 2017 as Alex explains: “After 10 years of working in conflict zones, I was diagnosed with PTSD and realised that I had to take a step back. I took a voluntary placement working with a herd of Jersey dairy cattle and found the whole experience incredibly soothing. I realised that what I really wanted to do was to work with livestock.”

Alex then won a Clyde-Higgs scholarship via the Royal Agricultural University (RAU) and spent a year studying for a graduate diploma in agriculture and graduated with RAU’s Haygarth Medal as the top student on the course. While at RAU, he saw how the National Trust were using Belted Galloway cattle for environmental land management, which gave him an idea for a business based on outsourcing cattle grazing services. He put together a business plan, which gained him the Pinnacle Award for entrepreneurship in farming. His plan was based around grassland grazing, offering full compliance with conservation rules, environmental regulations and public access.

After graduating, Alex took various labouring jobs on “probably 20 different farms”. He says: “I was learning all the time and I was

immensely grateful for all the people who gave their time teaching me, but I knew that financially having my own farm just wasn’t going to happen. We were living in the Cotswolds and there wasn’t even a remote possibility of getting a tenancy, let alone buying land. Emily and I considered our situation and it was a case of ‘we don’t have land, we don’t have cows, so how can we do it?’. The answer was that we should put my business plan into practice and farm without a farm – it seemed like a natural fit.”

Searching for a base, Alex, Emily and their two young daughters found a farmhouse in the Wye Valley which came with 6 acres of unimproved meadows and a small flock of Shetland sheep. By then, Alex had returned to the Foreign Office and was commuting to London and Emily was also working full time for an environmental educational charity which, when combined with turning Alex’s business plan into reality, meant that “there was quite a lot going on”.

The opportunity to get Grazing Management off the ground came with funding from Severn Trent’s Boost for Biodiversity Fund, which offers support to projects that enhance or improve the biodiversity across land in the Severn Trent region. Alex says: “From the outset, Severn Trent have been brilliant, really flexible. That initial funding meant that we could approach local landowners and offer a free service to establish our credentials. We started off working on tiny scraps of land that no one in their right mind would have taken on, but we were hungry for it.”

Being located in the Forest of Dean, Alex and Emily soon developed a good local network. As a new start-up they gained funding from the Forest of Dean District Council and worked with various local organisations, including the Parish Grassland Project, Foresters Forest, a National Lottery Heritage Fund supported landscape partnership programme, and the Wye Valley National Landscape’s Farming in Protected Landscapes programme.

Fundamental to Grazing Management’s operation is the use of NoFence geocollars. Alex says: “I’d had experience of geofencing technology with the military and immediately saw the potential for working remotely with cattle. Using this technology enables us not only to pinpoint and control where cattle are grazing, but also to track patterns of behaviour. For example, we had reports that one of our Herefords appeared to be tender on one hoof, so we were able to look at the data and see that it had been moving less than the rest of the herd for a couple of days and we could immediately do something about it.”

Working only with native breeds, the Crawleys currently have Belted Galloways, Traditional Herefords and Ancient Cattle of Wales, Bagot goats, and Castlemilk Moorit and Shetland sheep which are used for grazing within fenced areas. They buy in all of the grazing livestock,



usually at about a year old but will take older cull cows if they are temperamentally suitable. All new stock spends an initial induction period on the Crawley's own acreage, to get used to the geocollars and enable their temperaments to be assessed. Emily explains: "This training period is very important because we need to make sure that the herd dynamics are right as the animals will be going onto sites with public access. We're looking for docile animals that will follow a bucket of food, be non-reactive to dogs, get into a trailer, and work well with NoFence. We can't keep any animals that don't work with the whole system. Once we have the animals out on projects, we will keep them for as long as they're happy and healthy – we just need them to be able to stand on four hooves and eat. We currently have a 13 year old cow out on one site."

With the number and size of projects growing, Alex became full-time with Grazing Management at the end of last year and Emily is doing the same in July. They have two part-time members of staff, a move which Alex describes as a big step, but one that gives them resilience as a business, plus wider groups of volunteers, often from the organisations they partner with, who act as stock checkers. Alex and Emily have worked with RBST to offer training to their stock checkers, through RBST's LANTRA-accredited GAP training services. Emily says: "The GAP course gave our volunteers real confidence and bound people together as a team. Our volunteers have become our ambassadors, speaking to people on site and responding when members of the public raise concerns on line. I love it that we are educating people about animals in the course of our business." Alex adds: "We are lucky to work with a network of landowners and volunteers who are really brilliant. What we do is not straightforward, but it captures people's imagination and they buy in to what we are trying to achieve."



The projects that Grazing Management are working on have developed substantially since they started on 'tiny scraps of land'. They have taken on more projects with Severn Trent and are now Strategic Partners, which eliminates the need to go through a tendering process for each project, and they also have partnerships with Wye Valley National Landscape and Natural Resources Wales. A new partnership has been established with the Old-Lands estate in Monmouthshire belonging to the ecology focused Bosanquet family, who are working to restore 200 acres of species-rich grasslands as part of a wider estate landscape restoration

Alex says: "We are winning clients because we offer complete project management, which encompasses planning, management and site monitoring, and are prepared to take on challenging sites. We may never be the best beef farmers in the world, but we can bring lots of other skills to bear from Emily's experience in environmental management to my background in military planning and diplomacy, and feel so lucky to be doing what we love."



Photograph: Shirley Lawton

