

TALES OF THE FARM

Mary Smith meets the prolific Mouswald writer Gwen Kirkwood, whose romantic sagas, set in the farming community, continue to delight her readers

Photography by Phil Rigby

Dumfries & Galloway writer Gwen Kirkwood, who lives in Mouswald, was always an avid reader but it wasn't until the Eighties, when she had a busy life as a dairy farmer's wife and mother of three children, that she began penning her own novels. Some two dozen plus titles later, Gwen continues to delight readers with her stories, which follow generations of families living in Dumfriesshire's farming community.

Gwen's own farming background – born and brought up on a farm, agricultural college, work and marriage to a farmer – ensures the stories she tells ring true. The third novel in her latest series, *Heart of the Home*, will be published at the end of October and *A Home of Our Own*, a previous novel in the series, came out in paperback at the end of August. She is now writing the fourth, provisionally titled *Another Home – Another Love*, which will be published in 2011.

Although Gwen was born and brought up near Doncaster in Yorkshire, she had three Scottish grandparents.

"All my ancestors were Scottish. My grandparents farmed in Ayrshire and they gave their youngest son £100 and sent him down to Yorkshire to make his way in the world. It was what happened in those days," she explains. "Once he'd found a place he came back to Scotland for his sweetheart."

When Gwen left school she went to agricultural college in Wales after a year's practical farm experience, part of which she spent in Lancashire, near Blackpool and Preston. There were 18 students in her college class, evenly split between boys and girls. After two years in college she came out with a National Diploma in dairying.

"My mother hadn't wanted me to go to agricultural college. She thought I was throwing my life away but she came round," says Gwen. "I actually had my first writing success at college when I won a prize for an essay called *Breeding Better Dairy Cattle* – not very romantic."

Sadly, Gwen's mother did not live to see her writing success, but Gwen feels sure she would have been delighted.

After college Gwen worked for a time at the Ministry of Agriculture's experimental farm in Nottingham. Keen to see something of the country of her ancestors, though, she applied for a job as milk inspector in Dumfries.

"My job was to go round inspecting the farms which produced milk. I covered a third of Dumfriesshire with a total of 600 farms," she says.

Gwen met her future husband when she visited his farm. "On our first meeting we had an argument about the pros and cons of silage," she remembers.

Their difference of opinion on the matter was clearly not irreconcilable, as Bob later invited Gwen to the cinema. They married in 1959 – a quiet church wedding in Yorkshire.

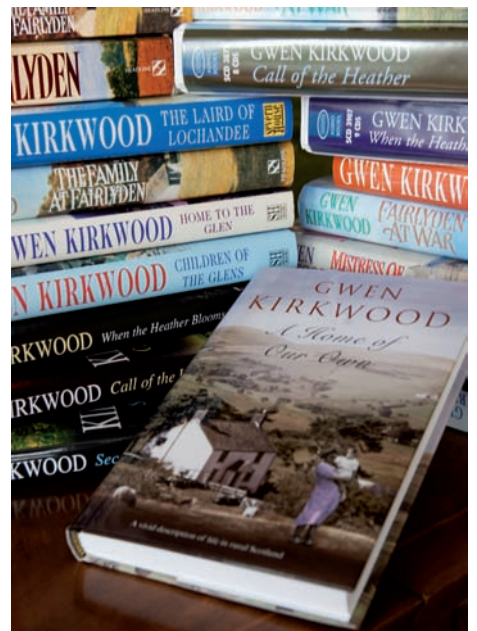
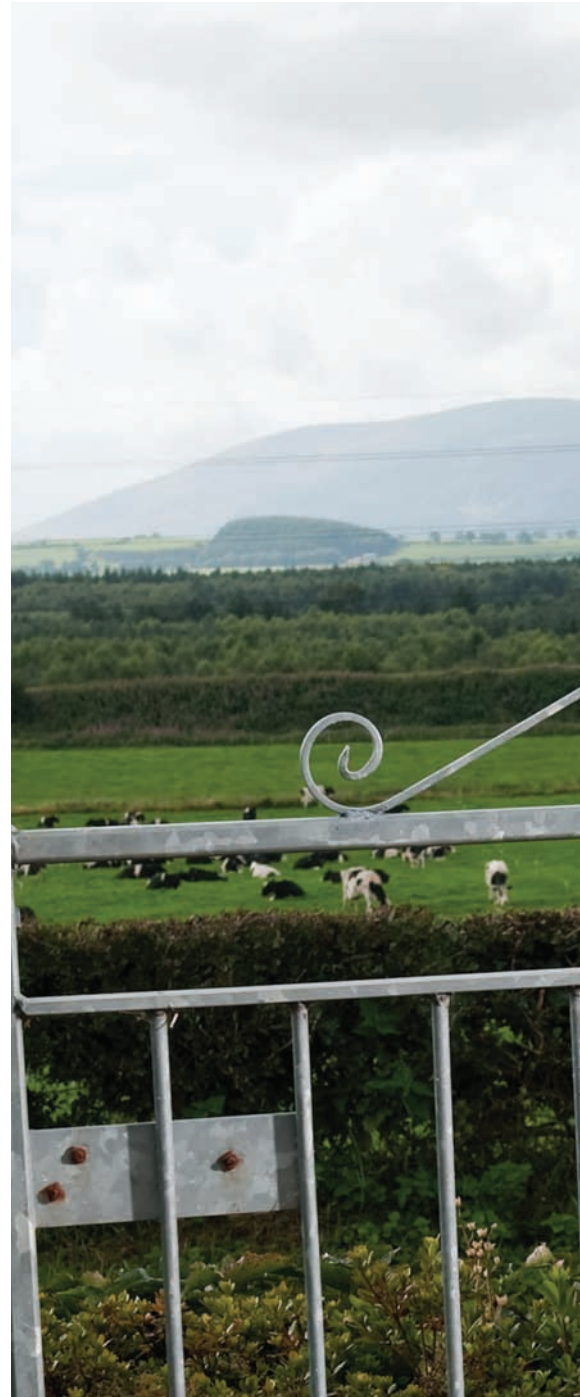
"I wrote letters," says Gwen. "In those days no one used the phone unless it was for something really important so I wrote long letters every week to my parents and to other friends. I sent such long letters people said 'you could write a book.'"

Her writing career started in an unlikely way when she entered a competition in the popular *Woman's Weekly* magazine.

"You had to submit the first chapter of a novel and a synopsis. Mine didn't win but the fiction editor, Lynda O'Byrne, wrote to say how much she'd enjoyed it and suggested I send it to the publishers Robert Hale," she says.

Gwen completed the novel and sent it off – but when it was returned with a note saying it was too long she assumed it was a polite way of telling her they did not want to publish the book. However, a few months later she received a letter asking if she had revised the novel.

"I was very lucky," she says. "The publishing world is very different today and I don't think editors and publishers would take the time and trouble to help new authors as they helped me. I did the revisions and the book



Gwen has published more than two dozen novels



Gwen Kirkwood at home in Mouswald: 'I wanted to show just how hard farming families have to work'

was published as *Lonely is the Valley*, my first short novel, under the name Lynne Granger."

It wasn't until then that Gwen told anyone, including her husband, that she was leading a secret life as a writer of romantic fiction. Gwen reverted to her own name when she began writing her family sagas.

"I wanted to show just how hard farming families have to work. Farmers so often get a bad press and the public have this notion they are all driving around in fancy cars and are very rich," she says.

This different kind of novel required a different publisher and Gwen's first task was to find an agent. She was accepted by the second one she approached, and the first publishers her agent approached, Headline, accepted her work.

"They were alarmingly business-like, asking for four novels with set deadlines which was a bit stressful as writing was a secondary occupation for me," she says.

"Anything official connected with farming means records and form-filling, animal pedigrees and the usual business accounts – the unseen and unpaid work of most small businesses. This was my responsibility and it had to come before my writing."

The sagas commissioned for Headline became Gwen's Fairlyden series, the fourth of which, *Fairlyden at War*, was published in 1993. Gwen's husband, Bob, died in 1994 and for the next six years Gwen stopped writing.

"There were," she says, "other things to deal with. I began again when the Romantic Novelists Association (RNA), of which I was still a member, resurrected the Elizabeth Goudge Trophy competition.

"I submitted the first chapter and a synopsis for the novel which was to become the Laird of Lochandee. I was – still am – genuinely astonished that I won. That got me writing again and I met my present agent at the RNA conference the following year. Since

then I have written 10 more novels published by Severn House."

For Gwen, her characters come first.

"The first in a series is the hardest. It's like moving to a new village and having to get to know people. I miss them by the end," she says.

"I have only a vague idea about how the book will turn out although I know which two characters will end up together. It takes about six months to write the first draft and I usually do a bit every morning. It's a great relief at the end of the first draft and I really enjoy the editing, strengthening and cutting sections. I used to hand-write the drafts then type them up, now they go straight onto the computer. I keep a loose-leaf folder in which I note names and characteristics because if they appear in more than one book I have to be sure to get the details, such as dates of birth and spelling of names, correct."

Gwen's series usually have four novels and she rarely writes beyond 1980 before beginning a new series.

"However, I've been thinking this time of perhaps going up to the present with a grandson of the family, so I can introduce the milking robots my son Robert currently has on the farm. I need to know I can keep the characters authentic to their time so it will require some research – probably undercover – to discover what sort of social lives and standards young farmers live these days."

Gwen often receives emails and letters from readers and has fans all over the country. "Usually they're from people who've lived through the events in my books and reading the books awakens memories," she says.

Sometimes searching for a storyline or a scene awakens her own memories. "I was reminded of the Criddle Cup while working on my present novel and I wanted a social occasion when I could involve a new character along with my existing characters, so my main farm is hosting a Young Farmers' stockjudging competition. This was something we did several times when our own family was involved," she says.

"Some years ago the pedigree Friesian breeders in this area got together and formed the South West Friesian Breeders Club. At the first stockjudging competition one of the feed supply firms donated the Criddle Burgess silver cup for the winner. No-one expected a woman to win, so it was a bit of a shock when I won most points. My name will be the first on that cup and I'm curious now to know if it is still doing the rounds. After that the club acquired another cup for the ladies. I have to say that whatever I knew about judging Friesians I learned from Bob – and judging is just a matter of opinion, but we did enjoy those occasions." **D&G**

■ *Gwen's latest novel, Heart of the Home, comes out at the end of October. See www.gwenkirkwood.co.uk.*

