

Still caring for the fields and the beasts

Life at the Royal Agricultural University in Cirencester is as jolly as ever after 180 years, but the diverse degrees on offer reflect the challenges of 21st-century farming. **Kate Green** charts a history of seismic change for the industry and **Mary Skipwith** talks to students past and present

THE farmer's occupation is the oldest, the most necessary, and, when rightly pursued, one of the worthiest a man can follow,' wrote Charles Dickens in 1868 after visiting his youngest son, Edward, who was studying at the Royal Agricultural College (now University, RAU), Cirencester, Gloucestershire. It was formed in 1845 by Royal Charter, with the motto *Avorum Cultus Pecorumque* ('Caring for the Fields and the Beasts', from Virgil), three years after a trenchant speech to the Fairford and Cirencester Farmers Club by one Robert Jeffreys-Brown. He opined that a 'specific education for Agricultural Pursuits', especially for tenant farmers, would be a good thing in an age when the country's food production looked as if it would not keep up with the huge strides being made in industrialisation and technology—Isambard Kingdom Brunel was an early shareholder in the college. It was the first of its kind in the English-speaking world and undertook research into such topics as manure, food genetics, botany, geology and chemistry.

Landowners and farmers pitched in with funding—there was no government support—and Earl Bathurst leased the site on the outskirts of the town. The college started with 25 students; today, the RAU has more than 1,100, men and women, studying for 20-plus degrees, the breadth of which reflect what today's farmer and land manager needs to factor in besides milking cows and sowing potatoes. 'We are in unstable sands,' warns pro vice-chancellor Mark Horton.

'What we have done is a root-and-branch review of what we teach, because the context in which farmers work is constant unpredictability, so the background is to prepare them to make decisions in a difficult world,' explains Dame Fiona Reynolds, chair of the RAU Governing Council. 'Talk to any farmer now and the whole context in which they work is pressurised—they're worried about taxes and grants, market volatility and climate change. There are high expectations from the



A crucial change: the college known as Ciren was given university status in 2013

public. Unlike 20 or 30 years ago, when they could see the future clearly, the main skills students need now are resourcefulness and adaptability. They can't rely on a government in the way their parents did.'

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Courses include environment and sustainability, bloodstock, equine science, real estate and wildlife conservation, alongside business, land management and, of course, agriculture. The King is patron and, as well as farmers, its governing body includes lawyers, government workers, academics, diversity champions and businessmen, among them Wilfred Emmanuel-Jones, owner of the food brand The Black Farmer.

Former students include the television presenter Jonathan Dimbleby, Capt Mark Phillips and his son, Peter, the Dukes of Beaufort and Marlborough, a Hawaiian prince, Irish politician Simon Coveney, racehorse trainers Andrew Balding and Nicky Henderson,

England rugby player Tim Payne, rare-breed saviour Joe Henson, former Defra minister Lord Benyon, Victorian entomologist Eleanor Ormerod and the Bengali poet Dwijendralai Rai, who won a scholarship in 1884.

On the way to its present-day status as a centre of scientific excellence, the RAU has had to shake off the post-war perception of aristocratic heirs fast-tracking their way to estate management and beery beaglers stuffing potatoes into exhaust pipes for a laugh. When its status changed from college to university in 2013, there was an outpouring of horror from alumni. In fact, the first modern degree programme began in 1984, in cooperation with Reading University, and, in 2001, government funding was awarded, enabling students from wider backgrounds to attend.

'At one stage, it was regarded as a gap year, a posh public school for 18-year-olds,' admits Prof Horton, 'but we have just invested £6 million in brand-new laboratories. Our reinvention from 2015 onwards has been as a research institution and much more connected to the green revolution. That is our challenge: to maintain food security, but in a more carbon-neutral fashion. The reality is that British agriculture is probably the most carbon neutral in the world, but it's still too much. If we're going to reach net zero, we'll have to be clever. It's about transitioning from the "Dig for Victory" approach, but rewilding doesn't solve the problem. We need to teach our students to be savvy, to balance food production with soil care and to end up with land from which they can make a living.'

Prof Horton is a global archaeologist, who was a presenter on television's *Time Team*; he has projects on the go in Tanzania, to clean up fisheries, and in Ukraine, to examine the contamination of soil by munitions. →

Strong roots, resilient future: the fundamentals of good soil management and husbandry blend with modern technology to ensure today's RAU graduates can face the shifting sands of the modern world





He speaks with inspiring energy: 'I realised there are two sides to understanding the environment, both green and historic, and that working in an agricultural university was a good way to influence the next generation so they are aware of historic built heritage, as well as the natural world.'

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1970s

Atty Beor-Roberts

By the time Atty Beor-Roberts, former regional chairman at Knight Frank, attended Cirencester in 1976, the image of it being predominantly for rich landowners was fading: 'I think a lot of landowners' sons who had returned from the war were enrolled by their fathers to learn how to run the farm or estate.' Standards remained high, however; jacket and tie was the expected attire and pride was taken in attending 'a bastion of old society'. Applicants had to prove they had either been involved in farming or completed a practical year beforehand. 'I was brought up on a farm, but I still went to work in a land agents' office from September to July. I then took the three-year estate-management course, which was extremely varied, covering law, taxation, building construction, botany, agriculture, valuations and estate management.'

One can understand how the RAU earned the nickname 'college of knowledge', with students enjoying outsmarting their professors. 'There being five seats in the front row of the new lecture theatre, six of us decided to



Left: Simon Hart may have had 'perhaps too much fun', but the world-leading agricultural education he received stood him in good stead in parliament. *Right:* Knight Frank stalwart Atty Beor-Roberts saw the RAC embrace a wider field of student backgrounds



He may have spent more time on the gallops, but Marcus Armytage, Grand National winner in 1990, relished his three years at Ciren

occupy them every time to keep them full so one of us could be absent. No one ever noticed.' There were no adverse effects. 'I was assistant agent at Cirencester Park before working at Knight Frank for 34 years and getting to the top table because of my time at Cirencester. So it did me all right, I'd say!'

1980s Simon Hart

Lord Hart, former chief executive of the Countryside Alliance, Conservative MP and chief whip, who is now in the Lords, reflects that, although he enjoyed the university culture—'it felt positive, friendly and great fun, perhaps too much fun'—it may not have been shared everyone who lived in the town. 'Looking back, I think the long-suffering local population showed extraordinary patience given how boorish we were, all the time thinking we were hilarious.' However, he suggests that such a sheltered existence may have provided the environment to thrive: 'Despite it hardly being a representative or diverse make-up of students at the time, it helped me confront the real world and forced me out of a comfort zone. In my day, the RAU was viewed, and still is, as a world leader in core agricultural education and development.'

He acknowledges that the emphasis has shifted from land ownership and management

to farming. 'There is more competition for places these days and the challenges are changing. Farming needs to engage the public and policy makers more vigorously and in a more sophisticated way than ever before. It needs to make a wider argument than food production and prices.'

'I learnt huge amounts about the countryside and life. You never lose that'

1980s Marcus Armytage

The fact that the racing journalist and former Grand National-winning amateur jockey Marcus Armytage 'thinks' he was at 'Ciren' from 1983 to 1986 suggests what a good time he had. 'I finished my first year in the top six of 120 rural estate-management students, but, at the end of the third, had to go to the vice-principal and ask him to look favourably on my finals as I had already diversified into writing and race-riding.' He scraped through the diploma (it was before degrees were on offer), probably because: 'Attending the first lecture was always touch and go

after riding out for [trainer] Michael Henriques; we often ended up in the Madhatters for breakfast instead. The second lecture was usually spent reading the *Racing Post* at the back of the room.'

Although they have now been turned into smart second homes, the farm cottages that served as his student digs were 'invariably damp, cold and had no heating unless they caught fire. Once we were down to two bars on a Superser gas heater huddled round a black-and-white television, we were so poor. But it was wonderful. Together with six months on an arable farm and six on a dairy farm before I went, it was the best four years. I learnt huge amounts about the countryside and life. You never lose that.'

2014–17 Rebecca Wilson

'I've seen first-hand how much the farming landscape has changed,' says Rebecca Wilson, a fifth-generation sheep and arable farmer from the Vale of York who was crowned 2025 Alumnus of the Year. 'Farmers are having to innovate and streamline more to ensure the survival of their businesses. Much of this knowledge stems from what's taught at the RAU. Perhaps more valuable still is the network it creates; it's one I've drawn on time and again.' Miss Wilson, who graduated in 2017 →



Above: Finding her true path: Rebecca Wilson returned to her rural roots after Cambridge to forge a career in farming, horizons broadened by the wealth of training offered by the RAU. **Below:** Iona Campbell relished the potent blend of history and innovation

with an MSc in rural estate management, credits the university environment for 'broadening horizons and giving students the confidence to be part of shaping both their own future and the future of food, farming and the environment'. This year, she was named in the *Sunday Times*'s Most Powerful 30 Under 30, won Influencer of the Year at the National Women in Agriculture Awards and co-hosts a podcast, *Wilson & Ashley*, with dairy farmer Charlotte Ashley.

Her route to the RAU was via Cambridge, but she decided not to follow her friends into the city. 'Instead, I returned to my farming roots. The RAU gave me the grounding to pursue a role as a surveyor, then a project manager in the poultry sector—both still linked to farming, but perhaps not jobs that I would have had the confidence or knowledge to do had it not been for the breadth of understanding I gained from my course.' Another appeal was the diversity of students' histories and their desire to pursue a career in the rural sector regardless of farming experience or family background. She adds:



'The RAU turned a love for farming and the rural way of life into a sense of purpose to blend the heritage of being the fifth generation with the progress that modern farming brings.'

2015–2018 Iona Campbell

'Growing up in the countryside, I already had a passion for rural affairs, but my time at the RAU amplified that feeling. Meeting so many others who felt the same way was inspiring and the university gave me the confidence and drive to co-found Women Who Work in Fieldsports,' says Iona Campbell, who works as a fundraiser for the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust. 'The enthusiasm of the people who study and teach there is infectious—it's a real force to be reckoned with.' However, even somewhere with its finger so on the pulse couldn't have foreseen what happened when she went into an exam on 'Emerging Agricultural Issues' during Brexit: 'We listened to the news on the way into the exam, only to discover on the way out that everything had changed yet again.'

She adds: 'There's nowhere else quite like the RAU for the traditions, the camaraderie, the shared love of the countryside. Friendships made there are lifelong, and the sense of belonging never really leaves you. It's a special place steeped in history, yet bursting with innovation. Traditions are cherished, but the future of farming is being rewritten every day.'

Current student Sophia Bloomfield-Faiers

Now in the final stretch of her degree, Sophia Bloomfield-Faiers is well placed to start a career as a rural surveyor. 'I feel a real sense of purpose at the RAU; it is practical, forward-thinking and focused on what the rural sector truly needs today. There's a sense of receiving a solid education alongside a hands-on approach that prepares you for real life.' The development from a male-only college to a mix of students from all backgrounds has, in her eyes, given the place energy and cohesion: 'Each day is different, but on Wednesdays everyone gets involved, whether it's in rugby, equestrian, hockey, netball, shooting—it brings the whole university together. The RAC beagles have been a highlight for me. Students can go beating on local shoots, which is a popular option and a fun day out. Only at the RAU would someone turn up to a lecture in hunting kit and no one bat an eyelid.'

'I have the RAU to thank for many things—including my job, relationship, business and friendships—and I will be forever grateful for the staff. It's the mix of community and history that makes it stand out.'



The practicality and pragmatism of the RAU engage Sophia Bloomfield-Faiers, as well as the chance of a spot of beagling

85 years of farming events



1939 Government launches Dig for Victory campaign to reduce reliance on imported food

1947 The Agriculture Act is designed to protect farmers and workers against market fluctuations by guaranteeing minimum prices

1957 The first Massey Ferguson branded tractor, the MF35, is launched

1962 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is created to ensure European food security

1973 Britain joins the Common Market; Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) formed to save native-breed animals, such as the Gloucester cow, from going extinct

1984 CAP quotas introduced to prevent over-production and 'lakes' of milk



1986 Presence of BSE in UK cattle confirmed

1988 EU Set-Aside regulations come into force to prevent crop surpluses

1994 Robotic milking system (introduced in the Netherlands) comes to the market



1996 Dolly the sheep is cloned

2001 Britain hit by serious foot-and-mouth outbreak

2002 The RBST's National Gene Bank project starts, prompted by foot-and-mouth

2003 CAP reforms 'decouple' production from environmental improvements

2007 Avian flu confirmed on a turkey farm in Suffolk

2009 Swine flu reaches the UK

2013 Further CAP reforms reflect an emphasis on 'greener' farming and crop diversification

2015 New CAP schemes for the UK, such as Basic Payments and Rural Development Programmes

2016 Britain votes to leave the EU

2020 Britain leaves the EU with a hard Brexit

2021 Sustainable Farming Incentive introduced; first avian-

flu outbreaks occur in UK; *Clarkson's Farm*, described by the man himself as 'genuine reality television', is aired on Amazon Prime

2024 New Chancellor Rachel Reeves announces changes to agricultural property relief

2025 Second-worst harvest in recent history is recorded; Defra offers one-year reprieve on Countryside Stewardship Mid-Tier agreements (Basic Payments will end in 2027); tractors roll into Westminster in protest against the family-farm tax

