



PROFILE

From Jennifer Byrne

Nuffield Scholar Ailbhe Gerrard and Brookfield Farm

Ailbhe Gerrard's family farm is by the shores of Lough Derg in County Tipperary. Despite the idyllic setting, an urban life lured her away from home and countryside, and a successful career in construction project management kept her away for many years to follow.

It wasn't until much later, when she began to study sustainable development at University College London, focusing specifically on the role of smallholders and women farmers in food systems and agribusiness that a choice presented itself; keep researching or get practical. Get practical is what she did and the search for land was on.

The chosen site was, eventually, Brookfield Farm, back on the shores of Lough Derg and Ailbhe has been proud owner now for almost 6 years. It was more land than she had intended to buy, it had been neglected and misused and a lot of work would be required to improve soil conditions. So, with local farmer Rory Deasy as mentor, Ailbhe took the decision to leave the land alone for a couple of cycles and continue to study in preparation for her new career. After completing the MSc in Organic Farming (Scotland's Rural College) at SRUC and Jim Cronin's Organic Market Gardening course in Killaloe, Ailbhe committed to introducing an organic lamb enterprise onto her land, alongside organic grassland, broadleaf forestry and a small portion of conventional tillage. Now, in 2016, she is in her second year of conversion and going strong.

Ailbhe's lamb enterprise is rooted firmly in the ethos of happy, healthy, well-tended animals resulting in tender, nutritious and delicious meat. 'Looking after animals is very important - it is a traditional part of Irish farming. There are many advantages in using animals in a farming system, but only with the highest of welfare principles.' Having a small number of enterprises on a farm is also a means to combat the challenges of making a reliable income. Ailbhe believes 'diversity will help make a resilient and sustainable farm'. While she



maintains a small conventional tillage section on her land, Ailbhe intends to withdraw from this over time, with the plan being to go fully organic. But she wants to take her time and get it right.

The vision for Brookfield Farm is to reconnect people with food production and farming. Ailbhe is passionate about food systems; local, national and global. She fully believes in the value of Irish honey, for example, arguing persuasively that Irish honey should not have to compete with honeys of questionable provenance on the supermarket shelves. Her Hiveshare concept, through which consumers can invest in a share of a beehive and enjoy the fruits thereof, is both innovative and sustainable. She invites Hiveshare members to visit the farm, see the bees in their hives and out on the 12 acres of wildflower available to them, all in the hope of educating consumers and perpetuating the value of quality, ethical food production. Her Honey Celebration day each summer offers honey-themed foods and drinks, bee talks, accessibility to a learning hive and the chance to actively

engage with this food system. Ailbhe's beeswax candles are a successful side-project to Hiveshare. Hand-dipped and traditionally made, these beautifully presented products are now available online – again, direct from the farmer.

In addition to her extensive studies, Ailbhe is also a current Nuffield scholar. She was awarded the scholarship in September 2015, which was followed by a global trip in June and July of this year. It has been a daunting and wonderful experience in equal measure. 'It isn't easy as I am so early to farming. But it is noteworthy that I am a relatively small farmer, thereby representing diversity of farming types and gender. The experience so far is teaching me that we are lucky in Ireland with our social licence to farm. Many of the international scholars envy us our rural community and the tight-knit nature of it'. It is fascinating to hear Ailbhe talk about her experiences on a 6,000 acre pineapple farm in Indonesia, for example, and, having witnessed farming on this scale, hear her remain entirely confident for Irish small-scale organic farmers. 'You don't need to be

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big to make a decent income'. The culmination of her Nuffield journey will be documented in a thesis on forward-selling, that is, farmers selling directly to consumers.

How has the conversion process been so far? Ailbhe believes that writing her own conversion plan was extremely helpful in focusing her direction and pre-empting early pitfalls. It helped her to understand what she was doing before going all in. Her advice for those considering the organic route is to really consider before converting everything; it is a new market that will require new knowledge strengths. She

emphasises the importance of being 'connected to the organic community. Meet other people, do the farm walks'. Networking and engagement with local support groups have been very worthwhile for Ailbhe (she is a member of both Tipperary Food Producers and Tipperary Green Business Network), from where she takes a lot of energy and avoids the loneliness that can come with living and farming in a rural area.

For more information on Brookfield Farm or to view some of Ailbhe's beautiful products, visit <http://www.brookfield.farm/>



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