VOICES FROM THE LAND

Raymond Calvert
Hoggarths, Upper Swaledale

When we meet Raymond Calvert there's a cold wind to blow us into the house. It's often like this, he says, 'Once you get fifteen miles down the road, it can be about six or seven degrees warmer, there's no wind, it's actually a nice day. Here, as soon as you get out the door, you're met with quite a cold chill!'

In the warmth of the kitchen, Raymond tells us more about the farm and his life here. The farm has been in his family for a hundred years, with Raymond's father and grandfather both farming here. Raymond now runs the family business with his brother, Chris, and his son Andrew. 'This farm today consists of what was originally six farms, made into one.' The Calverts amalgamated the farms gradually over the last twenty-five years. 'Over time, as it's been harder to make a living from these areas – some people have left the area. So today there's three of us working this farm to make a living, where once upon a time there would have been at least six if not ten people. We've had to become very, very sufficient.'

The farms have approximately 550 acres of inbye land, for pastures and grazing during lambing and tupping time, but most of the grazing land that comes with the farms is on Birkdale Common, where five other graziers also have rights. In all there the Calverts look after around four and a half thousand acres of grazing land. 'The farm here is 1200 feet. Our next farm up the road is at 1300 feet and our common land rises to 2238 feet. There are ten separate hefts[1] on the moor. Certain hefts go with certain

[1] An area of land that sheep become familiar with and tend to stay in; ewes teach their lambs the heft, and it is passed on from generation to generation and can be reinforced, or reintroduced, by dedicated shepherding. On unfenced common land sheep, on the whole, keep to their hefts and a farmer will know where to look for them at different times of year.

farms; this farm here has four hefts with it, Pry House has three, and then we have three other hefts with three other farms.' All the land is high, and rough. 'The Swaledale sheep has got this fantastic ability, not only to manage in these quite tough areas, but to thrive, to get through the winters, get through the bad wet weeks and come through lambing time. She's there doing her absolute best.'

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Raymond can't remember a time when he was not interested, and showed a keenness for Swaledale sheep from a very early age. 'I was maybe trying to emulate my dad. My dad had four different colours for the four hefts of Hoggarths sheep. So I had four colours of marbles, and they were my sheep. I then moved on –I progressed to acorns as my sheep and then I then advanced further and I used tin cans. The smaller cans represented a lamb, the slightly bigger ones were sheep. I marked them, I clipped them, I dipped them, I tupped them. And I named my sheep – my dad named his sheep, so I named mine. The very first sheep that I ever named was Fray Bentos.'

When he was young, there were around 500 sheep on the farm. 'It has gradually grown and grown. I always said as a young lad, I'd love to have a farm with a thousand sheep on it. We have quite a few more than that now. I feel as though, with my brother, we've done a bit of what we wanted to do. What makes it special, living in Swaledale, is the sheep. That is exactly it. If you ask me, 'What keeps you in this area?' It's them – it's the Swaledale sheep.'

The Calverts are well known for their flock of pedigree Swaledales, and it is a matter of pride when their tups and ewes win prizes at shows and sales. Of all the prizes, an award at Tan Hill Show is the most sought after. Raymond has been secretary of the show for thirty years, and believes the Swaledales that are shown here each May are of the highest standard. 'I would dearly love to win Tan Hill Show. If you can win at Tan Hill, you can win anywhere.' Having said that, Raymond's son Andrew came back from the show this year with one of the top prizes: 'He won the small breeders Champion this year, a fantastic achievement. It was a very, very proud moment for him, and for me. Really proud.'

While breeding good Swaledales is the main goal, maintaining the landscape is another source of pride. 'I get a great deal of satisfaction from people appreciating what we are doing, although it is just part and parcel of our way of life. We are quite proud, although we don't really like to admit it.'

One of the things that walkers often stop to comment on is walling. Raymond is fortunate: 'I love walling! I can remember two or three years ago, I was walling by a roadside and an unbelievable amount of people watched me, amazed by a wall being built without any cement. I don't know how many miles of walls we have, it is miles and miles and miles. We have about seventy different fields and pastures.' Walling is a job that needs to be done all year round – there are always gaps to fix.

Another task that Raymond enjoys is lambing – again, it's hard, and tiring, but it means a lot. 'It's a new cycle, a new production of that year's supply of lambs. I get quite excited leading up to lambing time because we don't know what to expect from the new tups. You know what you've got in the flock, you've bought your tups at the back end, and you're hoping that they'll get some good lambs, some nice-looking lambs like themselves. Going round in the morning, it isn't just like one lamb looks like another one and will end up 40 kilos, 45 kilos in the auction mart - it's this breeding potential within them which fascinates me. In this dale, you've got some of the very best Swaledale flocks of sheep that there are in the association[2], stocks with great back-breeding, highly sought after.'

Breeding a good Swaledale is not only about winning prizes or boosting a reputation – it's essential to the country's meat production, as part of what Raymond calls a three-tier system: 'There's me at the top: upland hill farmer, self-retained flock, producing some females. Next chap down: your upland man, say down at lower Wensleydale, Richmond – he's got his Swaledale sheep, not self-retained cos they're all crossed with the Blue-faced Leicester. He has no female Swaledale replacements as his females are half-bred lambs, the grey-faced mule. He sells them onto the true lowland man, down in the south, who hasn't got a self-retained flock: he's got a fat lamb producing flock. All his lambs, whether they be male or female, are just going on for meat. So he comes along to buy his replacement half-bred (mules) off the upland man, and the upland man hopefully comes to me to buy my Swaledale yows.'

'There's a lot of sheep in the country that are related to Swaledales. The back end sales at Kirkby Stephen will sell just over ten thousand Mule gimmer lambs and Hawes has a two-day sale selling 26, 28 thousand – that's 34 thousand lambs for a kick off, all bred from Swaledales. Then there's other centres. People from lowland ground tell us, we need you to keep on

[2] Swaledale Sheep Breeders Association

breeding. We need the breeding stock coming out of the hills. And we're proud that we do – Swaledale sheep are important across the country.'

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Keeping going, however, has for decades been in part dependent on government payments, and Raymond, like many other farmers, is concerned about the financial support and the impact that Brexit may have on upland farmers. 'I'm very nervous about the people who are going to be controlling us now. In the past, those people weren't shouting for us anyway, so why are they going to shout for us or defend us now? The schemes are absolutely vital. If we don't have them in the future, we quite simply won't be here, and it is as stark a warning as that. You can't do it without support. The main reason why I voted to remain in Europe was because I've never felt proper support from our own government. The two main friends I consider we greatly have, or maybe should say *had*, were the French and the Germans who understood the value of agriculture. The only way we can produce cheap food in areas like this is if we've got some backup. Our wether lambs (sold for meat) are making ten thousand pounds less than they were two or three years ago. Hill lambs are a poor trade. I'm sure it would be a different attitude if there was a bit of a food shortage, but at the moment, we're right down the bottom of the pile.'

While Raymond is referring to poor prices at the market, he is very clear that upland farming provides services beyond food. 'It's much bigger, wider and more beneficial than that. The landscape itself, the environment – all that goes with it. You've got a group of people who'll work for very, very little in conditions nobody else would think about doing. We're almost a breed to ourselves.' He feels that farmers are underestimated and undervalued by the 'powers that be'. 'What else can we actually do with this land? All our land is classed as severely disadvantaged land: you can't do anything else in these areas, our hands are very tied, whereas on lower grounds you can do different things. If we don't have farmers, you're going to have to manage it somehow, pay somebody so much an hour. Is it going to look as good? Does anybody know who's wall all this is? All sorts of things. It's built into you from working all your life and knowledge you have from people who've been there before you.'

The weather adds to the challenge. 'Sometimes you get scarred by what you've seen or what the weather can cruelly do to you on your farm. The only bad winter I ever saw was in '79. It was a brute. Apparently nothing like, as Dad said, '63, or even remotely near '47, but we've had some bad do's in these areas.' He tells us about the difficulty digging ewes and lambs out of drifts, and the numbers of sheep that can be lost. But conditions have been better recently: 'Without a doubt, these last ten years, on the whole have been very mild. We've had a lot of rain, a lot of rain – winters are much wetter – and less frost. But it'll get me one of these years: it'll snow all winter.'

Rain has always been a feature in the upper reaches of Swaledale and large areas of moorland are frequently saturated. Many years in the past, grips were cut into the moors to encourage water to run off (a scheme that was encouraged and paid for by the government). Today there is a drive from the environment agencies to block these grips in an attempt to reduce severe

flood events in the valleys and lowland towns by holding more water in the hills. Raymond is against the blocking, which has already started, covering an area of around 200 acres where he has grazing rights.

'It ends up like a jelly. If you go in it yourself, you can get out, but if a sheep goes in it, it can't get out. Have you any idea how much grazing we're losing because of all this water? Water isn't just overflowing and going to the next grip, it's spreading: the ground is ungrazeable. I think that they've got a little bit carried away thinking we can stop flooding in the lowlands. Although Natural England are pushing this, and getting good backing from the government, I've seen areas that have been blocked up and it hasn't made any difference to the flow of the river. If it rains like hell, its' going down – all the hill ground is like that, it's all feeding down. A lot of this water is running over the top because there is nowhere in the ground for it to go: it is already full of water.'

What will happen in the future, with grips and with heavy rainfall, has yet to be seen, but although Raymond feels strongly about this, and has concerns that farming may not have the level of support it deserves, he does hold a bright light for the next generation of farmers. 'In farming the average age group is quite high, but in Swaledale, particularly upper Swaledale, we've got a very good crop of lads who are prepared to stay and work in the dale. Those lads are the future for the survival of these upland areas. I only hope that there is a future for them, because they deserve it. We all deserve it, 'cos we work damn hard.'

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I ask Raymond how it feels to him, to work here and to walk across the land he has been tending for many years now. 'I feel a duty. I feel that our forefathers worked an awful lot of years for so little, yet they maintained this landscape then, not through any great educational sort of thing but through their own knowledge.' Before we leave the house, Raymond shows us his collection of Flock Books which record the many farmers who have gone before him. The Swaledale Sheep Breeders Association has been in existence since 1920, and he has every book produced since then.

We continue talking as we walk together to the wall gap that Raymond wants to finish mending. As we walk up through the field, avoiding boggy patches, a flock of oystercatchers rises from the long grass. The calls of curlews loop on the air, there are lapwings perching on the walls, and the sun begins to catch the top of the surrounding fells. The wind is still fierce – we pull our hats down over our ears – but there's a small hint of spring in the air.

'I can't think of doing anything else. Dad never pushed me to go into farming, he said there's never a great deal of money to be made from that. But that's not what interests me – yes you need to make a living, course you do, everybody does, but I just want everybody else to be able to come out to the countryside and enjoy it as much as I do. I thoroughly appreciate the look of the place, it makes me feel pretty good when other people can see that, and comment on it, and say, this is just fantastic. That sort of praise means so much to people like myself working and living in these areas, it really does.'

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