



ABOVE:

It's time to scan these cows using ultrasound so that the number of expected calves and their due dates can be tracked. A little feed is used to persuade them to leave behind their grassy meadow



THIS FARMING LIFE

The reality and the dream of life on the farm don't always match. Many small farms are struggling and a new generation no longer wants to nurture the land. Moved by the plight of these hard-working families, photographer Valerie Mather chronicled their Yorkshire seasons

WORDS: Valerie Mather



ABOVE: Yorkshire lads and lasses enjoy competing in traditional races at Malham agricultural show. Today the egg and spoon race substitutes tennis rackets and balls. However, the egg drop competition uses the real thing

TOP RIGHT: On a blisteringly hot summer day, these sheep are more than ready to get rid of their winter fleeces. Sheep can overheat and die in the summer months if not shorn

BOTTOM RIGHT: Jip the sheepdog may be getting on in years but she is always keen to help out!



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he idealistic view of farming life is all about spring lambs, big skies and the romance of the landscape.

And while that does exist, it's a tougher reality that Valerie Mather was touched by.

One that shows the average age of a UK farmer is 59 and, equally worryingly, that just three per cent of farmers are under 35. The suicide rate for farmers is almost twice the national average.

As a photographer Valerie was keen to chronicle the lives of farming families in

Yorkshire to see the daily slog and ongoing pressures. And also, to paint a picture of the spirit, grit and stoicism of our wonderful local farming communities.

The former lawyer from Boston Spa has created *Yorkshire Born & Bred: A Farming Life*, a book which captures the pressure and the pleasures of farming life.

Says Valerie: 'These alarming statistics made me want to see for myself what life was like for smaller farmers in and around Yorkshire. So, I set out to build relationships ►



and visit as many farms as I could. I was fortunate to meet families that have been farming the same land for three and four generations, as well as first-generation farmers not long out of agricultural college.'

She follows farmers through the lambing season, to shearing and to auctions and country shows.

'Small farms often have strong links with their communities but pressures on land and poor returns on their businesses mean many have sold up to be subsumed by larger farms

or for building and hence their way of life is under threat,' she says.

Valerie believes the farming community is facing the biggest changes since tractors replaced horses. Significant challenges being the post Brexit threat of cheap food imports not produced to the UK's high animal welfare and food quality standards and how they farm in the light of climate change and other environmental initiatives.

'Their success or failure will impact us all, as farmers are the custodians of our ►



TOP LEFT:
This farmer
proudly displays
his latest new-
born piglets. They
are as soft as silk
to stroke

BOTTOM LEFT:
Quad bikes
have long since
replaced horses
for bringing the
herd in from the
fields

ABOVE:
On a hot July day,
shearer Dan rests
in the shade on his
lunch break. He
has 140 sheep to
shear in a day



ABOVE:
Aldbrough &
Boroughbridge
Show provides
this young
farmer with an
opportunity to
enter his first
competition.

ABOVE RIGHT:
Livestock
auctions provide
the chance
for farmers to
catch up with
their farming
neighbours
between sales

RIGHT:
Photographer
Valerie Mather



land and their actions affect the countryside we enjoy and the quality of the food we eat. I want people to think about our farming industry when they shop and support them where they can.

'I feel passionately that these people don't have a voice and I want to raise awareness of their plight.'

She was particularly touched by the review of her book by retired Kirkbymoorside vicar Michael Wright. He was a vicar

in town in the 1970s and read and enjoyed the book while terminally ill.

'He has taken the time to write a lovely review which I was very moved by - he understood what I wanted to show in my images,' says Valerie. ♦

You can buy the book at valeriematherphotography.co.uk and from independent bookshops in Yorkshire after lockdown ends.