

Ravensdown

INSIGHT AND ACTION FOR AGRICULTURAL SUCCESS

ground

EFFECT

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EDITION 1

“Farming is in
our DNA.
It’s what we do.”

**George Williams,
Grassendale Genetics**

Environmental Legislation

New rules, new challenges.
Are you ready?

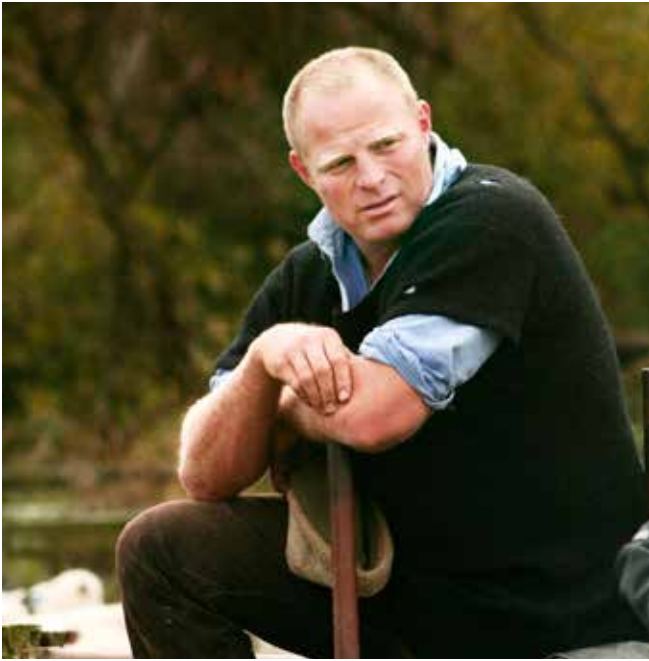
Soil fertility

Gambling on nutrient status
a fool’s game.



FORGING NEW GROUND AT GRASSENDALE

Balancing family life on the farm is just as important to Wairarapa farmers George and Luce Williams as delivering top-class genetics through their business, Grassendale Genetics.



GEORGE WILLIAMS

Having both grown up locally and worked and travelled overseas, the couple bought their first property, Longridge, in 2005 and then in 2009, bought the property next door - Luce's family farm Grassendale - from her parents John and Sue Dalziell.

The next milestone was buying the Valley Coopworth Stud, renamed Grassendale Coopworths. They have recently bought the Raho Ruru Romney stud as well and are now known as Grassendale Genetics.

George says, in hindsight, it has been a busy time building up a business alongside three young kids.

"We had bought two farms and to go into selling our own rams as well was a big step. It was a matter of backing ourselves really, which we did, and it has worked.

"A huge component to our business now was the realisation, back then, that we could do it on our own," Luce adds.

George and Luce are transparent with their business plan and have always written down short- and long-term goals - both personal and business. They're proud of ticking off two of the more landmark goals - farm ownership and starting a stud - but are adamant family still comes first.

"It's too easy to get caught up in what you're doing and forget why you're doing it."

"Business goals could range from fencing or re-grassing to debt levels," says George, "putting pegs in the ground and making sure they've been ticked off. The personal goals are a good way to keep on the right side of work/family balance. It's too easy to get caught up in what you're doing and forget why you're doing it. So we're spreading more of that time into the routine. We all have ideas in our heads of how things should be but something on a piece of paper cements it. You can't ignore it."

He says the business plan also means they don't sit idle and neither does the business.

"We want to have systems in place, built around our farming business, to minimise risk or adversity that might come our way. We also want to be trying new things. It keeps farmers farming. If it's new it is exciting, whether it works or not."

Grassendale in its current entity is 1,580 hectares - 1,050ha effective - including 315ha of native bush and 200ha of forestry.

It is summer-dry, steep hill country with a lot of wind, George says. In fact, the area was almost home to the country's largest wind farm.

"The farm is one of the highest farms around here so wherever you are you get wind, it's the nature of the game really."

Stocking policy has been built around mitigating drought.

"We know we live on the East Coast and have long, hot and dry summers and we've built our stock policy around that. By the start of December, we try to be at wintering stock numbers."

Grassendale carries 5,000 ewes including 1,000 recorded Coopworth, 500 recorded Romney and 500 recorded Romney Coopworths. Lambs are sold store in November with a target of 30 kilograms. Last year's total lamb crop was 8,500.

Grassendale Genetics has highly reproductive, easy converting, robust sheep, measured and selected on five traits - reproduction, growth, survival, meat and wool. That information is processed through the Sheep Improvement Ltd (SIL) database.

"When we get our ram selection list back we go through and make up the type and numbers to get a mix - we want to end up with sheep that look like we want them to look and with the numbers to match," George says.

He says reproduction has been major trait of the Coopworths on the SIL database.

The Williams are also passionate about wool.

"We still weigh all our hogget fleeces and have a wool classer come through and class all the rams. Once upon a time, everyone used to do that, but it's getting less and less. Wool is a fantastic product. It's renewable and ticks a lot of sustainable boxes. Wool is quite strong at the moment, compared to the lows where it has been, but we do need dual purpose sheep. We need to spread our source of income off them, not be purely reliant on meat."

Grassendale has a minimal animal health intervention policy apart from giving Toxoplasmosis and Campylobacter vaccinations to the hoggets.



LUCE WILLIAMS



FAMILY DOGS GUARD THE QUAD BIKE

“As far as the ewes go, which are the main driver of our business, the timing of shifts and good stockmanship has eliminated a lot of the animal health problems and we’re feeding them properly,” George says.

The farm has 90ha of plantain in its second year. There are no winter crops but all new grass goes through a summer cropping programme.

The beef side of the business exists mainly to groom pasture for the sheep. The property calves 220 Simmental and Angus cows with black cows going to red bulls and vice versa to utilise hybrid vigour.

“The Simmental is a high-growth-rate milking cow and the Angus has more constitution and suits our hill country farming. Speckle Park bulls have also been used in the past two years. The progeny are all sold store as weaners, or at 18 months, depending on the season.

“We have a complex sheep system so we need the easiest cattle system we can get and the cows on the hill country do a fantastic job.”

As well as George on the farm and Luce in charge of accounts and administration, stock manager Richard Puddy has been working at Grassendale for 18 months, alongside fencer general Stacey Torwick, who has been there four months. George says they’re not scared to ask for outside expertise and one of those closely involved with their business is their Ravensdown Senior Agri Manager Greig McLeod. Greig has worked with George and Luce for more than six years and before that, with Luce’s father John Dalziell.

He says when the Williams took over the two properties, six new soil test transects were created to be used alongside some of the old ones to get a better understanding of the farm’s fertility.

“We also completed herbage analysis to determine the metabolisable energy status of the pasture and did a visual assessment of the pasture,” Greig says.

A nutrient budget was done using a number of scenarios to see both fertiliser impact on pasture growth and any environmental impacts.

“Econometric modelling was also completed to determine what financial impact capital phosphorus would have on the various blocks. After reviewing all this data, a maintenance and capital fertiliser programme was created based on sound science and the belief George and Luce had in the science and advice I gave them.”

Soil test results are reviewed every two years. Smart Maps is used to identify under-performing areas in need of capital lime or fertiliser and also to help the planning process for new paddocks. The system can confirm the new hectare totals and measure new fence lines.



AN ACCOMPLISHED RIDER, LUCE WORKED AS AN EQUINE AND HUMAN PHYSIOTHERAPIST IN THE UK



GEORGE AND LUCE WORK HARD TO SHOWCASE THEIR GENETICS PROGRAMME, HERE PHOTOGRAPHING BREEDING RAMS

Greig visits George and Luce about six times throughout the year, with two sit-down meetings to discuss upcoming cropping programmes and the maintenance/capital fertiliser programmes for the year. "The other meetings are to discuss things such as Nitrogen use or to do farm walks to assess covers and crops, as well as to generate discussion regarding forward planning."

George and Luce are both valued members of their local community. Luce is on the Tinui School Board of Trustees, its parent fundraising committee and the Tinui Horse Sports committee. George is a steward at the Castlepoint Races and organises the Tinui School Trail bike ride. On the farming side, he is a member of the Tinui/Wainuioru Farm Discussion Group, the Waiknotz Business Focus Group and the Coopworth Society National Council.

George grew up on the Te Parae horse Stud in Wainuioru, near Masterton, and when he started shepherding at 16 found he had an instant passion for dogs and stock. He shepherded for two years at Wairere Romneys then headed to the South Island high country working on Molesworth, Argyle and Mt Nicholas stations, boasting more than 40,000 stock units each.

While on his OE he met Luce, who had grown up on Grassendale with three sisters.

"It will be an exciting industry for them. Who knows what will happen."

"If I wasn't on my horse I was on the farm with Dad," she says.

She finished a four-year physiotherapy degree in Auckland then studied veterinary physiotherapy in London where she went on to work across the UK as a human and horse physiotherapist.

"Farming is in our DNA profile. It's what we do," says George.

"Our kids are growing up on the farm and it's their farm.

Ultimately, like any parents, we'd love to see one of them take it over and do things better than we've done. They will have more technology and more tools than we have to drive production. It will be an exciting industry for them. Who knows what will happen."

Luce adds their aim is to give the three children, Max, 7, Sofia, 6, and Harvey, 4; an equal opportunity at an early stage.

"It might not be farming. We were fortunate our parents were able to give us opportunities early enough in life to make something of it. That's what life's about really. As long as they love whatever they end up doing as much as we love what we do."

The Editorial Team thank George and Luce for sharing their story.



THE HILLS OF GRASSEDALE PROVE IDEAL FOR BREEDING QUALITY STOCK