



Ellen, Olivia and
Mary Hynes

Farming roots and future paths: a legacy of women in agriculture

The intertwined stories that reflect tradition and transformation in Co Roscommon

Aisling Molloy,
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October 15th marks the International Day of Rural Women and in the rolling countryside of Roscommon, farming is more than a livelihood — it's a legacy.

Few families embody that spirit more than Future Beef farmer Olivia Hynes, her mother Mary, and her niece Ellen, whose intertwined stories reflect both the tradition and transformation of Irish agriculture.

Mary, now 81, has spent her life immersed in farming and in family. The eldest of three sisters, she inherited the farm from her parents in the late 1960s.

"I had the interest from a young age," she says. "I never had any ambition to do anything else. I grew up with it. My father loved sheep – that's mostly what we had – and in the very early days, we had a small dairy herd too. It was all hand-milking, very labour intensive."

Mary was just 24 when the farm was passed to her from her dad, who had previously inherited it from his mother.

"I got married in 1968 and moved to Jamestown where my husband had a farm too – so we were juggling both. We started farming together in 1970. I suppose I was lucky – there was no pressure to do something else. Farming was just the life I knew."

Back then, farming life was tough but community-driven.

"Everything was with horses, not a tractor in sight. Neighbours helped each other with hay and sheep. Sheep were sold at certain times of year in local fairs and wool prices were good.



Olivia Hynes with
her Teagasc advisor
Brian Daly

There was no silage, just hay. It was hard going but not pressurised like now."

She attended Home Economics school in Moate in the 1950s – but she says she would've loved the opportunities young people have today.

"The courses, the options – they're miles ahead of our time. Education is key. I tell all the grandchildren that."

A farm passed with purpose

Olivia took over the family farm from her mother at just 23 years of age. "It was always going to be me," Olivia recalls. "We talked about it as a family. There was no surprise in it." Mary agrees. "Olivia was always the one outside, always helping. She's like myself in that way."

Mary says early retirement schemes helped make the decision easier. "We talked about leasing and then just said – why not hand it on now? Olivia

was young, full of energy. There was no big issue – talking to the solicitor and accountant, with some paperwork, and that was it. No hassle."

Taking control and making changes

Olivia stepped into the role with both reverence and resolve. After completing her Green Cert with Teagasc in 1998, she started shaping the farm into her own. At the time, it ran 450 ewes, suckler cows, and finished Angus heifers.

"When I got financial control, I started to make changes," she says. "Angus cattle just weren't making money for us. We moved to continental breeds, sold the weanlings, and didn't keep them over winter. There just wasn't enough shed space."

That issue sparked investment – new sheds were built, including a hay shed and slatted unit, and changes were made to the sheep facilities.



Ellen, John, Jack,
Mary and Olivia Hynes

Olivia also shifted breeding strategies, began using AI, and took on more efficient management practices.

Mary, watching from the sidelines, never questioned her daughter's approach.

"I let her get on with it. You hope for the best and support them." Family support has always been part of the story. Siblings chip in during busy weeks – one brother handles AI, while others take turns at weekends during the lambing season.

Farming as a woman wasn't something Mary thought much about in her early years. "It was just what we did," she says.

Olivia, too, is pragmatic. "The only disadvantage? Everyone knows your name. People at the mart would ask, 'Is the boss coming?' and then realise it was me. But I've never let it hold me back. If you want to farm, farm. It doesn't matter if you're male or female."

Looking to the future

Olivia has her eyes set on future-proofing the farm: "You make it as viable as you can and hope someone comes behind you. There's no point

leaving a place and not making it financially solid."

She plans to add another shed to the out farm in Kilcass and will continue to improve the herd and sheep systems. AI has proven a great fit, producing high-quality weanlings and giving more flexibility with time and genetics.

A new generation learns the ropes

Though Ellen didn't grow up on the farm itself, she lived just five minutes away and was always drawn to it. "I was in and out helping, but it was around Transition Year when it clicked," she says.

"We were doing Agricultural Science in Roscommon Community College, and that subject really pushed me, with encouragement from my teacher.

It opened up the whole agricultural side and got me thinking – this is something I'd like to do."

She's now studying Animal and Crop Production at UCD.

"It's such a broad degree. You can focus on animals, crops, environment – it's great. I've had work placements on farms around the country and

bring ideas home – from shed design to nutrition." In fact, she's already contributed to the design of a livestock shed in Kilcass. "I've always liked buildings and layout, even if it's just putting up a wall or a handling unit. It's practical stuff, but it matters."

In the yard and beyond

When home from college, Ellen always makes time for farm life – particularly during lambing. "I usually do the night shift – penning, feeding pets, checking the machine."

She credits Olivia and Mary as her farming mentors. "Most of my friends had fathers or uncles showing them how to farm. But for me, it was Olivia and Granny. They showed me how to tube a lamb, how to handle animals, how to observe. That stayed with me."

She's also a member of South Roscommon Macra, though college and work commitments limit how often she attends.

"There's definitely more support for young people in agriculture now – grants, training, and incentives, especially for women."

Looking forward

As for the future, Ellen's not locking herself into one route just yet. "Originally, I thought I'd do four years, then two years PME to go into teaching. That's still a possibility – a teacher helped me, and I'd love to do the same for someone else. But I'm also thinking about research – maybe a Master's or PhD, maybe in the area of animal reproduction."

One thing is certain – she'll always be involved in the family farm.

"I love working with stock. It's frustrating when things go wrong, but I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't love it."

Mary shares the sentiment. "I'd love to see the farm continue, keep progressing. The paperwork is tough now – all CAP and cross compliance. But that's farming today. You have to let the next generation at it. Let them make mistakes, learn. Olivia's doing a great job, and Ellen will find her path too."

She also comments on the value of transferring the farm to the next generation. "It's a shame to see young people ready to take on farming, but the older generation won't let go. You have to hand it on, let them at it – even if they make mistakes. That's how they learn and improve it for the next generation."

70ha of grassland and AI breeding

Olivia farms 70ha of grassland in two main blocks near Four Roads in Co. Roscommon. She operates a 45 suckler cow spring-calving herd where the progeny are sold as weanlings, in conjunction with a 240 early- to mid-season ewe flock. She changed to 100% AI breeding in 2024, having moved away from using a bull after fertility issues. She uses a combination of Belgian Blue, Charolais, Limousin and Simmental sires, and uses two vasectomised bulls to help her with heat detection.

Replacements

Her aim is to breed her own replacements from within the herd, so as to reduce the disease risk and costs associated with buying in breeding stock. She is stocked at 1.78 LU/ha and has a carbon footprint of 12.13 kg CO₂e per kg beef LWG.

Olivia's breeding KPIs are excellent:

- Calving interval: 376 days
- Mortality at 28 days: 4.3%
- Calves per cow per year: 0.93
- Home bred heifers calved 22-26

months of age: 100%

- Spring six-week calving rate: 52%
- Eurostar index: €109

Last year she made a net profit of €507/ha from the beef enterprise, excluding any direct payments. She has excellent control of her variable costs and the contractor and fertiliser are her two biggest expenses.

Going forward Olivia plans to focus on reducing labour on the farm and will invest in a new slatted shed on the outfarm.

She is continually working to improve her soil fertility and improve her grass quality by use of paddocks and grass measuring, as cheap weight gain from grass is central to her system.

Using protected urea and spreading slurry by LESS are two key changes she has made to reduce her emissions. Biodiversity is also a key focus on the farm through the ACRES scheme and she has planted an ammonia capture area beside the yard, along with new hedges which will also provide shelter and shade to stock.



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Aidan Maguire, his
Teagasc advisor Aine
Gaffney and Fergal
Maguire

Getting cattle over the line

After a good grazing season, how will you finish your cattle?

Fergal J. Maguire,
Teagasc Beef 500
Programme

So far, 2025 will go down as one of the best grass years we've had in a long time. Grass growth has been excellent across most of the country, and cattle have done fairly well on the back of it.

At this point in the year, a lot of dairy bred cattle, especially the early-maturing types, are nearly ready to be fed for finishing.

The question farmers face is: "Can I finish these cattle at grass, or would I be better off housing them and finishing inside on silage and meal?" It's a decision that depends on a few key things, and the right answer will be different for every farm.

There are a few main factors to consider:

1. The type of cattle.
2. Grass supply.
3. Ground conditions.
4. Safety when feeding meal outside.
5. Housing availability.
6. Labour.

Early-maturing heifers (like Angus or Hereford crosses) should be looked at now to judge how close they are to finishing. A lot of these will come fit off grass alone if they've had a good summer. But there will always be a few that are a bit behind. For those, feeding around 3 kg of meal per day for 6-8 weeks either at grass or indoors can be enough to get them over the line.

Many of the early-maturing steers will be around 19-20 months old now. If your plan is to finish them before housing, you'll likely need to feed

around 180 kg of ration in total or 3 kg of concentrates and good quality grass for 60 days.

If you started feeding them in late August, and the ground is still holding up, there's a good chance you could finish them off grass in the next few weeks.

If your cattle are lighter than these targets at the start of September, they'll probably need to go indoors for finishing. That's especially true for Holstein-Friesians or continentals and lighter early-maturing steers.

Feeding meal outdoors can work well, but you have to do it safely. Big groups of cattle (20+) can get excited at feeding time and accidents can happen.

To reduce risk

- If moving cattle daily, feed meal before changing wire.

- Use a meal auger bucket on the front loader if available.
- Have a second person with you if the other options aren't available. If none of that's possible and it feels unsafe, just house them. There is no sense getting hurt.

As the back end moves on, grass growth will start to slow and utilisation can get tricky. If the ground starts cutting up, or if cattle aren't doing well at grass anymore, then it might be time to house and finish.

Remember calves or weanlings will benefit more from the good grass at this time of year than the finishing cattle. They're lighter on the land and will keep thriving with a small bit of meal.

If ground conditions are still good and you've plenty of grass, it usually makes sense to feed concentrates at grass rather than to feed silage and meal indoors. Once damage starts due to significant poaching, standing water in paddocks, etc. — you're better off pulling cattle into the shed.

One of the biggest headaches on calf-to-beef farms is not enough shed space. Getting as many cattle finished before the second winter takes the pressure off. It frees up pens for lighter stores and weanlings, and it helps avoid crowding and underperformance during the main winter period.

For part-time or older farmers, housing finishing cattle earlier can make life easier. There's less time spent checking and feeding cattle in dark evenings and mornings. Autumn grass remains a lower cost feed compared to silage or concentrate, so continuing to finish cattle at pasture is generally more economical than housing. Cattle respond positively to concentrate supplementation at pasture in autumn:

- With good grass: Feed 0.5 kg meal per 100 kg liveweight (e.g., 3.0 kg/day for a 600 kg steer).
- Where grass is limited or of moderate quality: Feed up to 1.0 kg meal per 100 kg liveweight.

Even if pasturing cannot be completed at pasture, short-term supplementation is often beneficial. It will reduce silage requirements later and allows the transition ('build-up') to an indoor finishing diet to begin



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Continuing to finish cattle at pasture is generally more economical than housing

Table 1: Target Weights for Finishing Early-Maturing Cattle at Grass

	Early-Maturing Steer	Early-Maturing Heifer
Start Weight (1 Sept)	480 kg	450 kg
Slaughter Weight	550 kg (Nov 1)	500 kg (Oct 15)
Carcass Weight	280 kg	250 kg

FARMING PROFILE: Aidan & Luke Maguire

Farming near Navan, Co Meath, Aidan Maguire and his son Luke operate a thriving dairy calf-to-beef enterprise alongside their agricultural contracting business. The farm extends to 70 hectares, with 54 hectares in grass and the remainder under forestry.

"Each year, we buy around 170 calves, split approximately 30% autumn-born and 70% spring-born, all sourced from four trusted local dairy farms," says Aidan. The main breeds reared are Aberdeen Angus, Hereford, Belgian Blue, and Friesian.

The Maguire's system is to finish heifers at 18–19 months and bullocks under 24 months. The goal is to bring heifers to over 550 kg liveweight and bullocks to 600 kg, aiming for minimum carcass weights of 270 kg and 300 kg, respectively.

Beef-bred steers and continental heifers are typically housed for finishing once they're thriving and have passed the 480kg mark.

Friesian bullocks usually need to be heavier, over 500kg before being brought in, though Aidan notes, "Some of the plainer Friesians need a bit more

weight before they're ready for the shed." While Aidan previously finished some cattle at grass with meal, he now prefers to finish all these cattle indoors.

"It's safer, more labour-efficient, and frees up grass for lighter stock to graze longer into the calf-to-beef enterprise," says Aidan. The best of the spring-born cattle on this farm are usually ready for a finishing diet from early August.

On average, Friesian steers and continentals take 100 days to finish, while early-maturing bullocks and continental heifers are ready after 60 to 70 days.

The typical finishing diet includes 5kg of ration per head per day, along with high-quality silage. Some of the more forward early-maturing heifers will finish off grass and 3kg of meal for four to six weeks. "They're easy fed," says Aidan, "but if grass quality slips, they're better off inside."

Each situation is different but any heifers that are not fit by October are housed, as they tend to make a mess around troughs if left out too long."