

Remote but not alone

Landini may be a relatively new brand of tractor in the UK but it hasn't stopped them from making an impression in certain parts of the country. One area is around Oban in Argyllshire, on Scotland's west coast, where, in the words of a famous old advert for Bedford lorries, 'You see them everywhere'. CLASSIC TRACTOR sent Pete Small way out west to look for a few.

A BUSY PORT on Scotland's west coast, Oban is the gateway to many of the Hebridean islands. Caledonian MacBrayne's ferries sail regularly from the quayside to provide the islands with a vital link to the mainland.

The town's claim to fame in a farming sense has traditionally been its livestock market. As well as providing an outlet for commercial beef and sheep, it also hosts the Highland Cattle Society's pedigree bull sale every February, and an autumn show and sale of these distinctive cattle each October.

Today the town has another agricultural headline maker – Argyll Agricultural Engineers – the area's agents for Landini tractors. The word 'area' has to be interpreted very loosely as in this case it

basically covers 100 miles to the north of Oban, a 100 miles to the south, as far east as Stirling and as far west as the ferries can take you. This dealer has to have one of the most demanding territories in the UK.

Rising to the challenge is Cameron MacFarlane, who runs Argyll Agricultural Engineering – one of five Scottish Landini dealerships – with his wife Sine and son, also called Cameron. Joining them at their premises at Glenshellach Road, just a stone's throw from the harbour, is full-time staff member Graham Morrice and young Ian Campbell who helps out during weekends and holidays. As well as selling and supporting Landini, the dealership holds the franchise for Krone agricultural equipment and Japanese-built Takeuchi excavators.

Cameron is a local man with a background in



Above: Rushing to catch the ferry to service tractors on the west coast islands is a common occurrence for the team at Argyll Engineering. A fully stocked van is a necessity to deal with the other jobs that often materialise on island visits.

Left: These Highland cattle, seen foraging on the foreshore at Duncan Buchanan's Shenavallie Farm, near Benderloch, rely on a 3200-hour Landini Powerfarm 95 from 2006 to haul in concentrate feedstuffs and big bale silage during the winter months.

agriculture having grown up on the family farm on the Island of Seil, situated south of Oban in the Firth of Lorn. Cameron recalls that the farm ran a Massey Ferguson 135 and that there were many MFs operating on farms in the area over the years. This was because Massey's West of Scotland agents Hamilton's had a very good salesman based in the town, although there was no service or repair depot. It is thought the last dedicated tractor dealer in Oban before Argyll Engineering was a Ford dealer back in the 1960s.

The Massey connection stayed with Cameron who, like many islanders, travelled to the mainland to further his career. He served an apprenticeship with Massey Ferguson dealers Jack Olding, of Perth, in the early 1970s. After completing his training, which included time at Elmwood Agricultural College, at Cupar in Fife, he stayed on with the firm working on many of the MF 100, 500 and 600 Series tractors.

Changes to the dealerships in Perthshire, and a desire from both Cameron and Sine to return west, saw them move back to Oban, and in 1988 Cameron started Argyll Agricultural Engineering. In the early days he just worked out of a van carrying out repairs to all types of farm machinery. His ability to turn out at any hour and on any day of the week to help a customer with a stricken tractor at feeding time or a broken baler during silage making helped build his reputation as a provider of excellent service.

Not only were agricultural machinery repairs undertaken, but plant and marine work became



A Landini undergoes pre-delivery checks at the firm's busy, modern workshop. The company is kitted out to deal with all sorts of repairs to agricultural and construction machinery, as well as hydraulic and marine engineering jobs.

Above Right: The team at Argyll Agricultural Engineers, from left to right: Sine MacFarlane, who looks after the office; Cameron MacFarlane senior; their son, also Cameron; Ian Campbell, who helps at weekends and holidays; and service engineer Graham Morrice.

Right: A Landini Powerfarm tractor leaves the car deck of one of the CalMac ferries that service the Hebridean islands on Scotland's west coast. These vessels are used by Argyll Engineering to deliver and collect tractors and are a lifeline for the islanders.

Background Picture: Looking across the Sound of Mull towards the sea lochs on the Scottish mainland gives a indication of the challenging landscape facing west coast and island farmers.

increasingly important to Cameron as he established his business. Today plant work is still a major part of the business, along with marine engineering. Ferry operator Caledonian MacBrayne is one of his customers, with hydraulic repairs being a main part of the work he undertakes for them.

Cameron's business took a major leap forward in 2006 when he was awarded the franchise for Landini tractors. By this stage the business was already located at its current Oban site, with a modern workshop and plenty of yard space.

For Cameron it was very much a case of being in a position to choose the brand of tractor he wanted. The lack of coverage in the area meant he had plenty of choice as most manufacturers wanted to be represented in this part of the world. He chose Landini because it's so well suited to the local farming area.

Price and specification were a major factor as



Cameron knew his potential customer's requirements; but no doubt his familiarity with Perkins engines was another factor, as was his liking for the business approach of Landini's parent company, Argo Tractors.

That first year of 2006 saw Argyll Engineering awarded the title of Landini's Northern Dealer of the Year, and to celebrate many of the new tractors that the dealership had sold returned to Oban for a photo shoot on the waterfront. In the five years since they

took on the Landini agency, the firm have now sold almost 50 new tractors, which considering the geography and the type of farming undertaken is a phenomenal achievement.

A map in the Argyll Engineering office has blue drawing pins attached to show where the tractors are located. These show sales at Muir of Ord on the Black Isle to the North-east and out on North Uist in



Tom Nelson's family have owned Glengorm Estate on Mull since 1969 and have built up a vibrant and diverse range of farming, tourist and retail interests. Their 2010 Landini Farmpower 100 plays a vital year-round role in a very challenging environment.

Left: Standing below the central tower of the magnificent 1860s Glengorm Castle, the Nelson family's Landini Powerfarm 100 awaits its next job. The estate features sporting, tourism, gardening, beef and sheep enterprises.

Main Picture: Warning shipping on the southern point of the Island of Lismore, this lighthouse overlooks the entrance to the Sound of Mull.

colours, which is to be expected in a livestock area. All but one of the tractors supplied have been four-wheel drive models. The sole two-wheel drive went to a customer on the Lismore who had only ever used two-wheel drive machines, but thankfully the island of Lismore is a bit less vertically challenging than some parts of the Lorn region.

One of the most recent deliveries was a smaller Landini Mistral 45 machine complete with loader, four-wheel drive and duals all round. This was sold to the Crofting Environment Improvement Association who will use it to reinstate peat land that had not been under the plough for 50 years out on the Uists. Included in this package was a trailer, fertiliser spreader and a set of harrows, while other implements are likely to follow.

Cameron is able to point out some of the



As well as operating Mull's island bus service, Jim Bowman uses this 2008 Landini Powerfarm 100, pictured wading across the Scallastle Burn, for his farm work.

reasons behind his company's strong sales in the area. The fact that no other dealer had a physical presence nearby or had any salesman operating locally made a huge difference, coupled to the fact that by the time he started to sell Landinis many farmers had reached a point where they needed to change their tractors. Farmers were happy to deal with someone local, and Argyll Engineering's location near the main ferry terminus appealed to the islanders. Many of Cameron's potential customers also had first-hand experience of his approach and mechanical know how, while the spec and price offered by Landini was another major factor in his favour.

Cameron admits that tractors are kept a good deal longer in his area and he knows he will have to work hard to keep new sales going. Meeting old and new customers is a vital part of any business and Argyll Engineering travel many miles attending small local agricultural shows, including island events on Tiree, and mainland shows such as the big Black Isle event, Lochaber Show, Mid Argyll and the local Lorn Show, as well as taking part in the Lorn Ploughing Match in the spring.

Despite being a beautiful area for tourism, this is man's country to farm, where the winters are long, the rainfall is high as the altitude and the fields can often verge on the vertical with rock hard stony outcrops and encroaching bracken and rushes. Stock farming is the only alternative, with hill cows and hill ewes producing the calves and lambs that are sold

for finishing on lower-lying ground.

Long before falling agricultural incomes forced the word diversification into the farming vocabulary, necessity meant that alternative incomes had to be earned alongside the farm in these parts. Not only is this the picture on the mainland, but it's a similar story on the islands where Cameron has had the same sort of success selling Landinis.

Oban is the gateway to many of the islands of both the Inner and Outer Hebrides. Much of the farming there is done by crofters, but they need machinery just like farmers on the mainland and Cameron is happy to keep them supplied. The need to travel ferry indicates just how complex servicing this territory is. If covering a 200-mile deep area on the mainland was not enough, going out to islands makes the job even more problematic.

Going to Mull is a 45-minute ferry journey, which isn't too bad during the summer as additional sailings take place for the tourist trade. Winter, however, sees a reduced number of sailings and a

out to the Uists involves a six-hour ferry trip making it probably the longest and most time-consuming journey for any dealer in the UK, but at least when the vans are parked on the ferry car decks they are not burning diesel. These same ferry decks are where the tractors are also parked when they are either collected or delivered to island customers. These ferry journeys all add extra cost to the service that can't always be absorbed by the firm, and a proportion has to be passed on to customers, such is the economic reality of island life.

Our visit to Argyll Engineering took us out to Mull, sailing past Castle Duart, the ancestral home of the Clan MacLean. The ferry is an integral part of life and business on the west coast and its operational details have to be factored into any business serving the islands. Our visit to Mull indicated just how hardy the island farmers have become, with many busy carrying out non-farming activities. Driving north from the pier at Craignure, on some quite narrow roads, the brightly coloured

“Cameron's ability to turn out at any hour and on any day to help a customer, helped build his reputation as a provider of excellent service”

more challenging planning job for the team as the service engineers have to work quickly and get all the jobs finished in time to catch the ferry home. More than once, staff have missed the last ferry home and have had to hastily arrange an overnight stay. A change of clothes is always packed alongside the tool box!

While the journey to Mull is bad enough, going

houses of Tobermory came into view (younger readers will be more familiar with its alter ego Balamory from children's TV).

The first port of call on Mull was Glengorm Castle on the northern end of the island, overlooking the tip of the Ardnurchan peninsula, the most westerly point on the British mainland. Tom Nelson runs the Glengorm estate and his Landini Powerfarm

the Outer Hebrides to the North-west. In between a lone red pin marks the sale of a McCormick on the Isle of Skye, something Cameron is able to do as an Argo Group dealer.

To the South, sales have included tractors to Tyndrum in the east side of the territory and down to the Lochgilphead area of the Kintyre peninsula. Sales out West are heavy on the Island of Tiree, but other islands buying Landinis include Colonsay, Lismore, South Uist, Coll, Mull and Cameron's home island of Seil.

Before delivering the tractors, Argyll Engineering carry out a full PDI check and any machines destined

for an island or coastal customer are given an extra coating of Waxoyl to protect them against the heavy salty air that takes a heavy toll on machinery. Another feature of Argyll Engineering-supplied tractors is the businesses' practice of applying the name of the farm in the top of the windscreen in large white adhesive letters. This is one of Cameron's trademarks and he says it's very popular with the tractor owners.

Up to 75% of the tractors supplied are fitted with a Sigma fore-end loader finished in Landini



Left: Robin Sedgwick's biofuel business needs plenty of power and it's provided by this 2007 Landini Landpower 135. One of the largest Landinis supplied by Argyll Agricultural Engineering, the Landpower 135 operates the biomass harvester and carts the heavy loads of woodchips throughout the Island of Mull.

Main Picture: Pictured sitting on the northern tip of Mull, with the Atlantic Ocean in the background, Glengorm Estates hope to get a 15-year working life from their Powerfarm 100.

the clock, the Landpower 135 has been more than capable of the work and has provided great service, says Robin. Despite its good report card, that didn't stop Cameron from giving it a quick check over while he was at the farm. This is something of a tactical requirement, considering the logistics of serving offshore customers. It also provided an insight to Cameron's attention to detail and the excellent 'nothing is a problem' service he gives to his customers. He even took a pressure washer back to Oban for repair, unsure of when it could be returned.

Making our way back to Craignure, we stopped at Jim Bowman's farm at Scallastle. He wasn't at home at the time, but we met him later while we were waiting to board the ferry. This is because like so many island farmers, he has other jobs and businesses to support his income.

In Jim's case, he operates the island's bus service. There was plenty of evidence of this on his farm, where his May 2008 Landini Powerfarm 100 was standing over the bus inspection pit. This tractor has now clocked 800 hours and is again fitted with a loader that is used for all sorts of livestock work on the farm. On the day of our visit the tractor was coupled to a grass harrow.

100 sat proudly beneath the castle tower. The baronial style castle is now part of a very diverse estate business geared for both farming and tourism, though it was originally built as a sporting residence. It has been owned in the past by Margaret Lithgow of Clyde shipbuilding fame; British Coal, who stripped the estate of timber for pit props during the war; and John Carr of the famous biscuit-making family.

Tom operates a diverse and broad range of businesses, all of which keep his Landini occupied on a range of tasks. On the day we visited, it was carrying garden waste from one of the estate properties in Tobermory that was being prepared for the tourist season. The March 2010-registered tractor is fitted with a loader and carries out a host of lifting, loading, digging and shifting jobs.

Farm work is centred on 70 pedigree Highland cows and 700 Blackface and cross-bred ewes whose offspring are destined for the local abattoir. Tom chose the Landini Powerfarm 100 because he wanted a no frills machine that was straightforward enough and could be operated by different drivers. It was chosen because of its simplicity and price and

the availability of good, local service.

The Landini replaced a Massey Ferguson 390 and has given good trouble-free service so far, much to Tom's delight. It doesn't clock that many hours each year so he's hoping to keep it for around 15 years.

Next on the list of visits was Crannich Farm, in the middle of Mull, home to Robin Sedgwick. While most of Argyll Engineering's customers run Powerfarm models, Robin is a bit different because he operates a higher-hp Landpower 135, purchased in 2007. Alongside his stock-farming operation, Robin runs a biofuel business on the island and uses his Landini Landpower to haul large loads of harvested biomass back to the farm for drying and processing. This requires plenty of grunt to pull the heavy loads from all over the island, plus handle the power-sapping harvesting operation to gather the biomass woodchip.

Currently showing 1500 hours on



Above: One of Argyll Agricultural Engineering's latest sales, this Landini Mistral 45, complete with loader, four-wheel drive and duals all round, is now being used to reinstate peat land by the Crofting Environment Improvement Association.

Bottom: This map not only shows the remote location of many of Argyll Agricultural Engineering's Landini customers, but also highlights the service difficulties that have to be overcome.

Back on the mainland, a journey over the Connel Bridge to Benderloch took us to Shenavallie Farm, where Duncan Buchanan runs 200 Cheviot ewes, 35 cross cows and 25 pedigree Highland cows on his 584 acres split over two units. Duncan was an old customer of Cameron's and was one of the first in the area to buy a Landini tractor back in 2006.

His Powerfarm 95, again fitted with a front loader, has now clocked up 3200 hours of hard work, including mowing, baling, carting and stacking all the silage bales, as well as the day-to-day lifting, loading and trailer work that goes with running a livestock farm where most of the animals are out-wintered.

The Landini Powerfarm replaced both a Massey Ferguson 390 and a Same Aster, although it has recently been joined by a Massey Ferguson 690 as back-up for a part time helper to drive on the farm at the weekends.

Returning to Oban, it was clear that while Argyll Engineering has to travel many more miles to visit their Landini customers than most other dealers, they do have the consolation of travelling through some of Scotland's most rugged and beautiful scenery. That's got to be worth a lot.

