VOICES FROM THE LAND

Rachel and Andrew Marston
Easgill Head

Easgill Head Farm nestles amid a scattering of trees in a dip of land where grass is punctuated by limestone outcrops. It feels like a hidden gem, set between Swaledale and Smardale, just a few miles from Kirkby Stephen but invisible from the main road. As we drive down the track towards the farmhouse, we leave the wind behind us and enter a yard in a short bout of sunlight between heavy showers that have become something of a theme during the last few weeks. It's late July and all eyes are on the weather, hoping for a few dry days that will allow for hay making.

Rachel and Andrew Marston welcome us into the kitchen where we are joined by their three daughters: Catherine, who has recently finished her GCSE exams; Abigail, who is thirteen; and their youngest, Olivia, aged seven. Andrew's mother and father are also part of the team. 'The farm's been in the family for a few generations now,' says Andrew, 'down my mother's side. I grew up here, I've spent nearly all my life here on this farm.'

Rachel is also from a farming family; her parents Harry and Mary Hutchinson farm in Uldale near Sedbergh. She met Andrew when she was thirteen. 'Our parents probably started sharing tups, and buying tups together,' says Andrew, 'so that introduced us to one another.' They manage the farm and a holiday cottage that they have recently created from one of the farm's barns.

The conversion of the barn was inspired by the interest that the family received after they featured on the BBC programme, *Lambing Live*, in 2011. At first, Andrew was quite resistant to the idea of appearing on a television programme, uncomfortable with the prospect of thousands, or millions, of people watching life on what he considers to be 'a bog standard farm.' He was persuaded, though, by Rachel and the children, who saw it as an opportunity. 'It showed a farmer's way of life, and a family way of life,' says Rachel. 'Everybody mucking in and getting on with the jobs - part of a team. A lot of husbands and wives go off to work and don't

spend a lot of time together. It's that spending time together, working in the countryside, that people really like. I suppose it's quite a privilege to do it.'

The flood of letters that arrived from people across the world in response to the programme set the family thinking about converting a barn to a holiday cottage, and they were able to do this with some financial support from Cumbria Fells and Dales. 'The point of the barn is that people come down to the farm and learn about farming, first hand,' says Rachel. 'We've had people lambing sheep and all sorts. They hay, water and cake the sheep. And on a night I'll walk round the fields and check the lambs, so they can come with me and do that. They're no extra burden, in fact it's someone to talk to. It's quite a privilege really, isn't it?'

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Behind the house, the fields are full of recently sheared sheep. The farm has a mixture of breeds – around a thousand ewes, plus followers, that are kept on the 400 acres of inside land, and have rights to graze on common land. Both Andrew and Rachel are passionate about breeding Swaledale tups. It's not just that they fetch high prices at auction (the record for one tup, Andrew tells me, is £110,000), it's also the satisfaction of producing the right kind of animal. 'I'm looking for a big tup, one with a lot of bone, thick legs, a good mould of head, a nicely laid horn. It wants some nice coloured legs - black and white - and the hair's important as well. You're getting quite detailed now, but, yes, something that looks proud of itself, and stands out from the rest.'

Andrew tells us about the other sheep. 'We work with pure Swaledales but we also cross the Swaledale yow to the Blue Leicester tups to produce mule gimmers, and then we have a flock Beltex and Texels, which produce very good fat lambs. They seem to be where the profit is for this farm, but not the same interest, for me, as the Swaledales.' There were no Beltex or Texels here until 2003, after Foot and Mouth led to a dramatic reduction in livestock. 'It was tough, tough. We lost two thirds of the sheep and a third of the cattle we had at the time.' Building up a flock of Beltex was part of moving forward. 'You have to try and look at the good things that came out of the bad,' says Rachel.

Andrew and Rachel manage the farm so that they have livestock to sell all year round. In addition to their sheep, they have around forty suckler[1] cows, crossing Limousins with British Blues. The calves stay with their mothers for ten months, and then are sold, usually to lowland farms for growing on.

The children are involved in and interested in all aspects of farming, but at present it is sheep rather than cows that get their attention, and they are continuing the family tradition of showing. Abigail says she is too nervous to go into the ring, but enjoys getting the sheep ready. Catherine, the eldest at 16, is already making strides, not just in showing, but in breeding, and is making profits. 'About three years ago I had a flock of about five sheep,' she says. 'I traded

[1] A suckler cow one calf a year, suckling it until it is sold.

these five for one yow. I tupped it with quite a good tup and then I got two tup lambs. You don't want to expect too much but it's the excitement of the thought - I could possibly make quite a bit of money here! It was quite hard, though, there were times when I thought it was rubbish – but then last year in October I made £3200 with my tup. It was absolutely amazing.' I wonder what Catherine made out of that money. 'I've saved it at the minute, but it depends. This year if I see a pen of sheep that I like I'll try and turn over that money and hopefully produce another tup that in the future makes more. See what happens.'

Catherine is keen to continue farming, and to speak up for farming. 'I enjoy talking about it. I think it's important. Sometimes farmers don't have a voice but if you want to make a change in the community, or in anything, the only way to get anywhere is to discuss it with people.'

At school, however, her wish to pursue a career in farming is not being met with enthusiasm. 'Catherine's been talking to her teachers for the last year, and Abigail will probably be talking to them in the future,' says Andrew. 'But if a teacher asks Catherine, "What's your career, what do you see yourself doing?" and Catherine says, "I would like to be a farmer, I want to work at home, on the family farm," the teacher's pulling faces, and actually saying, "Well that's a dead end job Catherine, you don't want to be doing that. You've got to do something else."'

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Catherine says that the teachers encourage her to go and experience other things before settling into farming, but she feels uncomfortable about what is fuelling their advice. 'You're pushed to go for the highest career possible,' she tells us. 'The people in the top classes are supported to go off and make as much money as you can. We have lessons when we look for things that we want to do in the future. Everybody's looking at the salary and they're not really looking at what the job actually entails – it's just money, money, money. There's a stereotype that farmers don't make money, so there's a pressure - am I going to go into something that is unsure, where I don't know how much I'm going to make each year?'

When Andrew was at school, he tells us, many more children were from farming backgrounds, and teachers were more accepting of farming as a career. This is one of the things that have clearly changed in the last twenty to thirty years. On the farm, the most obvious change is the introduction of the quad bike (although 'you still need a dog and a good stick.') Another marked difference has been a reduction in numbers of people working on each farm. 'There isn't the labour that there was on these farms. I clipped all the sheep myself this year but I can remember when I was growing up, there were half a dozen people shearing less sheep. They'd go and help each other. The labour's not there now, the people aren't in the hills the same as they used to be, definitely not farming anyway.'

This change is also a marker of the fact that, increasingly, smaller farms are being amalgamated across the Dales. This is something, Andrew thinks, that isn't good for the area. 'It might be the

way it will go, but I don't think it will make the area better, and it won't keep businesses. If we bought the farms round us, we would buy one tractor to do a lot of work. But if there are a lot of little farms, everybody has a tractor, everybody has a motorbike, so they're all keeping these other businesses in business.'

It's not just about economics: 'Communities is what it is all about. It's no good having one farmer sat with hundreds and hundreds of acres - you need lots of little farmers to make a community and make the area. I'm probably biased here but the Yorkshire Dales wouldn't be the Yorkshire Dales without the farmers that keep the walls up, that keep them looking nice, and they keep grazing the sheep in ways that make the quilt-work pattern of fields.' Rachel agrees, and adds: 'If it wasn't for farmers there'd be nobody here, and there'd be nothing to eat, so I think they're really important.'

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The special feature of the landscape, which has been shaped by farming for so many years, is among the qualities that have brought Easgill Farm, and the area around it, into the new extension of the Yorkshire Dales National Park – the Westmorland Dales. It's too early, Rachel says, to notice any difference this has made for them, but she is pleased that the area has been recognised as special. In terms of tourism, it's positive she thinks. For farming, Andrew says, the new status may be either positive or negative – perhaps more support, or perhaps stricter planning rules. 'From a farming point of view, what can the Yorkshire Dales do?' Andrew asks. 'They can't make your lamb prices any better or worse, I don't think, unless they do help the market – having lambs coming out of the Yorkshire Dales, or cattle maybe. There are opportunities, but it depends if they're interested in keeping farmers in the area.'

At present, there is no 'Yorkshire Dales' label for lamb bred locally. When sheep go to market to go into the food chain, they are just sheep, and the prices fluctuate from week to week and throughout the year. I wonder if it's difficult to work with this uncertainty. 'It's really hard. If you're trying to get a bank loan to purchase some land, or for whatever reason, you have to put a business plan together, and it's really difficult. From one week to the next you don't know. It could be 10 pound difference in your lambs, 20 pound, 30 pound. Or even a bad draw on the sale day. Some sales we sell 300 lambs. So it's really hard budgeting or working out where are you going to be this time next year.' I've heard this from farmers before and ask Andrew if it might be better to sell direct to abattoirs at predictable prices. 'We do sell direct to abattoirs but I think we need the livestock auctions. The dead weight system follows the auction – if the auction price is up, dead weight's up; if the auction price comes back, dead weight comes back. So without the auction setting that price, the job would be no good at all. And I do think the auction is a really good place – not just for the livestock but for farmers. It's a meeting place for farmers to talk to one another. If you're having a problem, chances are if you talk to somebody they've had a similar problem, or probably worse, so it's just it's a good thing to do. Farmers are pretty isolated people. They're often working on their own, long hours, and don't think anybody else has any problems, so I think it's a good thing.'

Beyond the auction mart, sales can also be boosted through the use of social media, something that has made a big impact at this farm recently. ‘We have a Facebook page for the holiday cottage,’ says Rachel, ‘so you can show what’s going on on the farm, and advertise. There’s twitter as well.’ ‘For the livestock,’ Andrew adds, ‘we sold some store lambs last year, just one instance – we put them on the Facebook page and a chap from the top of Scotland put a bid on these lambs without seeing them in the flesh. Things like that –people get their eye on a calf and ring you up and want to come and have a look. It is a good marketing tool.’

While we are talking, the light outside keeps changing: one minute, rain, the next sunshine. Despite the pressure of needing a few good dry days to get the grass cut, this is Andrew’s favourite time of year. ‘Coming up to the autumn sales, the back end sales as we call them. All that time you’ve spent from more or less this time last year, choosing your tups, buying your tups, if you can afford that tup you want, its progeny coming through, how good those lambs have done, how good they look. That’s your finished article.’

‘Thinking about what keeps people in the hills, I think it is the livestock,’ he adds. ‘I wouldn’t be interested in being a park keeper. I wouldn’t be farming if it wasn’t for the livestock. I’m not interested in looking after trees. I’m not interested in mowing grass with a lawn mower, or keeping things like that – it’s the livestock. And in the younger generation as well, it’s Catherine talking about her sheep, or Abigail talking about her sheep: it’s the livestock that’ll be keeping people in the hills.’

Catherine adds her thoughts: ‘You don’t really think about the maintenance of the area, it just comes naturally when you farm.’ And Andrew agrees. The farm is stocked quite heavily compared to some farms; it has fewer restrictions from agri-environment schemes and the sheep can stay out on the common throughout the winter. Andrew believes there can be a balance allowing for livestock and healthy land, and that having livestock in the hills is part of land management. ‘If you want people in the hills, you have to keep the livestock in the hills.’

During our conversation Rachel and Andrew have both mentioned more than once the privilege they feel, being able to live and work here. Their focus is always to maintain healthy livestock, but they love where they live and appreciate the land around them. Just the other

night, they tell me, they were walking in the fields and saw several pairs of owls. Lapwings and curlews are also in abundance during the summer months. ‘Takes your breath away,’ says Rachel, when I ask about the way it feels to be out there, with the sheep. ‘There’s a field you can go into and up the top you can see Wild Boar Fell, and down into the Eden Valley. It’s just amazing.’ Andrew nods in agreement. ‘It doesn’t matter what the weather’s like – it can be pouring down with rain and it’s still good. You go to the top of the fell in the morning, and it’s a privilege. It’s a bonny place.’

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