

The New Grad Farm Vet

Emily graduated in 2020 from Surrey and joined Westpoint Farm Vets straight away after spending time with the practice as a student. Having grown up around a smallholding, Emily is particularly enjoying working with smallholder clients and she has an ever-growing social media following where she shares her life on farm.

Where it all began

My grandparents were originally from Portsmouth, but they moved out to the countryside before I was born. They've had animals for as long as I can remember, and I spent a lot of time there. It wasn't set-up or run as a commercial farm, but they did supply free range eggs to some local shops, and there were turkeys reared for Christmas. Growing up with animals around just felt normal – some of my baby pictures feature a turkey on the handle of my pram! Being a vet was all I ever wanted to do, and I always knew that I wanted to be a farm vet, even though I wasn't from a farming family or had any experience of proper farming.

A Surrey Pioneer

I visited Surrey for an Open Day and applied to be part of the first cohort, even though the Open Day was looking at architect sketches and building plans on a screen – there wasn't a physical vet school to see at that point. The passion of the staff and vision to take a fresh approach to veterinary education had me hooked. I had an offer for the 2014 entry, but my final maths a-level exam had other ideas. Thankfully Surrey was happy for me to re-sit and apply the next year and looking back I wouldn't change a thing.

Going Large

My family will attest that it has always been farm for me. I enjoyed my small animal work experience, but I can't imagine myself ever being a small animal vet – being inside all day makes me miserable! I think a lot of people discount farm because they're not from that background, or maybe the working conditions aren't seen as desirable, but I'd take a horrendous caesarean in the cold and wet over hours of back-to-back consults any day. Farming has come a long way in terms of gender balance, but I can't say there isn't more work to be done.

When I started my clinical farm EMS in third year I had a couple of really unpleasant experiences. I was told that girls don't make good farm vets, and that I should just quit because I wasn't from farming. I'm sure I'm not alone in experiencing different treatment to that of male student counterparts. Those experiences did knock me, but I can confidently say that farming has improved massively even in that short time. Female farm vets, and vets not from farming backgrounds, aren't the exception anymore.

My advice for anyone who has even slightly considered farm is to go for it, go and do some EMS and don't let misconceptions or invisible barriers hold you back. Everyone has heard the saying that you can't be what you can't see, and in hindsight that was exactly the case for me. During my degree I met some incredible female farm vets, who weren't from farming backgrounds, but were amazing vets. Every industry needs people to champion those from diverse backgrounds, so if you're considering farming or just have questions please reach out and start that conversation. Most farmer won't care whether you grew up on a farm or not - they just want to know that you care about them and their animals.

Farm EMS

It's pretty well accepted that farm EMS isn't as easy to come by as small animal. There aren't as many practices, they're generally geographically isolated and often students need their own transport to get there. All that aside, I would really strongly recommend farm EMS to every student, even if you never plan to set foot on a farm again after graduation. Having been on the student and vet side of EMS students, I can see how valuable the transferable skills are. Farm vetting is as much about communication, problem solving and resilience as it is about surgery and PD-ing cows!



My advice for students going on EMS; please don't discount farm just because it's not your first choice. If you're engaged and give things a go, I guarantee you will learn things. I personally don't care whether a student wants to go into farm or not, but it can be challenging having students who make it very obvious they don't want to be there.

Top three tips:

1. Make sure the office staff, receptionist and vets have your phone number. Plans can change very quickly in farm, and entire days of visits can be cancelled if an emergency comes in. There's nothing worse than being sat in the office alone because the vet went to an emergency and couldn't tell you.
2. If there are certain areas of weakness or topics you'd like to focus on please let your practice know! We ask students to write some key aims on a board in the office, so we can prioritise them getting to fertility/sick animal/health planning calls. Equally if you'd just like to see some of everything, that's good to know too!
3. Try and get as stuck in as you can, I will always try and involve students more who are engaged and helpful. If you have some time in the office, ask if there's anything that can be done – we have kits to make-up and samples to process the same as in small animal practices.

It's been a tough year for everyone, especially vet students who have missed out on so much practical experience. I hope the profession has accepted that the next few cohorts of students need to be given extra support and time to develop those skills they would have done on EMS. There are so many ways to do this – for example Vet Partners ran a New Grad Boot Camp to provide practical learning opportunities on farm in a safe environment that graduates may have missed out on.

Student Turns Teacher

Having students with me as a new grad felt so odd, but I know it's a really valuable experience for students and graduates. The biggest thing I try and do is involve students as much as I can on farm, starting from always introducing them to the client – there's nothing worse than awkwardly standing there with no one knowing who you are.

As a student, I remember the first time a vet got me to speak to a client directly, rather than just standing there listening to the conversation. It isn't appropriate in all situations, but lots of clients have been happy for final year students to do the history taking and clinical exam. My biggest challenge as a new graduate was stepping up and having those conversations with clients. I'm hoping to make that a bit easier for students if they've started asking those questions whilst on placement. Equally, as a vet, having a student has made my life so much easier sometimes. Having an extra pair of hands to scrub into a surgery really turned around the last caesarean I did, and it's much easier than teaching a client how to scrub in and making sure they don't touch the wrong things.

Employed in a Pandemic

I spent a lot of time seeing practise with Westpoint, who I currently work for. I wanted to stay near family and I appreciated having a good-sized team,

plus a wider network throughout the rest of the company. I've really relied on that during the pandemic and have been able to speak to vets hundreds of miles away on an on-call weekend or about a difficult case.

Starting work during the pandemic was certainly different, and the biggest challenges for me were getting to know my team and forming relationships with those extra challenges. A few of us started an early morning online case discussion to make up for all those missed conversations that would have happened in the office between visits.

On farm things did feel more normal, but we were still wearing PPE and social distancing. Even little things like not being able to go inside for a cup of tea after a visit affected the relationship you have with clients. In the really challenging months, with everything shut and people furloughed, I did really appreciate the normality of farm life, and being able to go out to work every day as normal definitely kept me going.

The Learning Curve

They say you don't really learn how to drive until after you pass your test, and I'd say the same about being a vet. Even without the difficulties of the pandemic, no amount of practical experience can fully prepare you for the first time you're on farm by yourself, having to make decisions and clinical judgements. Whilst you might be physically by yourself, I think it's important for new grads to remember that support is only a WhatsApp or phone call away, no one will mind you talking through a case when you start out. I still frequently chat things through with other vets, and there's no shame in that.

Every veterinary degree now places a lot of emphasis on communication skills, but it's not until you start in practice that you realise just what proportion of your day is talking to people. Often you're 100% reliant on your communication skills to ask the right questions and be able to give the right advice. Some things do only come from experience, which isn't that helpful as a new grad other than to reassure you that things that feel alien will get easier.

Reaching Out

Throughout vet school I was involved in the wider profession as President of the Surrey Veterinary Society. The connections I built up then have made the transition into practice much smoother, and I wanted to contribute to that network building for the vets and vet students of the future. It sounds crazy but my Instagram account has been a big part of my support network this year. Online I can connect with farm vets, wherever they are, to share experiences and advice. When I had tough visits, or situations that didn't go as planned, I would share that online and be able to talk things through or learn from other people.

Social media is an ever-growing part of our lives, and it can be a great tool for educating and sharing our stories with the wider world. Of course, it can also be incredibly negative and toxic, it's all about how you use it. Most weeks I have conversations online with vet students about the reality of being a farm vet, and many of them have discounted it as an option for them. Equally members of the public get to see how much time and effort goes into ensuring the highest welfare possible for our farm animals – it's all about breaking down stereotypes and getting some facts out into the discussion.



A few clients follow me online, and I always have permission for what I post.

Finding Fulfilment

Everyone says that the day bringing new life into the world doesn't make you happy is the day you should hang up your waterproofs. My first spring season was exhausting, but a good lambing, no matter what time of the night, will always put a smile on my face.

You get a lot of 'firsts' in your initial months as a farm vet, and they're always amazing but there are smaller milestones which I've noticed too. Not being from a farming background, I tried particularly hard to learn about the other aspects of running a farm so I could integrate better with farm teams. Initially my on-farm chat was just about the extortionate price of straw, and how well the cull prices were holding, but I'm slowly learning more and that does give me a boost.

The other thing I underestimated is the buzz you can get from educating people. I remember a client calling me at 3am on Easter Weekend with their first difficult lambing. They described what they could feel, and we managed to talk them through correcting the position and delivering live twins. Even as new graduates we have a lot of knowledge, and it's easy to underestimate that compared to more senior colleagues, but we can still make a real difference.

There are challenging sides to the job, and TB testing isn't always the most interesting visit in the world, but we shouldn't just switch off and rush through those visits. As a new grad, TB testing is great way to get to know farmers without the pressure of a sick animal to deal with. Often there are some castrates, or PDs to do on the read day so there's always the possibility for some clinical work too. Even more importantly we should be engaging with farmers about TB, talking about risk management and sensible decision making. I challenge anyone to listen to BCVA Board member Sarah Tomlinson speak about TB and not feel empowered to pick up the gauntlet and do their bit to tackle this disease.

Clients & Communication

The partnerships you develop with clients is such a key part of being a farm vet, and that was a struggle during the height of the pandemic. As a new starter it can be hard to find your place, especially if you're shadowing a senior vet on visits or going as a second vet to a routine. I think it's all about time, and to some degree you do have to prove your worth. We're not a heavy dairy area so I've only just done my first small routine as second vet, without the first vet present, but having clients trust my judgement and skills is a really good feeling. The hardest thing is clients who won't acknowledge your presence on farm, or only speak to the senior vet even if you're stood next to them.

There will always be clients who'd prefer

to have the senior vet on farm every visit, but new graduates need to be integrated into these teams to allow that client partnership to progress. Communication teaching has improved and is focused on in vet school. The key things for me are honesty, attitude and listening. Clients want to know you care about their situation, whether that's a retired couple with some pet sheep, or your biggest dairy farm. If I don't know the answer to a question, or don't have a definitive diagnosis I will say that. If a surgery isn't quite going to plan, I'll explain that too. No one has minded me calling for a second opinion, and clients will always be more forgiving if they are kept informed about a situation as it happens.

Work Still to Do

The profession is facing many challenges – staffing shortages and staff wellbeing were issues even before the pandemic. I think it's a difficult environment to ensure new grads are getting the support we need, but this is an area we should try and prioritise or risk losing these vets before they've even found their feet.

Every member of the veterinary team can make a difference, but I think culture change needs to come from the top down. There is always more work to be done, but managers should be making a conscious effort to ensure their team are going home as soon to finish time as possible, and not using their evenings and weekends to catch-up on work admin. If a system only works when everyone consistently gives up their personal time, the system needs to change.

Personally, my upcoming challenges are continuing to learn and develop, without stagnating, and taking on more responsibility within my practice. I don't have any specific areas of interest yet, but there's a lot more to learn before I'll feel confident and competent with all general areas of farm vetting.

We are part of an industry where there is always more to give, but awareness of our own wellbeing and the importance of time away is increasing. When I started work, I was told to book my first holiday as soon as I got access to the HR system, and to always have something planned to look forward to. Visiting friends and trips away were hard during the pandemic, but scheduling time to just be is important too. I've started doing some activities outside of work and getting back to the hobbies I enjoyed pre-pandemic. Having a weekly club or rehearsal to attend gets me out of 'work mode' and dog walks in the countryside will always help clear my head after a difficult day.



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Emily she/her
Veterinarian
New Graduate Farm Vet

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