

# Growing into his heritage

Tony Benny 11:24, Jun 20 2016



TONY BENNY

Waimate farmer Dan Studholme has taken the reins of the family business.

With the nearby town of Studholme bearing his family name and being descended from the first European settlers to take up land in the district, Dan Studholme has deep roots in his corner of South Canterbury but as he grew up he didn't have a burning ambition to farm the family land.

"Mum and Dad didn't actively encourage any of us to think about farming because there wasn't really a bright future in farming in the 80s and 90s. It more happened by accident really," he says.

After completing a commerce degree at Otago University, Studholme returned home briefly to save some money and then left to see the world, first tractor driving in Western Australia and then travelling to Thailand.

"In 2004 irrigation came through and Dad was farming on own at that point. I'd come home and helped and then headed overseas. But six months into travelling Dad decided it was a bit much for him so I came home."

The two farms that make up the business needed development when Studholme came home but he could see plenty of potential to improve them. He's spent 10 years fencing, fertilising and re-grassing and now he's

a keen user of FarmIQ software to further raise productivity. But taking the reins has not been without complications.

His father Paul had farmed on his own account and then in partnership with his father and together they sold some poorer land and bought the second, larger property, about 8km away, in 1980.

"Dad and my grandfather were going well at the time but when the mid 80's hit, a series of events including my grandfather's sudden death in a car accident, led to the farming business coming under severe stress and going into survival mode." Studholme says.

"Basically Dad was just hanging on for 15 odd years and the place got a bit rundown. He could not afford to buy his two siblings out and nothing really happened until I came home and it had to get sorted out.

"The ownership structure was very complicated. There were several different ownership entities within the two properties, intertwining historical loans and things that were difficult for the lawyer and accountants to unravel.

"And right about the time I came home, land values started skyrocketing. So that made the process even harder."

Studholme expects settling with his sisters will be a less complicated process but with another generation of succession and his now-retired father and mother still living on one of the farms he does need to increase profitability.

"It's good to have a challenge. It would be a bit boring if it was all nice and easy and there's potential to do better. They're not farms that are flat and totally developed."

The farms include rugged hill country, easier rolling land as well as 60 hectares of irrigated flats. This year about 4500 stock units are being wintered, down nearly 1000 on what Studholme was comfortable with before the past two years of extreme dry.

With production down as well as lamb prices, the income that had been steadily growing as farm improvements took effect has fallen too, so Studholme's put the brakes on more development meantime.

"But the good news is, we've had a couple of pretty tough years but the farms are looking as good as they ever have as far as the ability to grow grass when the conditions come right," Studholme says.

"The engine's probably as good as it's ever been so it's just hopefully getting some growing conditions and being able to convert that growth into dollars will be the next challenge."

Though the farm is still unseasonably dry, Studholme's not too concerned yet about another dry spring ahead.

"It's quite nice having a mild winter now and there's still growth quite surprisingly. We get great feed utilisation at this time of year when it's a little bit dry and we've got some feed there so it's not an issue, just so long as come August onwards we start getting regular rain."

Having irrigation also helps. During winter there are only ewe hoggets on the 60ha of irrigated land but then it will be used to finish lambs and graze dairy heifers.

"In spring 400 ewes on nearby hill block will come down and lamb and once they're weaned the ewes go back up on the hill so from weaning onwards it's finishing lambs. Dairy calves arrive in December and I'll bring the one-year-old heifers which winter on the other farm on fodder beet back to follow round behind them.

"The irrigated stuff is almost treated like a dairy platform with virtually no stock in winter except for a few ewe hoggets and we crank it up in summer. The soil type of the irrigated ground does not lend itself to wintering a lot of stock as it is quite poorly drained and I don't want to destroy good summer producing pastures over winter."

With farm development on hold in the meantime, Studholme is looking for other ways to increase production and is using FarmIQ software to help with that. Most of his sheep now have electronic ear tags and from the data he's amassing he's identified weaning weights and pre-weaning growth rates as an area where improvements can be made.

His lambing percentage is close to 160 per cent but average weaning weights sit around 27-28kg. Studholme would prefer them to be 32kg or higher. He's identified some tweaks to his system to try to achieve that.

"One is more feed for the ewes from scanning to weaning and it's got to be higher quality. Another is shifting the lambing date a bit later to try to

match the feed growth curve a bit better because we always seem to have a bit of a pinch in about late September through to mid-October."

Studholme says research has shown that lambs born a week later can have the same weaning weights as those that lambed a week earlier. He's also going to better feed ewes shown to be carrying multiple lambs at scanning.

"Historically I've probably wintered ewes on the hill too long so now I'm putting them on the hill from the second cycle of mating whereas they used to stay in the paddocks for all of mating.

"Then the twins and triplets and any lighter ewes come off the hill at scanning time instead of three weeks after scanning. We get the scanner to identify second cycle lambs and these are lambed on hill blocks."

He's planted 10ha of rape to feed the ewes in July and August to keep them off the lambing paddocks so they've got good covers coming into lambing. A trial he did last year with high producing Persian clover for triplet bearing ewes showed the value of high quality feed, with the triplet lambs weaning at 29kg compared with the rest of the lambs averaging 27.5kg.

There has been significant investment in new forages this year including plantain herb mixes, tall fescue, savvy cocksfoot and rohan ryegrass. There is a focus on legumes in all mixes with AberLasting white clover, Relish Red clover and some sub clover going into the mixes this year.

He's changing his beef policy too and will move from a hereford-angus cross to a straight angus. Until now he's carried a small hereford herd to breed replacements and has had to buy in hereford heifers to do that but once it's all-angus the operation will be simpler.

In future Studholme intends to finish more cattle instead of increasing breeding numbers again to build more flexibility into the system. This will be done by retaining weaner calves instead of selling them.

With an all-angus herd he will have a greater number of heifers to select replacements from and plans to use ultra sound scanning to identify the best meat producing animals and select for the best meat genetics.

"As I move into a beef finishing system I want to make sure I am getting the right carcass traits to get the premiums," he says.

Though he didn't grow up wanting to be a farmer, Studholme clearly enjoys it and is comfortable with his family heritage. He and wife Bridget have two children.

"There's potential to get better performance so that's what we've been trying to do for the last 10 years, to slowly chip away and it's going to be an ongoing process I think. It's probably a bit of a lifetime project really – it's quite rewarding."