

YOUNG FARMERS DO IT IN WELLIES

MOVING to a new job can be daunting. Factor in a new area of the country, your first postgraduate job and home a five-hour drive away, and you have a recipe that makes for an anxious new graduate.

A Lancashire lass at heart, I moved from the red rose county to the Dorset coast to begin my first post as the RVC intern at Synergy Farm Health. I was faced with the challenge of building both my professional and personal life from scratch – a phenomenon faced by many new veterinary graduates every year.

As veterinary students, we are reminded throughout our education of the importance of a "work-life balance", as well as our holistic development and well-being. Even at my interviews for veterinary school, I was quizzed about veterinary mental health and "what I would do in my spare time".



As a student, I was probably as guilty as most of being a bookworm, but as a new graduate, I resolved to have a thriving extracurricular calendar. After all, work hard, play harder.

Stepping on to the social ladder

As a new farm veterinarian with my own sheep flock, and in need of an instant social calendar, my local young farmers club was my first port of call. Having selected a club based on the number of members in my age group and club size, I was invited along to Wareham and

"First impressions? They were mostly loud, the girls were all perfectly turned out and the lads soon congregated around the nearest piece of machinery (very stereotypical)."

Purbeck Young Farmers' Club – the biggest club in Dorset.

Prior to joining, I had many preconceptions about young farmers – raucous parties, drinking and vices with most members eventually married off. I also heard rumours of it being a closed community, with the entry criteria of a set acreage or livestock. Despite this, and with nothing to lose, I decided to attend my first meeting.

Having partially completed my first week at work shadowing veterinarians on routines, calf scour work-ups and retained fetal membranes, I set off to my first meeting. I arrived early – what I would soon learn to be a faux pas in this club, as no one is ever early. Waiting by my distinct Suzuki Swift, I was gradually met by a trickle of young farmers.

First impressions? They were

mostly loud, the girls were all perfectly turned out and the lads soon congregated around the nearest piece of machinery (very stereotypical). The club was preparing for the next local carnival and a concert they were about to host (The Wurzels were set to headline).

I was quickly introduced to the senior members of the club who, after teasing me about my "inner city car", began to ask questions. "So Emily, what do you do?"

As soon as I explained I was the new vet at Synergy, the banter began. After covering drug drop-offs, they all started comparing their own practices, discussing how many of my colleagues they knew, asking had I done my first solo displaced abomasum yet and saying how most of my colleagues "usually bring biscuits with them whenever they visit their farms". A tall tale.

After the initial excitement of "the new vet" had died down, it was back to business. "Emily, the club is doing a naked calendar," they said. "We're short for someone in the summer months – keen? Here's the front cover we've planned."



The author's new-found friends at Wareham and Purbeck Young Farmers' Club.

Having been shown a photo of two young men and a conveniently placed piece of machinery, I respectfully declined. I didn't want to give my new employers the wrong first impression.

The end of my first meeting was completed with a trip (in a tractor convoy) to the local pub. I was quizzed about my clinical interests and informed about all of our different clients with affiliations to the young farmers.

Networking success

With a week until the next meeting, I had time to reflect on my experiences. They were a nice bunch with a common interest in farming and having fun – the perfect group to complement my busy

working days as a farm vet.

It subsequently turned out my trip to the young farmers club had also been a nice introduction to a significant number of clients. Within the next week, I did a medicines drop-off for a young dairyman (who I recognised from the proposed front cover, this time wearing more than just his wellies) and I went to visit a down cow at one of the leader's farms. I found as soon as I walked on these farms, I had something in common with the client and this certainly eased me into my first few calls.

My visits to the young farmer meetings continued and involved helping with The Wurzels' concert, visiting a local quarry, talks by local agricultural

merchants and assisting at the Dorchester show.

Benefits of banter

One of the biggest events in the club's calendar is the annual harvest supper, in celebration of the year's achievements and to acknowledge the support given to the young farmers by "the old farmers" and local businesses.

My first harvest supper was preceded by a busy week at work. Tuberculosis testing in full flight and a visit to some memorable coughing cows culminated in a nasty collision with a "pastry transport vehicle". My ego was suitably bruised (the rest of me intact) and I ended my working week with a trip to the local village hall to help with final preparations.

"How was your day, Emily?" asked a notorious member. "So-so," I replied, with hesitation. "I had my back doors bashed in today." As soon as the words escaped my lips, I regretted them. Not only was my faux pas mentioned in the keynote speech of the evening, but spread far beyond the realms of the young farmers. Clients regurgitated this slip on many visits and my driving

"errors" became legendary. Thanks guys."

Other notable faux pas' included apologising for leaving a meeting because I had an "early start". Granted, being on farm for 6am was early for me, but not for my compatriots. The ribbing began and I soon also became notorious as

"A good laugh is like manure to a farmer – it doesn't do any good until you spread it around."

the sleep addict of the club.

Unfortunately for me, my driving misfortune continued, culminating in a further flat tyre, a cracked fuel sump and, ultimately, a written-off van. A lasting sentiment for

me was a fellow young farmer consoling me: "Emily, we're all farmers and really we'd rather you just arrived safe and sound on farm than not at all – even if you are going to be late. Slow down." This was very touching for a new graduate who was the newest member of the social group.

Social satisfaction

In a short space of time, I had established a new group of friends, who also had an interest in agriculture, an active social life and a busy calendar.

I was always warned, don't take work home with you and ensure you have a good

work-life balance. I had always found this difficult, exemplified perfectly by my sheep flock as a student and my trips to agricultural shows in the holidays. Agriculture is infectious and, like many of my friends from the young farmers' club, work and non-work life are difficult to separate.

Fun, learning and achievement are the catchphrases for the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs, but based on my experiences of the past year, I would like to propose a new thought – one that sums up my new friendship and membership of the club: "A good laugh is like manure to a farmer – it doesn't do any good until you spread it around." ■



EMILY GASCOIGNE is a University of Cambridge graduate. She began an RVC internship in July 2012, in association with Synergy Farm Health. Her interests lie in sheep flock management, as well as dairy medicine and surgery.