VOICES FROM THE LAND

Richard Paul
Carr Farm, Arncliffe, Littondale

Littondale is a narrow, steep-sided valley, with something of an intimate feel to it. Cut through by the River Skirfare, it has two distinct types of land: limestone to the south, on the left side as you drive up the dale, extending to the limestone pavements above Malham, and the dark, peaty soil to the north, which supports heather growth, and extends to the tops of Arncliffe Moor and Hawkswick Moor. Richard Paul has been farming at Carr Farm in Arncliffe since 1991, grazing his livestock on limestone land. He looks after Lleyn sheep, which originate on the Llyn peninsula in Wales.

'We lamb 430. The wethers – the male castrated lambs – go off to slaughter but most of the females are kept and sold a year later as shearlings. That's the main part of my financial income.' Richard also has thirty Aberdeen Angus cows and has recently exchanged his Charolais Bull for an Aberdeen Angus bull, so his beef cattle will be pure Aberdeen Angus.

Richard was born in Wales. He developed an interest in farming - not from his parents, who were teachers, but from helping on farms as a teenager. He went to agricultural college in Aberystwyth, where he met Sarah, who was born in Skipton. Sarah didn't come from a farming family either, but both she and Richard wanted to farm in the Yorkshire Dales. When the opportunity came up to rent Green Farm in Arncliffe in 1991, they took it. They moved to Carr Farm in 1997, just before their last child was born: all four children are now at university.

The Pauls started with one hundred acres. Sixteen years on, they have six hundred acres in total. Richard has a particular interest in soil types and different qualities of grass. He has worked full time for an agricultural company since 1989 and succeeds in doing this alongside farming. 'I manage to juggle my main passion, which is farming, and my other passion, which is grassland management (fertilisers, grass seeds, liming and soil) and working with farmers:

going round, talking to them, advising them and selling to them. A lot of people hate going to work on a Monday morning, whereas I actually have great pleasure and I enjoy my work, whether it's on the farm here or driving off and visiting farms in Yorkshire.'

On many farms across the Dales some fields have a low input of manure or no input at all, usually as stipulated through an agri-environment agreement. Leaving the soil without improvement makes it what Richard calls 'hungry', or poor, with low levels of phosphates; this offers the right conditions for meadows with species including ribbed plantain, yellow rattle and red clover. For the creation of meadows, and the invertebrates they support, this works well, but for a farmer who wants to produce a lot of grass for his animals, it's preferable to improve the soil.

'I'm lucky here on my farm,' says Richard. 'For the last ten years I've had the Higher Level Stewardship or HLS Scheme but I've also had the Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) scheme. So I've had land with the low inputs, or no inputs, cutting hay and growing flowers and butterflies and bees, but I've also had land which they weren't interested in environmentally. So I've been able to do liming and reseeding and grassland improvements. I've seen both aspects. I look on the HLS land as being the land that *grows* the lambs, but it is the other land where I am feeding the soil to grow better grasses that is going to *fatten* the lambs. It's a big question – a lot of farmers that are perhaps not fortunate enough to have land that's improved like mine, they will have to purchase their feed in a bag. And that is a lot more money.' Richard estimates the costs: 'If you were to re-seed a field and you take into account all the costs, the cost of growing a kilo of dry matter on that grazing land for fattening lambs is 8 pence a kilo. Whereas if you buy it on a wagon at £220 pound a tonne, that's 25 pence a kilo.'

Do I carry on farming as I have been without payments for not putting fertiliser on and not putting manure on and having the old grasses? Or do I try and farm them for food production, and improve the grasses by feeding the soil with more muck, or bought-in fertilisers? Or even the extreme, which is to do a re-seed? Big question marks about the future.

That's a significant difference and one of many elements that enter the complex equation of hill farming, and influences decisions that need to be made going into the future. Like every other farmer, Richard is facing the uncertainty of what happens when Britain leaves the European Union; agricultural payment schemes will inevitably change. Even without such a seismic political shift, changes regularly occur. Agri-environment schemes typically last for five or ten years, after which they are re-evaluated. Richard is on the cusp of a change now, ready to sign up for a new five-year agreement, but some changes leave him unsure about how to go forward.

'There are quite a lot of fields where I've been planting individual trees, like in a parkland environment, with tree guards. The cricket field when you come into Arncliffe on the left is one of them, and everybody comments on how beautiful it looks with the trees in it. The same with the field on the other side of the road.' There will be no options for these fields to be included in the scheme, Richard tells us, which means there is no obligation to plant trees, and certainly no additional payments to support the growing of trees instead of the grazing of sheep. 'So as a farmer,' asks Richard, 'do I just carry on farming them as I have been without

any payments, for not putting fertiliser on and not putting manure on and having the old grasses on there? Or do I try and farm them for food production, and improve the grasses by feeding the soil with more muck, or bought-in fertilisers? Or even the extreme, which is to do a re-seed? Big question marks about the future.'

Richard has some concern about changes that may have a detrimental effect on the look of the landscape. 'There are certain parts of this farm, the steep hillsides, and maybe some of the top land, if it wasn't in the scheme we probably wouldn't do a lot different anyway, in all honesty. But other fields: they could all be ploughed up, rotavated and reseeded, which would be a shame, because you're changing the landscape aren't you?'

Richard gets quite animated about dry stone walls, which are an iconic feature of the Dales. He has twelve miles of wall to maintain. He loves walling and he makes a point of fixing his gaps, both on his own, and with paid help, but feels dismayed at walls that are crumbling elsewhere.

'A lot of these walls have been up since the Enclosure Act of 1720: that's when they were originally built. Somebody went to the effort of building them. A lot of farmers, they just let them go. It's so sad, it's part of our heritage. I think that's wrong. All we've got to do is wall gaps and fix them. If farmers like me are getting paid so much a hectare, for doing something, there should be simple conditions that go with that. You're lucky to farm where you are and you need to do it to a certain standard – and one of those things is to maintain the walls that were built by someone on your land. Nobody's been policing these things. Drives me nuts really. The problem is that the farmer that doesn't do his own walling pays contractors to come and do it. And labour, as we know, is very expensive. So what happens is that he can't afford to do it all, so he will send them into the fields to do the walling that is most important to him, which is down below by his buildings, his lambing meadows – he wants them to be stock proof. But the bit that the majority of people don't see is on the tops of the hills. And if they start looking up there, it's not good. I worry about who's going to do this in the future. The youngsters now, whether they're keen enough to do it, or whether the moneys there – it's a big debate. Who's going to do all this work? It's so manual.'

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On some farms, many of the barns that were once in use are falling into disrepair but Richard's barns – all eight of them – are still in use. 'A lot of them are open so that the sheep can go in for shelter. The problem with these barns is that they were great in the olden days. They used to cut the hay with scythes and bring the hay into the barns, but the door is quite often on the side, rather than on the gable end. With modern farming, and tractors, you can't get in from the side and turn. We got planning permission to put a new door at the gable end of one barn, so we can put all our farm machinery in there. So that's a good use of a barn that would otherwise not be used.' In another barn, Richard tells me, he put an owl box two years ago. 'That was quite exciting. We had fledglings – a nest of three. Beautiful.' As part of the new scheme, Richard will be putting owl boxes in four more barns.

He's enthusiastic about the owls as well as other birds on the land. 'We have lots of curlew and lapwings. Oystercatchers also come for nesting and on the tops we have snipe and golden plover. We also have birds of prey. There's a peregrine falcon that nests on the cliff – always has done – and a pair of buzzards, and occasionally you see kestrels.'

Richard goes on: 'It's interesting when you talk about environmental schemes. These birds that we want to keep in the hills, they need to eat insects. I've got fields on the HLS scheme and I've got fields next to them which are not. You can have more birds nesting in the fields that are not in the HLS scheme, because there are more insects in that environment because that land has been fed more: it has had more muck, so there's more insects and organic matter for them to peck away at. And even though it's reseeded land, you can sometimes have more nests in those fields. So I keep an eye out for them. When you're driving round of an evening, you can see the curlews floating down to their nests. We go and mark those nests so that when we do go in with the tractor we'll mow round them. And the same on the top, even though it's not mowing land. If I see a lapwing's nest or a curlew's nest I will put a stick in the ground to mark it. Farmers tend to look out on their sheep flocks when they're driving with their quad bike. Potentially, if you're not careful, you could drive over one of those nests, so we tend to do that. It's quite good. It gives you a bit of pleasure. I like seeing wildlife – birds in particular.'

To keep on top of farming tasks, Richard occasionally gets paid help from other farmers or contracted workers. Making big bale silage, for instance, is more efficiently done by

contractors, and saves Richard from having to buy all the machinery. He also contracts some clipping each year, but does a reasonable amount on his own: this is one of many jobs that he likes. Sarah is on hand to help at lambing time but typically is occupied with her own business, which is breeding Angora rabbits for their fibre. She keeps a hundred rabbits in a huge purpose-built shed, gives them four clippings a year, and sells her yarns through specialist markets. She is also involved in village life, part of a community that Richard values highly, and he definitely feels at home here, having lived here now for longer than anywhere else in his life. He's pleased to be part of it, and believes it's the farming families that keep the community going, just as it's the farmers who keep the landscape looking as it does – his recent conversion of an area of the village green into a meadow, seeded with yellow rattle, is a novel way of bringing a bit of difference to the typical village scene. But the appeal of the place is not just for tourists, says Richard. 'I appreciate the beauty. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else, even though I'm an offcomer – I'm an immigrant from Wales. I'm very happy up here.'

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