

LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE



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THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Stuart Fletcher has made an extraordinary life change from ships to sheep – meet the naval architect turned shepherd.
Words by: Trevor Sturgess Pictures by: Manu Palomeque

AS Stuart Fletcher inspected the steel components of a luxury cruise ship being built in Trieste, he never dreamt that one day he would be rearing sheep in deepest Kent.

His career as a naval architect was on the up. He looked forward to promotion and a career for life. In the blazing heat of an Italian shipyard, Stuart monitored construction quality to ensure no repetition of a *Titanic*-style disaster.

On sea trials, he checked that the lifeboats would deploy, and monitored fire protection systems after filling the vessel's corridors with smoke. It was a highly responsible job; every piece of cleared steel could be identified to him. His reputation was always on the line.

Stuart studied naval architecture and marine engineering at University College London. After joining Lloyds Register's emergency response group at 22, he served on the frontline of safety at sea, part of a team investigating collisions and groundings. He recalls: "If the captain rang after an incident, we could model it, advise if it was time to abandon ship, or generally give him instructions on what to do."

Stuart's world was ship design, machinery, steelwork, anchors, leaking oil tanks, metal fatigue software. His skills took him to cruise ship, aircraft carrier, destroyer and drilling rig. He was so well regarded that the Royal Navy and UK shipyards asked him to join them.

But something was niggling at the back of his mind. He observed ships designed by others and believed he would have done better. "It was frustrating," he says. He became fatigued by metal fatigue. "Ships bouncing on waves for 20 years can develop cracks. I was researching why they cracked in different shapes."

Stuart and his wife Vicky moved to Wadhurst, partly because it was handy for Bewl Water where Stuart – a rowing champion – tests his

skills. He commuted daily to London. Through the train window, he would watch flocks grazing in lush Kentish pasture.

It triggered thoughts, not initially of owning sheep but of seeking out local produce. "I went to the supermarket and all the lamb was from Wales or New Zealand. The local butcher only knew his lamb came from Smithfield."

He bought at Tunbridge Wells' Farmers' Market but that happened only once a month.

After asking a local farmer for lamb for the family freezer he was told he "didn't deal with people because it was too much hassle."

This finally prompted Stuart to do it himself. He paid £70 apiece for four sheep – later discovering they were all female. Time to learn.

He attended a sheep husbandry course at Hadlow College, had a fortnight's hands-on experience with a farmer, and read books, including one by BBC *Countryfile*'s Adam Henson (see pxx).

As Stuart found more pasture, he bought more sheep. He now works with 23 landowners who

let his sheep safely graze on rental, handshake or barter agreements. The closure of abattoirs in Lamberhurst and Charing forced Stuart to go to Heathfield. It was a busy time combining two roles. He went to his flock after a hard day's work at the office, sometimes leaving early when a sheep strayed into the road.

He bought more lambs. He chose Lley, a rare breed until the 1980s. They are hardy creatures, with a good carcass, lean meat and excellent taste – and easier to shear than woolly Romneys. Ewes lamb in the open, with their new offspring quick to stand up and suck.

At just 32, Stuart reached his Rubicon, quitting naval architecture after 10 years, giving up a secure profession for the riskier life of an entrepreneurial meat producer.

He staked everything, notably the future of



"There's something fundamental about putting food on someone's table. It's doing something that's morally good."



Left Stuart the shepherd
Above Stuart with his wife Vicky and their sons Fred and Arthur



his wife and two young children, on Fletchers Fine Lleyn Flock. It's tough getting into farming, especially without a relevant background. Stuart, now 35, sees sheep – he now has more than 300 - as a good entry point.

He is proving a good shepherd, a traditional name he prefers to “sheep farmer.” He has expanded into organic production, with 100 sheep in Lamberhurst, near Tunbridge Wells.

Striding among his flock, Stuart is clearly content. Seven-year old son Fred helps with lambing, staying with Dad in the caravan. In time, baby Arthur may share his brother's enthusiasm.

Stuart's pedigree collie Bess hails from the Romney Marsh breeder who supplied the 'rogue' sheep dog featured in the latest film of Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Stuart's lamb boxes are proving popular with individuals, restaurants, hotels and farm shops. With traceability now so important, he can tell you the provenance of every chop, leg, rack, shank and rolled shoulder joint. As the UK tries to reduce dependence on imported food, Stuart is doing his bit, and has joined Produced in Kent.

“Everyone said farming would be difficult

financially and it is. I don't get any EU subsidies. But I'm spending money in the local economy. You buy from a local farmer who spends it at the greengrocers or the pub and both survive.

“If you go to the supermarket and buy New Zealand lamb, half the money goes to New Zealand, the rest to supermarkets and shareholders everywhere.”

Stuart loves the environmental gain. His sheep eat grass and wild flowers, thus helping the regeneration of traditional meadows.

While he says some disparage him because he's “not a farmer,” he shows them every day that he is. He is learning to shear. He aims to expand distribution of his lamb boxes, become more profitable, improve productivity and genetics.

“Morally, my naval architect job was good. It ensured safety at sea. But there's something fundamental about putting food on someone's table. It's doing something that's morally good.

“Maybe it was a bit risky, but at lambing I look at my son and think it's not a risk at all. He's not stuck in front of a computer, he's outdoors feeding lambs. What better education is there than that?” Stuart the Shepherd has indeed voyaged far. ♦



GET IN TOUCH

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