



NUFFIELD  
Farming Scholarships

# The Position of Farming in the Public Consciousness

*Written by:*

Emma Patterson Taylor NSch

**December 2025**

A NUFFIELD FARMING SCHOLARSHIPS REPORT

**KINDLY SPONSORED BY:**

The Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland (RHASS)



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NUFFIELD  
Farming Scholarships

Date of report: April 2026

*"Leading positive change in agriculture.  
Inspiring passion and potential in people."*

Title	The Position of Farming in the Public Consciousness
Scholar	Emma Patterson Taylor
Sponsor	The Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland (RHASS)
Objectives of Study Tour	To explore the relationship between the public and farming and gain a greater understanding of actions that could be taken to improve it.
Countries Visited (in person and online)	France, Australia, England, Brazil, Northern Ireland, Scotland
Messages	<p><b>Farming Industry</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be more open to change.</li> <li>• Listen to your customers and work harder to understand them.</li> <li>• Be conscious of the landscape you are operating in and the nature of its limitations.</li> </ul> <p><b>Government and Policy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remember you are meant to lead.</li> <li>• Industry will always have its own interests, and 'loud voices' should not dictate the terms.</li> </ul> <p><b>Individuals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on the only thing under your control: yourself.</li> <li>• Challenge yourself to be intentional when you shop; which food and farming systems do you want to support?</li> <li>• Cook. For yourself and for your family and friends. Eat with them. Make and take the time. These seemingly small acts can bring about change - in your own life as well as the lives of others.</li> </ul>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The position that farming holds in the public consciousness can have the power to make or break a sector. Rarely is the whole of agriculture under threat at once but most of us have seen the industry suffer body blows when it comes to the rise and fall of public opinion.

One response to this might be that fluctuations in popularity should be disregarded. Farmers need to hold their nerve and remain committed to doing the work they do in the way they choose to do it. The level of ignorance about agriculture amongst the public is renowned. Media outlets broadcast news of the school children who believe potatoes grow on trees, cows lay eggs, or that fish fingers are made from chicken. This evidence alone confirms the folly of paying too much heed to the general public. If children think that, imagine what their parents might believe. Farmers and specialists working in the field are the ones who understand the sector; what they think is what matters. The opinion of the public should be taken with a generous pinch of salt, or better still totally ignored.

Another conclusion could be that given 'the consumer is king', their views should lead the way and be the primary consideration when it comes to farming and food production. Highly successful businesses are built on that premise. If agriculture wants to thrive it must be too. Countless expert reviews and industry debates have agreed that agriculture is not sufficiently market focused. This is where the sector is going wrong. Clearly the public may not understand the minutia of crop rotation or slurry management, but when it comes to the food sitting on supermarket shelves and ending up on dinner plates, consumers ought to be in the driving seat. Their voice should be the one that counts.

When deciding which side of the fence to come down upon, it is worth considering the degree to which Millennials and Generation Z are interested in food. These active consumers will remain important for the foreseeable future with their spending power and influence set to grow over the next ten to fifteen years. It seems important to engage meaningfully with the public for this reason alone. These two groups have a desire to educate themselves out of ignorance and to know more about where their food comes from. Yet that wish has had mixed results. One reason for this has been the ability of certain players with vested interests to educate selectively and effectively. Another has been a lack of preparedness by those within farming to tell their story. In 1989 Wendell Berry proposed that 'Eating is an Agricultural Act'. Segments of the public have displayed an appreciation and understanding of that viewpoint. Thirty-six years on, at a time when food production is ever more removed from its source, Berry's perspective offers an ambition for our food system that both farmers and the public could try to align with and share.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary .....	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Background to my study subject.....	2
Chapter 3: My study tour .....	3
Chapter 4: Findings from my ‘travels’ .....	4
Melbourne, Australia .....	4
East Linton, Scotland .....	5
A perspective: An East Lothian Farm .....	5
Brazil .....	6
A perspective: Blog de Carne .....	6
A perspective: Sally Thomson, Sowing Seeds.....	7
Wooler, England .....	7
A perspective: Charlotte-Anne Chivers, University of Exeter.....	7
Bangor, Northern Ireland.....	8
A perspective: The Quarries Farm; a Community Farm .....	8
Brittany, France .....	9
A perspective: A French Diary.....	9
A perspective: Ruscol Farm .....	10
A perspective: A Brittany Focus Group.....	11
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	12
Chapter 6: Recommendations .....	15
CHANGE .....	15
POLICY .....	15
INDIVIDUAL ACTION .....	15
Chapter 7: After my study tour .....	16
Chapter 8: Acknowledgement and thanks .....	17
Bibliography .....	18

## **DISCLAIMER**

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author alone and not necessarily those of the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust, of the author's sponsor, or of any other sponsoring body.

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Nuffield Farming Scholars are available to speak to NFU Branches, agricultural discussion groups and similar organisations.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In July 2019 I applied to become a Nuffield Scholar. The prospect felt daunting and exciting; I was determined to do my best to get through. When I discovered I had been successful, I was thrilled. It felt like a huge achievement and the beginning of an unprecedented adventure in my life. I had travelled to some degree but never on the scale that a Nuffield Scholarship offered. The prospect was like a whole new world opening up to me. A once in a lifetime experience that would never be offered again.

After I received my scholarship in the autumn of 2019, I was ready to begin travelling. My journey started at the end of February 2020 as I boarded a flight to Australia on a 'Round the World' ticket. I planned to attend the CSC in March and then go on to New Zealand and Brazil. No one could have predicted the international crisis that would happen next; the pandemic which brought all our lives to a standstill one way or another.

Even once it was possible to travel again 70% of my budget was gone and there was no hope of insurance providers paying out for cancelled plans. More significantly, I was pregnant with my first child so jetting off round the world was impossible on a number of fronts. Motherhood and Covid-19 have completely changed my outlook and my scholarship as a result. It is all a far cry from what I originally envisioned but perhaps far richer as a result.



**Figure 1: The author Emma Patterson Taylor and her daughter Maisie Patterson O'Neill in Brittany, France, September 2022. Photo: Frances Patterson.**



## CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND TO MY STUDY SUBJECT

The aim of my scholarship was to undertake an examination of farming's position within the public consciousness and to assess how that perception is shaping the evolving relationship between consumers and the food they choose to eat. Central to this was identifying how the agricultural industry should respond to both the challenges and opportunities that arise from this shifting landscape.

Heightened concern around climate change, animal welfare, biodiversity loss, and human health has contributed to a marked rise in interest in veganism and plant-based diets over the last few years. Gen Z, alongside Millennials, are among the most likely to eat no meat or to be reducing their consumption of meat and cite environmental concerns as the reason.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, an increasing disconnect between primary food production and consumers has become evident. Many consumers are geographically, culturally, and emotionally distanced from the land, resulting in limited understanding of how food is produced and who produces it.

My intention was to explore the contemporary wave of negative narratives surrounding farming and its perceived role in the 21st century. I wanted to try and understand the conditions that had allowed suspicion and cynicism towards agriculture to intensify. When I chose my topic in 2019, it was the era of this kind of marketing campaign and George Monbiot's Guardian column was part of this narrative:



**Figure 2: Anti-farming billboard campaign.<sup>2</sup>**

Ultimately, my objective has always been to articulate clear, actionable recommendations. To reframe farming not as an outdated practice, but as an innovative, responsible, and essential sector capable of shaping a sustainable and resilient food future that the next generation value and support.

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<sup>1</sup> FSA Research Report, February 2020  
<https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/generation-z-full-report-final.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://plantbasednews.org/culture/ethics/billboard-campaign-slaughterhouse-stats-ww2/>



## CHAPTER 3: MY STUDY TOUR

I explored (physically and virtually) the following countries. I also undertook two periods of maternity leave during my study period which provided their own opportunity for greater understanding and new perspectives on my topic.

DESTINATION	DURATION
<b>Melbourne, Australia</b> February/March 2020	2 weeks
<b>East Linton, Scotland</b> March/April 2020	6 weeks
<b>Brazil</b> Virtually during lockdown 2020	n/a
<b>Wooler, England</b> March 2022	2 weeks
<b>Bangor, Northern Ireland</b> July 2022	2 weeks
<b>Brittany, France</b> September 2022	6 weeks

“What is honoured in a country is cultivated there.”

Plato, *The Republic*, Book VIII



Figure 3: Artwork by William Brown.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/traveling-opens-your-mind-and-heart-to-the-worlds-challenges/>



## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS FROM MY ‘TRAVELS’

The nature of my Nuffield ‘travels’ has been very different to how I envisioned it would be. I technically did travel to the other side of the world but just for two weeks. In the end, I would say I embarked upon a huge personal journey rather than one made up of Nuffield airmiles. My ‘Round the World’ ticket of exploration and discovery has been individual and local. Two little people deserve most of the credit for that:



**Figure 4: Maisie and Thea Patterson O'Neill. Photo: author's own.**

### **Melbourne, Australia**

I arrive in Melbourne in early 2020. It feels like summer. I've escaped a dreich Scottish February, and endless dark and chilly days have been replaced with gorgeous sunshine and incredible food in a buzzing metropolitan capital. Within an hour of arriving, I'm eating brunch in a normal café that is offering a standard and variety of food that would rival high-end London offerings. In the same week I reluctantly queue for an overpriced but admittedly excellent croissant at a millennial hotspot. Their branding and tagline '*Lune is an institution solely dedicated to the creation of croissants*' makes it apparent that they totally understand their customer and know exactly what they're doing. When your founder is an Ex-Formula 1 Aerodynamicist, it undoubtedly helps your business get clear on your direction of travel and where you're going. Many aspects of my trip to Melbourne feel like I'm visiting the new world of food.



**Figure 5: Lune café branding, Melbourne, Australia.<sup>4</sup>**

### **East Linton, Scotland**

After flying back from Australia, I go into isolation in East Linton as lockdown is established in the UK. East Linton is a small town in Scotland, 24 miles or so from Edinburgh. It's a very strange existence. Spring is finally here but we are all just allowed one short walk a day to glimpse the daffodils and tulips coming up before escorting ourselves home again. There is a tiny Co-op where we all queue slowly and carefully for our allotted weekly shop. My lifeline is a wonderful fruit and veg van that stops and beeps their horn once a week just outside my rented flat. The man who runs it is kind and friendly, one of the only people I talk to in this odd lockdown life. He has an array of produce, most of it not remotely local, that includes the first crop of beautiful bright pink forced rhubarb. I buy bundles of it all season and the sight of it stewing ready to be stirred into my morning porridge is endlessly cheering.



**Figure 6: Back of a fruit and veg van. Photo: Emma Case.**

### *A perspective: An East Lothian Farm*

Tom Middlemass has a long history at Markle Mains farm in East Lothian, where his family has farmed since 1923. The farm's origins date back centuries, with reorganisations in 1830 creating separate holdings and new buildings.

<sup>4</sup> <https://foodinfocusz.com/lune-croissanterie/>



Tom describes major shifts in farming practice: from mixed livestock systems with sheep, cattle, pigs, hens, horses, and diverse crops, to today's large-scale arable production of wheat, barley, and oilseed. Mechanisation transformed operations and labour needs fell dramatically. Field consolidation, drainage, dyke removal, and woodland clearance reshaped the landscape.

Farm management changed and diversification efforts were explored with recent tree planting reflecting renewed environmental awareness. Tom recognises himself as one steward in a long line of custodians shaping the farm's evolving history.

## Brazil

During lockdown I carried out several online calls and interviews with individuals and groups in Brazil who I had planned to meet on my travels. It was an odd experience. Coming from my Western perspective and as someone with an environmental background, I was disconcerted by having conversations with people who denied that there was any issue with deforestation of the Amazon rainforest. It also seemed impossible to have any real discussion about the pros and cons of eating meat with a culture of red meat eating clearly baked into Brazilian identity. I was left wondering if visiting in person would have helped get 'under the skin' more. I felt like I was hitting invisible walls during my conversations.

### *A perspective: Blog de Carne*

Brazil has around 200 million cattle, making it one of the world's largest beef producers. Traditionally focused on commodity output, the sector is slowly adapting to changing consumer preferences, including demand for specific cuts, breeds, welfare standards, and sustainability certifications. Premium brands target affluent urban consumers seeking quality and transparency. Producers are intensifying systems, aiming to reduce slaughter age and expand feedlot finishing, though costs and pasture inconsistency remain constraints. Structural challenges include slaughterhouse dominance and limited producer coordination. Blog de Carne, with 200,000 followers, founded by Mirella and Juliana, was set up to support consumer education around beef cuts, preparation, and production, promoting a more informed, quality-driven beef culture.



**Figure 7: Blog de Carne team: Mirella Cais and Juliana Chini. Photo: Blog de Carne.**



### *A perspective: Sally Thomson, Sowing Seeds*

Sally has lived in Brazil for six years and views the experience very positively. Originally from rural Western Australia with a farming background, she now runs a facilitation business focused on identifying priorities across natural, financial, and particularly social capital. She sees Brazil as rich in social capital, where trust and networks are built gradually through relationships.

Practical challenges include high import taxes, expensive goods, low-skilled labour, and a reliance on imported farm infrastructure. Climate change debates are less publicly visible than in Australia, despite strict forest protection laws. Social inequality dominates public concern, and Brazil's strong religious culture fosters a broadly accepting outlook in the people Sally meets.

### **Wooler, England**

I spend two weeks in Wooler with my first child and wider family. It is a haze of sleeplessness and the demands of a nearly six-month-old determined not to sleep for longer than ninety minutes at a time. Early attempts at weaning also dominate as I clutch in desperation at anything that might help our nights get longer. Weaning your first child is an interesting time. It forces you to think again about your own food choices and challenges ideas you hold around what you feel might be best for them. Perceived risks you would happily absorb into your own biological system suddenly seem wildly reckless in relation to their tiny little bodies that, to date, have only been nourished by milk. Alongside these all-consuming pre-occupations I do absorb the sleepy rural feel of where we are staying. A small town with agricultural roots that you can sense going way back into the landscape.

### *A perspective: Charlotte-Anne Chivers, University of Exeter*

People often struggle to respond to repeated negative news, feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, or numb, especially if issues seem too complex to solve. Emotional reactions include fear, guilt, anger, defiance, or blame, and repeated exposure can trigger avoidant behaviours like denial, deflecting responsibility, wishful thinking, or fatalism. Fear-based messaging may grab attention, but research shows it rarely drives long-term behaviour change unless people feel personally vulnerable, capable of acting, and have clear, actionable guidance.

Guilt appeals are similarly unreliable because people prioritise self-integrity. They may feel moral responsibility but resist behaviour change unless actions align with their values. Effective communication emphasises social norms, shared values, and collective identity to reduce defensiveness. Self-affirmation strategies, such as highlighting group identity or positive aspects of one's practices, can increase acceptance of environmental risk messages. By reinforcing self-worth and social norms, advisors can encourage reflection and action while avoiding defensive or avoidant responses. These factors are key to understanding consumer behaviour and should inform any attempts to try and change farming practices.



## Bangor, Northern Ireland

I spent every holiday throughout my childhood on the Ards Peninsula in Northern Ireland. It curls around Strangford Lough, just down from Bangor and Newtownards; the ring in the nose of the Flying Pig of Ireland. We would set off from Edinburgh in our ancient orange car, packed to the gunnels, the three of us children sitting in the back. Without fail, we would be searched every time we queued to get on the ferry, my Irish mother cringing at how much we stood out. It was the 90s and an orange car is distinctive anywhere but was a beacon to soldiers working in Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

As I returned to Northern Ireland in 2022 with my own child in tow, I was reminded of how farming and food are important to the Irish in a way that they are not in Great Britain. Farming is recognised as integral to many people's lives and plays a significant role in the economy with Armagh apples, Comber potatoes, Lough Neagh eels, Portavogie prawns and Strangford Lough oysters all known for their part in that. Agriculture isn't seen as peripheral and the concern of a minority in the way it is in the rest of the UK. Food and farming are part of Ireland's culture and identity both north and south of the border. In Bangor the shadow of the Troubles can still be felt, with the Union Jack coloured curb stones that I remember from my childhood and divisive flags still flying high. What stays with me when I return home though is the amazing produce we ate. The first piece of grilled fish my daughter has ever eaten, gobbled down in a lovely cafe by the sea. The local food featured and celebrated across restaurant menus. And the exceptional ice cream we ate as we waited to cross 'the Narrows' on the Strangford Ferry.



**Figure 8: The Quarries Farm, Bangor.<sup>5</sup>**

### *A perspective: The Quarries Farm - a Community Farm*

Joan Woods grew up on The Quarries Farm, where her family has lived since her grandfather settled there in 1892. Raised with stories of earlier generations, she experienced a rural childhood that had changed little from her father's, aside from tractors replacing horses. The mixed farm was largely self-sufficient, producing milk, butter, eggs, meat, crops, and fruit. Harvest time brought neighbours

<sup>5</sup> <https://quarriesfarm.co.uk/farm-history>



together to bale and stook hay before rain, sharing sweet tea and sandwiches in the fields.

In the 1970s, urban expansion linked to the Troubles transformed the area. Compulsory land purchases displaced neighbouring families, new roads replaced winding lanes, and housing developments spread towards the farm. Joan's once solitary walk home became busier, marked by new schools, friendships, and occasional bullying.

Over time, farms and familiar landmarks disappeared, replaced by estates and shopping centres. Increasing mechanisation and economic pressures made traditional mixed farming unviable. By 1990, her elderly father farmed alone. Joan's sense is that, beyond land and neighbours, an entire way of life has been lost.

### **Brittany, France**

We make a very rural part of Brittany our home for 6 weeks in the autumn of 2022. With a nine-month-old in tow there are limitations but both 'Granny' and 'Grandma' very kindly visit and provide childcare which gives me the freedom for some research, adventures and the opportunity to try and live the way the locals do. Food is at the heart of life in France. It is inextricably bound up in the way the French live their lives and when you spend time in Brittany, agriculture inevitably becomes part of that too.

#### *A perspective: A French Diary*

In September 2022, I kept a diary while living in rural Brittany, reflecting on food, farming, markets, and motherhood through the lens of my Nuffield research. Daily life revealed how closely agriculture sits to everyday French culture: ancient tractors still in use, goats and cows in gardens, vegetable plots by the roadside, and school canteens serving four-course meals with the menu printed in the window. Markets formed the rhythm of the week - ranging from tiny village stalls to the vast Marché des Lices in Rennes - offering fresh dairy, seasonal produce, ice cream, flowers, meat, fish, and bread. The quality and freshness of the produce and the patience and deliberation embedded in these trading exchanges contrast sharply with UK food shopping norms.

I became fascinated by French preferences - UHT milk, cash payments, strong local sourcing - and by the visible connection between land and plate. Yet I also observed pressures of convenience, processed foods, and industrialisation. Visits to Ruscol Farm and the Rennes Eco Museum made me wonder about livestock's purpose, the extinction of traditional breeds, and farming's moral and environmental standing.

Gradually, a central tension emerged: people care deeply about food, but not necessarily about farming. If agriculture feels distant or problematic, perhaps the industry must listen more carefully to what consumers are asking - and learn how to ask for what they need in return.



DAY	MARKET	DETAIL
<b>Monday</b>	Saint Quay Portrieux	Little seaside market, around 15 - 20 stalls.
<b>Tuesday</b>	Belle-Isle-en-Terre (visited 3 times)	Organic market, ten or so stalls. Veg stall, fruit stall, eggs, dairy, ice cream, bread.
	Louargat March	Tiny market; one erroneous shoe stall, one meat stall, one creperie.
	Paimpol	Quite a big market in a large coastal town. Lots of clothes, jewellery etc. as well as the fruit and veg, meat, cheese, honey, baked goods etc.
<b>Wednesday</b>	La Roche-Jaudy	Tiny market: one fruit and veg, one meat, one fish (plus patisserie in the medieval square)
<b>Thursday</b>	Lannion	Large market with 100 plus stalls all through the streets. Clothing as well as food.
<b>Friday</b>	Guingamp	Big market; around 100 stalls – busy, bustling, an ‘every day, normal’ market, not touristy.
<b>Saturday</b>	Guingamp	Smaller version of the Friday market, around 20-30 stalls in the central square.
	Marche des Lices (Rennes)	Second biggest market in France. Two large undercover areas for dairy, meat and bakery goods. Large numbers of fruit and veg stalls, a fish section, flowers – all on the street.
<b>Sunday</b>	Lannion	Closed for the day; a risk you take in France.



**Figure 9: Belle-Isle-en-Terre – Les Halles, 2022 and 1800s. Photos: both author’s own.**

“The market is an anchoring aspect of life... a true and authentic moment of give and take with producers. The farmers’ market is France. It is a meeting place, a social centre, a spot where the finest in France is put forth at its best and I, for one, couldn’t live without it.”

Susan Loomis (in *On Rue Tatin*)

*A perspective: Ruscol Farm*

David, a social worker with lived experience in care, and Sophie, who is neurodivergent, run Ruscol which is Sophie’s family farm in Brittany. Inspired by nature and farming, they support children aged 6–8 and others with learning



difficulties, offering inclusive, specialist care rather than fostering. The 7-hectare farm with 7,000 trees hosts educational and therapeutic activities connecting people, animals, and land. David continues advocacy work with Who Cares Scotland and sits on Scotland's Care Oversight Board. They focus on practical engagement, while fostering community, learning, and growth for children and young people in a supportive, non-rejecting environment.

*A perspective: A Brittany Focus Group*

Jack, Isabella, Silvie, and Domenic are a mix of retirees and local professionals living in Brittany, drawn to the countryside for its lifestyle rather than specifically its food. Brittany is dominated by small family farms, and perceptions of farming have shifted from hard work and poverty to modern concerns like intensification, politics (the Common Agricultural Policy), and environmental practices such as talus restoration. A talus is a traditional earth bank, often topped with a hedge, used to boundary fields, manage water, and provide shelter for livestock. Locals value meat and dairy produced gently and sustainably, preferring local, high-quality, and organic products. Environmental issues, like water contamination from pesticides, and conflicts over intensive or foreign-owned farms, shape community attitudes. Residents often protest about practices they see as harmful. Food choices reflect these values: they favour local, French, organic produce, unprocessed foods, and prioritise taste, health, and connection to nature. Brittany also supports bio co-ops and health food shops, though imported products remain common. Overall, there is a strong focus on sustainability, community, and responsible consumption.

When we leave Brittany to return home, I'm left in awe of what France has to offer. I'm not the first and won't be the last to be impressed by the French and their food but their appreciation of and commitment to good food means that a quality of produce exists there which is unobtainable in the UK. There is a depth of flavour in every day produce that is affordable for all which is staggering. I miss it desperately and am still in mourning for that aspect of their way of life. Shopping and eating in the way that they do fosters a form of agriculture that is more diverse, less industrialised and more fragmented as a result.



**Figure 10: Plouisy, France, 2022. Photo: author's own.**



## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

While writing this report I have reflected on my five-year Nuffield journey. It has been shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic and early motherhood, both of which fundamentally altered my experience of international travel and study. I have also been able to draw upon my sixteen years of professional experience in agriculture, seven years' experience working in the food industry and over twenty-five years of being a conscious consumer as I have examined my chosen topic: farming's position in the public consciousness.

I would argue that the relationship between agriculture and the public can be strained. Reasons for this have varied over the decades. In the past few years this has largely been driven by the rise of veganism, critical media narratives, and the growth of plant-based alternatives.



**Figure 11: Anti-farming billboard campaign.<sup>6</sup>**

Issues that have emerged as a result have often been exacerbated by farming's inability to respond collectively and effectively. I think there are also several other factors at play which contribute to the challenges in this relationship.

My first observation would be that when it comes to what the public seem to think and feel about farming, if it is negative, the agricultural industry tends to be sceptical about what they have to say. The sector is very quick to dismiss their customer which is a missed opportunity:

“Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning.”

Bill Gates (in *Business @ the Speed of Thought: Using a Digital Nervous System*)

Secondly, partly because of the nature of rural life and the all-consuming demands of farming, the agricultural industry has a tendency to be insular. Day to

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/claire-lambell-a934382a\\_its-like-milk-but-made-for-humans-such-activity-7376531837525057536-6VI5/](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/claire-lambell-a934382a_its-like-milk-but-made-for-humans-such-activity-7376531837525057536-6VI5/)



day, farmers often don't think beyond their farm gate and as an industry there is a habit of echoing that by becoming absorbed in our own preoccupations. This doesn't promote an understanding of the vast majority of consumers who are urban and live very different lives:

"Around 85% of the population in the UK lives in urban areas."

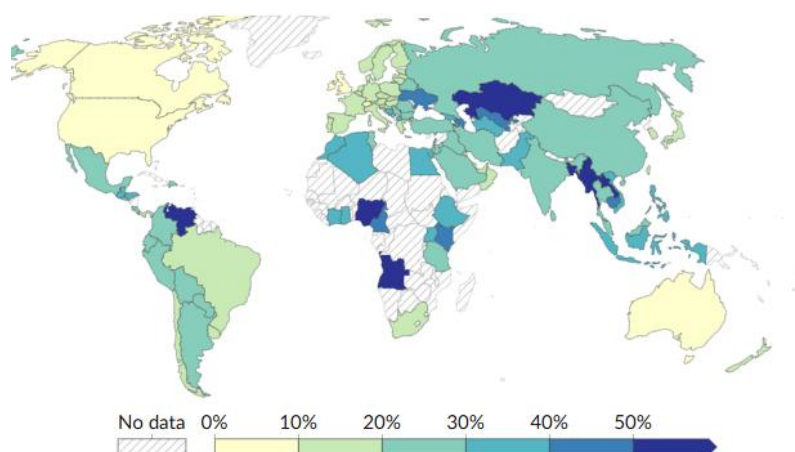
The World Bank, 2024<sup>7</sup>

And thirdly, those working in agriculture and the sector overall has an innate conservatism and strong instinct to preserve the status quo. The ability of farmers to do the same thing day in day out, year in year out, generation after generation fosters a culture that knows it needs to take care of what it has and be cautious about risking what is meant to be passed on. This can sadly result in a resistance to change. There are parts of our sector in slow decline grappling with Charles Darwin's observation:

"It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most adaptable to change."

Charles Darwin

The UK has strong potential to be amongst the most sustainable farming systems in the world. As professionals working in the industry, we have legitimate passion and pride in the diversity and quality of our produce. And the country has natural advantages and extensive production systems that are aligned with the hopes and aspirations of consumers for what they choose to eat. But there is a need to accept and be pragmatic about the context we are working in. Sadly, we lack a shared food culture, and generally consumers are unwilling to pay significantly more for their food:



**Figure 12: Share of consumer expenditure spent on food, 2023. Source: Our World in Data.<sup>8</sup>**

<sup>7</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=GB>

<sup>8</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-consumer-expenditure-spent-on-food>



My observation would also be that farmers sit at the beginning - not the centre - of our complex food system. In today's logistics driven, global supply chain the idea that 'Farmers Feed the World' can appear disconnected from reality.

In conclusion, I would propose that there is a need for three areas of change. The first is that we should all challenge and question an 'aye been' culture. The idea that 'it's always been this way' is a good enough reason for things to continue being the same. For the reasons I've outlined, farming is at risk of this type of outlook. The more we can encourage the sector to be open and look outwards while challenging inwards, the better. There is a necessity for this kind of shift in our sector and listening to the public is essential to shaping farming for a future that society wants and needs.

Secondly, I would urge ministers and policymakers to be mindful of the need to define their sense of purpose and direction by saying no. The duty of government is to an entire nation, not a subset of that group, and showing leadership is essential to good governance. A close relationship with the loudest and most powerful group representing farming has not necessarily served the industry or Scotland well.

And my third call is for individuals to recognise everyday food choices as a powerful connection between farming, nature, and society. Whether or not you cook and how and where you choose to shop are both ways of voting for the food system you believe in and want to support. Such choices are directly within your circle of control and make a difference, however seemingly small, in all our lives:

"Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."

Rumi



## CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations emerged from my research into ‘the position of farming in the public consciousness’. In my view, action in all three would improve how agriculture is seen by the public and foster a more positive relationship as a result.

### CHANGE

It is time for agriculture as a whole to understand and accept the need for change. Individual businesses taking their own courageous steps forward is not enough. Leadership at a strategic, senior and national level is required. A culture has been allowed to persist where the role of ‘industry’ has become to fight hard for ‘preferential terms’, whatever that may mean. The consequences of this are understandable but unfortunately result in the sector fighting hard to stay the same. That dynamic is not ultimately in the best interests of farming and risks further isolation of a sector that is failing to build a meaningful relationship with a public who will not be satisfied by the answer ‘it’s aye been’.

**We should all be careful about fighting hard to stay the same.**

### POLICY

The Scottish Government and Scottish Ministers need to rediscover and re-establish their own position on matters relating to agriculture. There is a lack of independence and impartiality relating to how decision making is carried out in farming. This has emerged from a well-intentioned place of seeking to be ‘industry led’ but ended up in a position of being ‘industry stalled’. There has been a disproportionate weighting given to ‘loud voices’ which have understandably persisted in advocating for their own interests.

**Leadership often requires us to define our sense of purpose and direction by saying no.**

### INDIVIDUAL ACTION

We need to all take responsibility for our own decisions. There is a dissonance that plays out in consumer choice and behaviour which ultimately informs us having a lack of faith in ourselves. There is a need for confidence and the ability to follow through in this kind of decision making. Work out what is important to you and hold on to that thread. If it’s fresh food, find a veg box near you and support them. If it’s high welfare meat, find a great supplier and become their customer. If it’s supporting small businesses, then track them down. All these options are available to you; give it your attention and time. And remember to cook. Take the power of that into your own hands and invest in everything it can unlock. As Wendell Berry said “Eating is an Agricultural Act”.

**What and how we choose to eat directly informs the food and farming systems that, in turn, supports.**



## CHAPTER 7: AFTER MY STUDY TOUR

As my Nuffield Scholarship draws to a close, I can see the arc of a chapter of my life begin to resolve itself. I have always been interested in food. When I was sixteen, I got my first job on a delicatessen counter in Sainsburys. Those eighteen months were formative in a way that would have surprised me then but is clear now. Getting to know a huge range of products - particularly cheeses and cooked and cured meats - so extensively was the beginning of something.

I went on to work on two more deli counters with five years spent in a specialist Italian store while I pursued my environmental undergraduate degree. I loved being a cheesemonger and the experience led directly to my passion to learn to make cheese. In later years, I took a series of secondments from work doing unpaid placements of 4-6 weeks in creameries and farms across the USA, Ireland, Scotland and England. Milking, making and mongering felt like coming home.

Meanwhile, I had graduated, and by chance landed my first job in agriculture. I became a policy maker designing and implementing an eradication scheme for a cattle disease. I was immersed in a fascinating world and welcomed by an industry I was totally new to. Ever since then, that industry has been my professional home. I've loved it. There is so much to applaud and to celebrate. It's a cliché but the people are down to earth and work hard in a way that blows the idea of hard work out of the water. And there is something real and tangible here that I can hold on to. In a world that increasingly seems to manufacture hot air there is a lot to be said for solid ground.

But farming does have to change. I have struggled with a lack of openness and the challenges that exist around practice and behaviour shifting to where it needs to be. As an outsider in the industry and an urbanite on rural ground, I've been able to see the gap between what the public want and need and what agriculture is willing and able to offer. There is a chasm there that needs to be narrowed. As I enter my fourth decade, it's time for me to clarify what role I can play in that, if any. I'm looking forward to what comes next and seeing what can emerge from the space that my Nuffield scholarship has been occupying.



**Figure 13: The Sycamore Gap by artist Sophie Elm.**



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**Figure 14: Thea and Maisie Patterson O'Neill. Photo: author's own.**



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