

The Hill Farming Year

(Drawn from an interview, in January 2009, with Stephen Lord, Farm Manager at Forest Hall Farm, near Kendal. Forest Hall Farm is owned by the Levens Hall Estate, and is 5000+ acres of mainly enclosed fell with a flock of 2000 Swaledale sheep. Forest Hall Farm is designated 'organic' under the Soil Association accreditation scheme.)

Variations on Traditions

'We are just doing a variation on what those who came before us, did, and you can't do anything else because you are restricted by the weather, the farm, the amount of in-bye land you have, the altitude, the breed of sheep you have; things like that which don't change and that's been happening for hundreds of years. The only thing that has changed over time is that more and more land has been enclosed and so there has been more in-bye available. There are fewer shepherds now because the price of labour is so high, other jobs have become more attractive, and farm income has been drastically reduced.

Some things are very traditional...and some things are very new, you see this year we have vaccinated against blue tongue... '

Where do you think hefting is going at this time?

'If you go up into the south of Scotland, the hefting is quite strong because there have been more shepherds traditionally; you can have a stream dividing a heft up there because the shepherds have probably been there all the time to keep an eye on the sheep, whereas in the Lakes we tend to turn the sheep out of the fell gate and hope that 85%-90% stay on the right ground, but some do drift a little bit. I think hefting has become worse since foot and mouth, and if things go on as they are, I think hefting could become, well, a thing of the past eventually, in a lot of fells. Flocks are reducing, there is less time and less men; there isn't the time to go to the fell now. Shepherds would go up first thing in the morning and last thing at night and just dog the sheep into the middle, and that just doesn't happen now; you turn the sheep out and if you get up there once a week you've done fantastically well. There are some fells where shepherds will just turn them out and gather them in when they want them. Unfortunately that is what is happening; it's a shortage of labour. I was talking to some chaps from Glencoe at the Kirkby Stephen

tup sales, and I said to them “how do you gather Glencoe?” and they said: “Well we look at it and we say we need five men to gather that mountain and that’s £500+ , and then we look and there’ll be a 100 ewes on it, so there’ll be 80 lambs, there’ll be only 40 wethers which we’re after, and so we’ll say ‘bugger it’, because it just isn’t financially viable, and we’ll leave’em; the weather will fetch them in and we’ll get what comes in; it just doesn’t add up.” Now, I’m not saying that is going to happen in the Lake District , but there is a joke now, that one day we’ll be letting some dogs out at Cockermouth, and we’ll gather the Lake District back towards Kendal, because there’ll be nobody bothered, and we’ll just see what we get at Kendal; it’s not a good thing but it’s how things happen, and you have to accept it ...

Is this about the loss of livestock during Foot and Mouth?

Foot and mouth only really hastened things on, foot and mouth pushed things on ten years on overnight’. It wasn’t only the loss, I think it was more to do with the mental state of everybody; we’ve had so much trouble; problems with BSE, Scrapie, and Foot & Mouth, and you get to point where you think “what the hell” anymore; I’ve always felt that my job was to feed the nation and I don’t see that quite the same any more.

You don’t think that feeling will come back?

Well, I’d like to think it would come back... It’s going to be food shortages that bring stock back on to the fells and with this, people to look after them. We have such a valuable asset on these hills, an absolutely fantastic asset. Right now the credit crunch is masking what is going to happen soon; fuel and other costs are going to go back up. For example, we can’t afford to fly kiwi fruits from New Zealand now, and it will become even more expensive in the near future. As the world warms there will be a lot of migration, we complain about immigration now, but, in time, we will not know what it means; there will be so much migration out of Africa into northern Europe. So we are going to have to produce a lot more of our own food in this country; we can’t plough these hills, we don’t want to; but the protein that can come off these hills is phenomenal, and we’re just squandering it...the men that’s there think “sod it; why bother”.

The Shepherd's Year

October - December

'I'm going to start you on 15th October and I'm going to talk about the ewes. At the end of October we gather to get the ewes in; we've already drafted what we don't want off (drafted means sold out, got rid of the ones that have to go to kill because they're old, and the ones that we are selling on to breed off; so we'll sell our worst ewes and our best ewes of a particular age). So we gather in at the end of October. We give them a fluke drench (we've just been to the ram sales and purchased any rams for replacement), we clip the tails out so that this does not impede the ram while he's working. We also give them a blue tongue vaccination; we try to give this 2/3 weeks before we let the tups go, so if the ewe has a slight temperature she is over it and it doesn't affect her breeding cycle. All our best ewes are bred to the pure Swaledale tups and our poorer quality ewes are bred to the blue faced Leicester tup. The tups run for about a month, the raddles change colours about once every 5-6 days (the raddle is the colour marking we put on the tup (it's orange yellow, green, blue, red) so that we can sort the ewes into what is going to lamb every 4/5 days. After about a month we remove the Swale tups, the ewes are turned back to the fell and we send half a dozen cheviot tups with them; they are what we call chasers, and they are just to catch any sheep that return in season.'

January-March

'The first part of January can be a slightly quieter time; we've got cattle to take care of in the sheds morning and night, and then there's the whole maintenance of the farm to look after; the walls all to be maintained; fences to maintain; we're always improving fences and walls; a quiet time to me is when we are not doing a lot of sheep stock work; where we can get farm maintenance done...

The ewes remain at the fell until the 3rd week in January. They are up there unless the weather is very very bad and then we'll gather them in. . In the old days they would have stopped out nearly all the time, but now we bring them in to be scanned and we do the first thousand at the end of January to look for how many lambs they have, ones, twos, three; ewes with ones and nothing in lamb go back to the fell for a few weeks, and we begin to supplementary feed the ones with twins on the in-bye, and the ones with three go inside. We then do the same with another

1000 (up at Borrowdale Head); the only thing different we'll do up there is that we'll draw off the sheep that are having their first lamb and keep them separate; give them some individual attention; we have to make sure they are eating concentrate. The sheep are then fed to what they are carrying right up until lambing which begins on 1st April. We'll gather the sheep back off the fell that are carrying singles at the end of February. The only thing I've missed out from the end of March is all the gimmer hogs have returned from wintering ... *'What does gimmer mean?'* ... Gimmer hogs are last year's female lambs, which we sent away to winter on lowland farms. When they come back, we have to treat them against sheep scab and lice, and we brand the farm's letters into the horns – brand FH – and they also get a booster of heptavac P which is a chlostridial vaccine before they go back to the fell for the summer and join the ewes and the new lambs. They are our replacements for next year, we'll talk about those again.'

April and May: Lambing

'We lamb a lot of the twins inside the sheep sheds, and the singles outside. The ones that lamb inside, they get their navels dipped; they also get a rubber ring on their tails and are castrated within 24 hours. Then they are put outside onto the lower ground. The singles lamb outside; they are castrated and tailed as the shepherds go around. Then the singles are back to the fell within 10 days because we need to clear inbye land and they run on the fell just alongside the pasture land, then the twins will run in the pastures where the singles lambed. It's the same system up at Borrowdale Head, except that the only difference up there is that we record the pure swaledales and when the tups are loused, we mark each ewe as to which tup that she has been served by; when she lambs we put an ear tag into her female lamb with a number which we record alongside her mother's number and that goes in our flock records. We can then trace back the parentage of our sheep like a family tree, and we know the breeding, and so, when we sell, we know exactly how they are bred. We have the sheep split into eight different ear tag colours and they are kept in those colours, if a ewe is pink its gimmer lamb is pink; if its blue, it stays blue, so we can keep a close track on the breeding and what we're doing and that's another job at lambing time. Before everything goes back to the fell, there's a 'mark out' to get the farm mark on and then there's a scratch for orf; 'orf' is a nasty contagious disease which humans can get. If sheep get it they are in an awful mess; there are scabs all over their faces, and so we use a vaccine for that.'

And so you have your own Forest Hall mark which is an old mark...'

'It's a very old mark which is particular to Forest Hall, you can go back through the Shepherd's Guides and see these marks; this was before the advent of the ear tag, before people could read the ear tags, and when the sheep were on the fell, say Crosby Ravensworth fell for example, all the sheep would have their own farm mark, but then they would have a strip down one leg and these old Shepherds would know it was from Crosby Ravensworth Fell.

We are now mid-April/May. Once the lambs go back out we don't feed the sheep anymore; it's just a case of keeping an eye on everything from now on; it can be a quiet time of the year. Then really we're watching for worms; if a lamb starts scouring in May/June, there may be a worm problem and then we have to treat that. The sheep are everywhere at this time; as grass growth increases, the worm problem can increase too. Worms don't bother an adult sheep, but they can kill a lamb. Any worming undertaken has to be strictly monitored and our organic status must not be compromised.

One particular problem we have at Forest Hall is a plant called Bog Asphodel on the fell. Lambs can get addicted to eating this plant in its first months and the toxins in it react within the lamb and can cause eventual death. There is no cure for this. If we see symptoms (loss of wool, ill-thrift) we remove the ewes and lambs off the fell otherwise major losses will occur.'

June- September

'So the next big thing on the horizon is clipping time. We clip the hogs first about the end of June, so we gather these in, and then clip the ewes two weeks later, clipped by ourselves or by contractors. Once they've been clipped, they all have to be re-marked again and the wool needs to be packed up. If we use the contractors we are losing money; that's a cost we can't get back because of the low price for wool. As soon as we have done with clipping, we have our silage and hay on the in-bye land, and we watch the weather very carefully because we musn't miss any dry days, and we are into August.

At the beginning of August, we gather in all the ewes with the mule lambs on and wean these lambs off these ewes. The gimmers are going to breed and the wethers will go to fatten and we check all ewes and anything we don't want – past it, old, or something wrong with it – they're out and have to be sold, then everything else goes back on the fells. The ewe lambs which we sell down south to our customer are sprayed with a drug called vetrozin which is to keep the blow fly maggots off. We used to dip but we don't dip anymore. Vetrozin is a drug which stops a maggot developing; the fly can lay its eggs but they don't hatch. The lambs stay on the inside ground, and the sheep go back to the fell and the fell sheep at Borrowdale Head are a fortnight/three weeks behind. In September we are selling sheep all the time. The mule ewes are going to be used for breeding; we sold a lot of the mule wethers into Northumberland last year to fatten, and the Swale wethers went down into Lincolnshire to be fattened. So by the beginning of October we are basically left with the ewes out on the fell, plus our 500 ewe lambs – pure Swaledale- which we are keeping to maintain our flock. We also sell 150 of our best three crop ewes (the ewes which have had three lambs off our pure flock), and they go on for further breeding in other farms; they are auctioned and that's when the quality of the breeding really matters. We are then about to send off our 500 gimmer lambs to winter; they have to have 2 injections of heptovac P a month apart, to get them onto the chlostridial system, and somewhere in there they have to have a blue tongue vaccination, and they go away to winter about the middle of October, to Southport, below Kendal, up at Carlisle, anywhere I can find wintering. Then in December we go to look at them and all the ewe lambs are vaccinated against enziotic abortion and we'll watch them for flukes and worms.'

Variations on Traditions

Do you feed the sheep a lot more now?'...

'In the 70's sheep became a lot more valuable and it became more viable to feed sheep. I've been brought up to feed sheep, whereas the previous generation would not feed sheep as much. Now we will feed them more and try to get as many lambs out of them as possible, although you have to be careful, you don't want too many lambs because of your farm's constraints...but that is what has happened in the last 20/30 years. I would be worried that it is slipping back the other way now that farmers, because of feed prices going up, are tending to feed less.

That's a natural thing; if you're not going to be make money out of them, you haven't as much money to spend on them.'

'Why has Forest Hall got Swales?'

'It's a tradition really; Forest Hall has always had Swales. In the first flock book of Swaledale Sheep breeders of 1910, Forest Hall had Swaledales; I don't know why Forest Hall had registered Swales; there must be a reason, because all around them was Rough Fell and Herdwicks. When you get over to Tebay and Shap, you get over to Rough Fell country, because those sheep do better on what we call a white fell a grass fell. Swales do better on a heather fell, a peaty fell, which is more like Forest Hall, and then obviously further into the lakes you are into Herdwicks, but the Herdwicks are narrowing down a lot to the western and central lakes....'

'So, do sheep breeds relate to what the different land types are?'

'Yes they do, but it also relates to which sheep were making the most money. The Swale became very popular because of the North of England mule - that's out of the Swale ewe by the blue-faced Leicester tup- and these were in big demand to go down south to breed fat lambs. They are a very good mother, the north of England mule ewe and very prolific. Breeds change with popularity; this is usually tied in with how much money a breed is making; is it fit for purpose? You can't run a Herdwick ewe in the south of England and expect two fantastic texel lambs out of it; it just doesn't happen; you can't run North of England mule yews up on the top of Coniston Old Man, it just doesn't work; the sheep isn't designed for that; that's back to the constraints issue that we started out with; we are doing a variation on what our predecessors have done, and the next man that follows me or whoever will do a variation on what we are doing; he will only alter little things. The only big thing he can do is alter his breed, but then he has to be careful because of his altitude, weather, his farm, the amount of grass it grows. It's a well-proven thing all this lot and if we're not careful it will all unravel ...'

'Are the young people coming through in any quantity?'

No, not enough; I think that the people are there, and would come back to it if there was an income to be had. Young people see what their friends are bringing in as a wagon driver, a plumber or whatever, and it just doesn't bear any comparison, and they finish their job on a Friday night and they don't take their job back home with them; we take our job

back home with us at night, that's something that people have to understand. If you understand that it's a way of life then there's a fair chance that you'll be capable of doing the job. Sometimes you might think us farmers are always complaining, but we're hemorrhaging enthusiasm, work force, young people, and investment. We need to get these back; it will have to happen. If we don't act, the bill for the nation will be so much higher than it would be now. It will take millions and millions of pounds of reinvestment to revitalize these hills.'