

Careers

Best of both worlds for this farm animal vet

Completing a year of management studies while at vet school provided invaluable training for **Sam Bowker** as he now splits his time between roles as director of Blackdown Farm Vets and on the family farm.

LOOKING back, growing up with livestock has been hugely formative in my life, with exposure to outdoor pigs, sheep, cattle and even reindeer piquing an interest in a career within agriculture. Aged seven, I started my own flock of pedigree Charollais sheep, which provided a level of interest beyond the day-to-day tasks on the family farm, exposing me to proactive veterinary approaches such as scrapie genotyping and artificial insemination.

It also taught me some valuable lessons in terms of the vagaries of livestock, with inevitable deaths at times, as well as managing the economics of an enterprise. From age nine, I was charged 'grass keep' by my parents and had to keep annual accounts as a teenager!

I had not planned to go to vet school initially, but a combination of inspiring work experience with George Dart of the Vale Vet Group and a strong academic record in the sciences led me to apply.

Thankfully, Cambridge took a punt on me, despite the fact I had no work experience with small animals or horses! Vet school was intense but fascinating, and I relished the opportunity for a third-year intercalation in management studies.

It was a brilliant course, widening my horizons beyond the clinical and, if I'm honest, it was my favourite year at vet school (it may also have been due to the six hours of contact learning a week and the 20 hours of sport I managed to fit in). I genuinely feel that that year framed a lot of how I approached being a vet.

After qualifying and having sold the flock of sheep to buy an engagement ring, my now wife and I headed to Cheshire for an adventure,

and were quickly welcomed as family by both the veterinary practice and the local church. It was a wonderful place to be a new graduate, with a massive caseload of dairy work and senior vets who were keen to see young vets try new things and develop their interests.

Modern farm vet

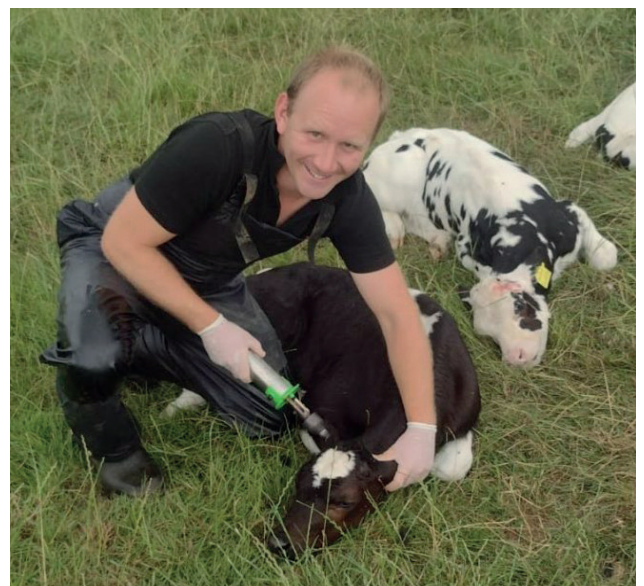
I was fortunate to be working with proactive farmers with whom close relationships could be built, and learned quickly that the level of relationship you have with a farming client determines the rate of input and subsequent change that can be realised on farm. Showing an interest in the farm and its goals, systems and challenges proved to be very valuable.

I am also hugely grateful for the level of veterinary business exposure I was given as a young graduate – from explanations of veterinary pricing structures to preparation of tenders for buying groups and personality profiling testing for optimal communication with different characters within the vet team and on farm.

At that stage, the practice was independently owned and the logical progression seemed to be to work towards partnership.

Lameness and block calving

One of the best pieces of advice that I was given as a clinical student was to develop an interest in a specific area of veterinary medicine. Without



Sam practising 'knock down' disbudding of calves

thinking strategically, I fell into an interest in lameness work through being given the young graduate job of mobility scoring. Although somewhat tedious at times (six hours to score 2000 cows on one farm every month), this provided access to some of the more progressive farms in the practice.

It also fed an interest in analysing data to improve outcomes on farm, something I have always been very passionate about. The relatively low-skilled job of mobility scoring provided a platform for further training as a 'mobility mentor' and more interesting consultancy work in the longer run.

At the same time, the farm at



One of the best pieces of advice that I was given as a clinical student was to develop an interest in a specific area of veterinary medicine

WHY NOT SHARE YOUR CAREER JOURNEY?

Vet Record Careers aims to reflect the diverse range of career opportunities available to vet professionals. Suggestions for articles are welcome. Please send them to vet.careers@bvajournals.com



“
From a veterinary perspective, practical farming has certainly made me a better vet

From left: Discussing performance with a farm client and taking liver biopsies for mineral analysis

home was starting to gradually move to autumn block calving, and this, along with a desire to see the glorious creation of the Antipodes, led me to taking a sabbatical in New Zealand in 2018. The opportunity to work and travel and be exposed to different ways of doing things was hugely valuable and I would encourage anyone to take the opportunity. This was a significant time in more ways than one, as back in Cheshire, change was afoot.

Moving back to Devon

On reflection, I have probably always subconsciously thought that I would be involved in running a business, and so to return to the UK to find that the practice had been sold to a corporate was very unsettling. In addition, witnessing successful block calving systems had inspired me and so, in 2019, my wife – also from Devon – and I explored what a move back home would look like.

We were expecting our first child and, after a number of conversations with our parents and lots of praying, we decided to move. I took a three-day-a-week role in a local practice and worked two (realistically four) days on the family farm.

This stage of life was, and continues to be, a significant learning curve in terms of understanding myself and what a balanced life looks like. A tendency towards perfectionism and, at times, working 26 days straight has on a couple of occasions led to burnout. This work pattern wasn't sustainable for me or my young family, and so

following conversations with my parents, I now only work weekends on the farm during the calving season – this has made a massive difference.

From a veterinary perspective, practical farming has certainly made me a better vet. A greater awareness of the farming industry as a whole, as well as a realisation that the vet's number-one priority for the farmer is often number eight on the farmer's priority list (the scraper tractor has a puncture or the relief milker has phoned in sick), has certainly tailored the advice I give and how I give it. In addition, being able to try things on the farm and see if they work (we have done on-farm trials with monensin boluses and ketoprofen) has given me greater confidence in making recommendations.

Blackdown Farm Vets

In 2021, an opportunity arose to be involved in a new farm-only practice in the local area, Blackdown Farm Vets. Being able to realise my goal of running a veterinary business with a great team has been the most enjoyable and satisfying thing I have done in my career.

Being independent and in control of your destiny is massively important to me, and seeing a group of people who have ownership and work hard to provide a really good service is hugely rewarding.

I have been able to use a lot of what I learned in the management studies year at university, from financial awareness and negotiation

skills to seeking to set organisational culture. This is something I feel should be talked about more at vet school.

Proactive herd and flock health management, health planning and the use of data are increasingly important in farm practice, and when we set up Blackdown we wanted that to drive our business.

One of the things I am most proud of is the proactive health planning packages that we have set up and associated discussion groups. They drive lots of stimulating consultancy work on farm and seem to be helping to deliver real change, in particular through a focus on partnership, working with other advisers to the farm, including nutritionists and foot trimmers. The role of the farm vet is changing and we want to be at the forefront of that!



Supporting animals at a local show