

Farming on the shores of Lough Derg

By Laura Roddy on 01 June 2017



BROOKFIELD FARM, AILBHE GERRARD, LOUGH DERG

Ailbhe Gerrard took the leap from construction to farming six years ago and hasn't looked back since, writes Laura Roddy. Six years ago there was nothing here – I had just bought this. I still didn't know what I was going to do with it," Ailbhe Gerrard recalls of the start of her journey at Brookfield Farm in Coolbawn, Nenagh, Co Tipperary.

The kitchen table we sit at will belong to the kitchen of the farmhouse, once Ailbhe has finished renovating. Just 18 months ago, she grew her 65-

acre mixed farm to 75 acres, and purchased a house along with it, that sits perched on a hill overlooking Lough Derg. With beautiful views of the lake and a vantage that stretches for 70 miles, from Portumna to Killaloe, Brookfield Farm is Ailbhe Gerrard's happy place. "It's quite amazing. I have been really lucky to be a part of it," says Ailbhe, who swapped a career in construction to start from scratch in agriculture.

A terrifying start Though she sees herself as lucky now, Ailbhe says she

felt terrified at the beginning, when she was still figuring out what to do with the farm. "I remember lying awake at night and thinking: 'What am I going to do?'" she confesses.

Her family were surprised by her decision to purchase the land, with her sisters asking her if she was crazy and her brothers-in-law telling her she wouldn't make a living from it. She accepted the challenge, though she agrees that the Ailbhe of 15 years ago would have been surprised at her decision to pack in her construction

job and buy a farm just five minutes down the road from her family home. "This area is gorgeous but it is economically deprived – it's one of those unemployment hotspots. And so you didn't expect to be able to live here. You thought: 'Right, off to the city,'" she explains.

To the city Off to the city Ailbhe went, securing jobs in architects' offices while doing a postgraduate in construction management at night in Trinity College, followed by an MBA in DIT. She worked her way up to the

position of project manager, overseeing construction projects worth €25 to €200 million.

"We worked on bank headquarters, office fit-outs and unused development," Ailbhe explains. In 2006, Ailbhe says she could see the crash was coming, as banks were beginning to stop handing out several million in seed money and their hesitation was starting to show.

Ailbhe handed in her notice and decided to go back to study a masters in environmental and sustainable development in University College London for three years. She then returned to Ireland and bought the farm from money she had made while working in construction.

Growing up on a small holding, Ailbhe wasn't ignorant about farming. "We grew our own vegetables and we had hens and made our own hay – hand turned hay – it was hard work," she laughs.

"My mum and dad were delighted when I bought the farm. They were so excited. They didn't expect it, but they were really pleased and really supportive," Ailbhe explains.

"My mum [Mide] died three years ago, so it was nice to be there for her last years," Ailbhe continues.

"She had a real interest in land

and landscape and land use and how people could be economically active in a rural area. I have actually absorbed a lot of her thinking about it, because she was very wise and very thoughtful."

And indeed, a lot of thought has gone into the dynamic of Brookfield Farm. There are 25 acres of trees, 25 acres of land and 25 acres of crops.

Back to the books

While deciding what to do with the land, Ailbhe studied organic farming part-time for three years in Aberdeen and has turned all of the grass on the farm organic, which is used by her sheep and lambs. She sells organic Brookfield Farm Lamb straight to the consumer and also keeps bees, which produce honey. She uses their beeswax (with a little help from other stuff) to make candles and lip balms.

An integral cycle

Ailbhe describes her farm as "an integral cycle". "Traditional mixed farms use inputs that they need," she explains. "The straw for the cattle would come from the bit of the tillage that they had and the oats from the tillage would be fed to the cattle or the horses, and the pig would use up the household scraps but would also be protein. Then there would always be a bit of extra cottage

industry going on – like hens for eggs that can be sold and a lot of beekeeping, actually."

Under GLAS, she got funding to put down wild-bird cover on the farm too. In addition, she sells the hardwood thinnings from her forestry, winter barley and lamb. She has set up a hiveshare, where you can get a share of the honey her bees produce, and makes the candles and lip balm too. She teaches in nearby Gurteen College, welcomes people onto her farm for farm walks and honey celebrations and is preparing for Bloom at the minute, as well as carrying out research for various other projects.

"I started quite a few projects and expected some of them not to turn out – and what has happened is they all have worked out, which is brilliant," she says. It is clear that the skills she has learned from her previous life have certainly been applicable to her farming life and she agrees too. "I treat it [farming] like project management, so every element is a project and I try to manage resources. I don't know if other farmers do that. I presume they probably do – that is the way I do it," she notes.

For the barley, she hires contractors – but other than that all of the work is done by herself. She says her father Peter – who is still

living in the home house – is a great help, making her dinners when she gets really busy.

"I am glad I am farming now," she says at one stage. "I am running a business, so I am more face forward, but there are loads of women farmers who are working away and nobody knows about them," she adds.

Ailbhe is certainly face forward, involved in endless projects and having won so many awards: most recently bronze in the Creative Retail category at the Bank of Ireland Start-Up Awards

For Ailbhe, study and travel are two things that are really important. Last year she was chosen as a Nuffield Scholar and not long ago she was selected to travel to Korea and represent Ireland by IFOAM, an umbrella organisation for Organics International.

"It is the best life being a farmer – it is absolutely brilliant and so varied. I picked a varied, diversified farm. I thought when I started farming I would not be moving very much, but I have never done more travelling in my life – and it is all about agriculture and being brought on these scholarships, so I really enjoy that and I have met some really interesting people," Ailbhe surmises. CL

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