



**VOICES FROM THE LAND**

## **Paul Harker Punchard Farm, Arkengarthdale**

Arkengarthdale, in the north of the Yorkshire Dales, runs from high open moors down to Reeth, dissected by Arkle Beck. Punchard Farm sits at a height of around 1100 feet, set off the single main road in the valley, and looks east towards Booze Moor. There's a narrow beck running past the farm, with new trees growing up around it, and older trees around some of the farm buildings.



Paul Harker's family has been here since his grandfather took on the tenancy in 1946 and bought the farm in the 1990s. The farm was run for many years as a traditional Dales Sheep farm with a small dairy herd. Dairying continued until 1981, with the traditional field barns being used to house cows in the winter. Paul's father always successfully bred pure Swaledales; through the 1970s and 80s he had a small number of mules (crossing Swaledale ewes with a Bluefaced Leicester tup). They have since been replaced with a small number of Gritsones, and Texel-cross ewes, which produce good fat lambs. Paul also has a small number of beef cattle.

The farm has 130 acres of inside land and, along with twelve other commoners has grazing rights on Arkengarthdale Common. 'The common is split into two halves: the east and the west. We're on the west part, which is owned by the Duke of Norfolk. He has the shooting rights. I think he's had it since 1975 and before that it was Thomas Sopwith, the aviator. He owned much the dale and when he sold the estate a lot of the tenanted farms were sold off, and it was broken down. The duke has since bought back some of these farms and added them back to the estate.

Like many other farmers, Paul has reduced the numbers of sheep grazing on the moor as part of a Higher Level Stewardship scheme. 'We are paid to reduce so many head of sheep permanently, and you get a payment for reducing the number in winter. We're only left with a hundred on the fell through winter and the rest have to be found homes for. The hardest job is finding wintering that is suitable: it's either not well enough fenced, or it

doesn't last the winter through, there isn't plenty of grass. Everybody's chasing, everybody wants the best places.' Paul brings the sheep back after winter, in time for lambing at home in the meadows close to the farmhouse.

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'Apparently one time they were all lambled on the fell. That was when twins weren't expected. Lambing percentages have crept up to about 170% now. Mostly twins – they're a lot better looked after really.' Lambing is the favourite time of year for Paul's partner Ruth. 'She loves making sure everything is alright. I'd find it a lot tougher if Ruth wasn't here, I'm sure of that. Her parents were farmers in Howgill so she's well used to sheep farming.'

This year's lambing weather has been good, without too much rain and certainly no snow. 'Winters don't seem as harsh as I remember them. I can remember being off school for days at a time. I think there's a generation growing up that hasn't really seen heavy snow. That's not to say that we won't get a bad winter again: we're always wondering what's going to happen.' As for rain: 'We've seen plenty of that,' says Paul. 'In the last ten years there have been two or three summers where it has seemed to have rained virtually every day. Global warming? I don't know. I think it's just patterns. I would like to see a lot less rain. I've been very pleased this Spring, the way things have gone.'

We have come to meet Paul on a day when Arkengarthdale is bursting with life, with new lambs and sun shining on trees in full leaf. There is also an abundance of new birds: lapwing and curlew chicks still too young to be wary stumble around in the grass beside tracks and roads, and the air is full of their calls. The Yorkshire Dales is one of only a few places in the country where numbers of wading and upland birds, particularly curlew and black grouse, are not falling. In part this may be due to reduced stocking numbers on the moors. 'When it was really hard grazed it was grazed really tightly and there was very little waste, whereas now the sheep tend to stick on the best bits and avoid the sourer end – and the sour bits are going ranker. But I think it's better for the moors now.' The longer grasses offer cover, says Paul. 'Insects and birds will thrive in this long grass. When I was young, the black grouse, we never saw them. They've made a huge come back. That was one of the big drives with these latest round of schemes. You know that Spring's around the corner when you hear them, and they're always in the inbye land through winter. The gill opposite was planted with trees, and they go in there to feed as well.'

Another element of being in a Higher Level Stewardship scheme is an agreement to keep meadows with no input, or very little input from manure. 'We'll cut 60-odd acre I suppose. Just the one cut. We've had a crop off them already with the sheep in lambing time. A lot of people tend to remove the stock from about the first of May but it's very seldom we take anything out before the 15<sup>th</sup>.' The hay from this grass is left until the 8<sup>th</sup> of July, at the earliest, before cutting. 'I think the sheep prefer the ground that hasn't had fertiliser on it. They seem to do better than they ever did when it was quite heavily fertilised. In the traditional meadows I've noticed a lot more yellow rattle this year – whether that's down to a drier winter, a drier spring, it likes that. We have a lot more wild flowers: they're in a better state than they were 20 years ago certainly.'

Paul manages to gather in more than enough for his own needs. 'We have one or two neighbours who don't cut so much now and we sell them a bit through winter. Suits them and suits us. It's the way this farm's set out: we're short of pasture land and there's more meadow. But because of the HLS schemes I'm obliged to keep these flower meadows so we have a bit of surplus crop. Particularly when you're sending quite a lot of sheep away to winter, they're not to feed when they've gone. When you had four or five times as many on the moor, that's a lot more bales of hay needed every day to keep them all fed.'

Each year, Paul has a new batch of sheep and I wonder whether he has his eyes on showing them? 'My dad was the keenest, that was his love. Showing came first, you had to work round it. I did show at Tan Hill this year, but I wouldn't say I was as keen as he was. Three of us who joined together with a tup took that and he got second in his class, so that was good.' Sharing a tup between farms is not uncommon amongst Swaledale breeders; tups can sell for tens of thousands of pounds so sharing makes them affordable. 'He seems to have done very well. I had a quarter share. I had the first go but that was just because we lamb a bit sooner than one or two of the others. Everybody was suited. Some people take sheep from one farm to the other and the tup goes to all the sheep at the same time.' But with this agreement, the tup came to Paul. 'I don't like moving sheep around that have just been tugged, and I like them where I can see them every day.'

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This cycle of tugging, lambing and hay making continues year after year, and at regular intervals Paul will be out on the moors to gather the sheep in. Having a quad, he says, has changed farming, or at least made it a lot easier. 'My dad always had a two-wheeler and my grandfather went on horseback to gather. I got a bike when I left school. The four wheelers are the handiest things. The dogs can ride, it saves them, and it saves a lot of time: you can carry things and tow trailers, they've been a big help. I wouldn't say it does the dogs a lot of good, though, and you shepherd better on foot. We have one heft that you can't get a four-wheeler in. I can go in with my two-wheeler trials bike but you're better on foot really, so we still do that.'

Driving across some areas of moorland has become easier with the recent blocking of grips that were cut into the land forty-fifty years ago. 'Through the 1960s and 1970s, there was government funding for gripping. I think it should never have been touched really, it has caused a lot of flooding. Just recently they've

completely blocked the length of the grip and re-profiled it. It's a tidy job and you don't get the flash flooding like you used to. The flood comes out slower and it lasts a day or two longer maybe. I think that's a big benefit. There was a lot of peat erosion as well. These moors have been here for thousands of years, undrained, and I think for water storage they're best left as a sponge, to soak it all up.'



The combination of farming and land management work being facilitated by environmental organisations goes back many decades in the Dales and Paul is frequently in conversation with other organisations as they monitor the land. 'They keep a close eye on it, they like me to comply with the schemes and to see that they made a difference. It all started with the ESA scheme in the mid 80s. We resisted joining it for the first ten years and then we joined up and we never regretted it. The ESAs came at a pivotal time when things were starting to get intensified; it was replaced by Entry Level and Higher Level stewardship schemes. The majority of ours is in Higher Level, and we're in that until 2021.' So what does Paul think will happen after this? Some farmers, he says, may be going back to farming practices that are more productive or intensive. 'That suits some better than others. At the moment it wouldn't suit me but we just have to wait and see what's offered when it ends.'

This begs the question: how does Paul see the future of farming here in the Dales? 'I suppose hill farming around here is much as it was fifty years ago, which is certainly not *progress*, and you could intensify but whether it would be any more profitable I don't know. If things were to stay roughly the same, I'd be quite happy.' Without financial assistance, though, Paul can't see farming carrying on as it is. 'It's a way of life more than a job but it does rely on a bit of support, otherwise it would hardly be viable. There'd have to be more money in lambs, or you'd have to keep more, with all the problems that brings, and you'd need more land, which isn't cheap. It's difficult to see a future for it unsubsidised. It has been subsidised for such a long time and this has improved the farm I think, for the benefit of the land.'

When we stroll around the farmyard, Paul points out the trees that he helped to plant around ten years ago and talks about the ancient woodlands on his land that he's helping to restore. Curlews fly from the grass, and we can hear lapwings calling. 'It all goes hand in hand,' he says, as we talk about the balance. 'I don't think there's a lot of need to farm

intensively, which you perhaps would have to do if you had a lowland farm. It's about a way of life here, and looking after the land and the animals and wildlife as well. And it's beautiful in summer. Everybody says it's a nice place to live. You feel fortunate, every day, you feel you're very lucky, and if you can make a little bit of money as well, that's all the better!



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