

Lambing live

Pye Ash Farm in Cheshire hosts thousands of visitors every year as part of its Lambing Live event. **Amy Browne** speaks to owners the Gilman family about diversifying the business.

John Cottle

Growing up on the family farm, siblings Martha and George Gilman can't remember a time when they weren't helping out during lambing season.

"When you're younger and have smaller hands, it's quite good for lambing sheep. It was only when we were at school that we realised it wasn't normal for most kids to be doing that," laughs Martha, 30.

"When I was too young to walk my mum used to put me in the sheep pens while she lambed the sheep and when we were a bit older dad would take us to sheepdog trials all over the country and we'd be in the back of the van, with the dogs."

Pye Ash Farm in Cheshire has been in the Gilman family for three generations. Martha's parents James and Jane took over the farm in the 1990s and it's where James' dad Joe grew up with 10 brothers and sisters.

"Grandpa Joe is 91 now and still comes to help in the car park when the events are on," explains Martha.

In recent years, the 'events' Martha refers to have steadily turned the working sheep and beef farm into a place for a family day out – and it's Martha who's spearheaded the transformation.

"It's always been a passion of mine to get people onto the farm. I used to breed and sell rabbits and would put a sign on the road to advertise it.

"In 2017 I wanted to do Lambing Live, so I posted fliers around the village and invited people for free."

In 2020, a friend of Martha's suggested she try selling pumpkins – but the concept wasn't met with any enthusiasm. "Dad said 'absolutely not'," recalls Martha. "He said no one would want to come and buy pumpkins.

"Then mum and dad went away for the weekend and he reluctantly let me have part of the shed to try it. When they came back, they had to queue to get back into the farm because it was so busy with visitors."

Having never grown crops before, Martha persuaded her dad it was the right time to pivot. "To get dad to give us part of the field to grow a crop that might not grow and that he thought people wouldn't want to buy, was difficult. But we've grown them now for the past four years and dad's come around a little bit. We now grow around 30,000 pumpkins, so it's quite a big operation."

Behind-the-scenes challenges

During two weeks every April, the family welcomes around 2,000 visitors for



Martha and George Gilman



Lambing Live and the farm's various events have raised more than £31,000 for local charities.

"People love coming onto the farm, so we've built the experiences out," says Martha, who credits their big team of helpers, including friend Jemma, for making it all possible.

"When we do the pumpkin maze, mum and dad do sheepdog demonstrations every hour and George and his wife Liz [a vet who also helps out on the farm] have created a nature trail.

"I'm always thinking of new things, I want people to keep coming back. It's

an honour to be part of people's traditions and to raise money for the community."

While it might be a fun day out for visitors, the work behind the scenes as they lamb 500 ewes, is nothing short of gruelling. This year, the season kicked off earlier than planned when the first two lambs arrived a month early, thanks to an escapee tup who 'had some fun'.

"Every year is a big challenge and the sleep deprivation is the worst," says Martha. "The days we're open to the public are intense.

"All the time we're talking about what we're doing, while doing it and can't hide if something goes wrong.

"We had a really challenging birth during one session. People at the event weren't aware but we had to manage it in the background."

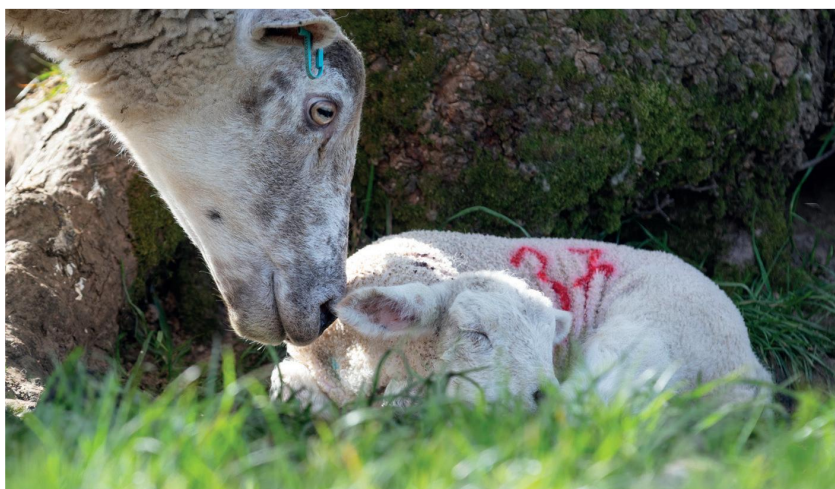
During the lambing fortnight, the farm takes on a shepherd, plus veterinary students who work on a rota.

"It's full on but we've got a lot of help," explains Martha, who works the 'morning shift' from 4am. "Thankfully, now we have

New beginnings



During two weeks every April, the family welcomes around 2,000 visitors for Lambing Live



cameras, I can check what's happening from my bed and only come if it's busy. Mum looks after the cade lambs who need that extra care, so she's always got a bottle in her hand."

Shift to sustainability

While Martha's focus is on marketing and organising the events, her brother George's fascination with sustainability and regenerative farming has led to him bringing about his own changes at the 200-acre farm, along with wife Liz.

"Noticing that biodiversity is declining and physically being able to see it in places made me want to increase it here," he says. "I've always loved seeing how animals interconnect with each other and the more research I do, the more I realise that without healthy soil and clear air, you can't farm."

"I recently started doing hedgelaying and planting, so that's creating new habitats and bringing beneficial insects and creatures in, which help the wildlife that's around. For example, bringing pollinators for the pumpkins, because without them we'd need to hand pollinate. And making changes to help predators like frogs, toads and hedgehogs that will eat slugs, so they

don't annihilate the pumpkin crops.

"You can work with nature and it will help you – or work against it and be in constant battle."

George and Liz's endeavours have been embraced by the whole Gilman family. He explains: "We all love nature, my dad loves birds so it's about working out how to help them, rather than seeing them decline. We can watch it happen, or be the change."

It's an ethos that more young farmers now share. Martha says: "There's definitely more of a push for regenerative farming among young farmers."

"It's about being aware of what you can do. For example, with the pumpkins we get lots of weeds and could just spray them, but that's not good. Now we try to hand weed as much as we can."

Such is George's enthusiasm for sustainability, he's been known to rummage through bins for empty pizza boxes thrown away by visitors to the pumpkin maze. The cardboard is then mulched down and has helped grow 500 new trees on the farm.

The siblings' contribution to the family farm is nothing short of impressive – especially considering they both have



full-time jobs, with Martha travelling regularly for her role in medical sales and George now a self-employed labourer, having spent five years in the Marines.

"Annual leave and weekends are when I'm here at the farm," says Martha.

"Growing up on a farm is very character building. It's good for career opportunities as well – I think people realise that if you're from a farming background, you've had no choice but to work hard from a young age."

Young farmers can inspire

The siblings are the first to acknowledge the challenges young farmers face – but are keen to encourage those coming into the industry to be the change.

"It's tricky to break into farming," says Martha. "It's not like you can just buy a farm, unless you win the lottery. Yet there seems to be more of a buzz around farming."

"It's really important for farmers to market themselves – you see more farming influencers and people using platforms to get the word out. It's important to reach out to farms and get as much work experience as you can. Farms just want people who are enthusiastic."

George agrees and encourages young farmers to "keep an open mind to change".

He adds: "Young farmers pushing through is good because they can help farms adapt with the way the world is changing. It's tough, but it's also a really enjoyable job. You speak to any farmer and it's the only job they'd do."