



VOICES FROM THE LAND

Harry and Mary Hutchinson Uldale, Fell End

The farmhouse at Uldale sits against the fell, at the end of a track that winds over open moor and through dense woodland. It has a feel of being in a world all of its own, hidden from view until you are almost at the front door. The farm is at approximately 1000 feet above sea level, and is, by many standards, a tough place to live. Mary adds a touch of humour to the reality of the weather up here: 'Somebody said to me: there's wet land, and then there's very wet land, and then there's Uldale.'



'A lot of people say it's not a fit place to bring a woman up here,' says Harry, 'But Mary loved it, from the beginning.' Since moving to Uldale in 1983, the Hutchinsons have acquired additional segments of inbye land, giving them a total of 450 acres. This offers something better than the wet, boggy land immediately surrounding the farmhouse. 'Most of the other land we've got,' says Harry, 'is limestone, so there's quite a good contrast between the two. The limestone's nice and dry, you can go and spread muck any time you want.'

Beyond the inbye land, the farm has rights to graze on Baugh Fell Common, a vast expanse of unfenced land where 22 farmers have rights to graze; at present there are eleven active graziers. Uldale has the right to graze 1200 sheep but grazes less than this.

When they arrived on the farm, Harry and Mary reduced stock numbers straight away, as they began to improve the quality of their flock, and numbers have since fallen in line with regulations set under the Higher Level Stewardship Agreement that covers the common. At present, they lamb around 700 ewes each year focusing on pure Swaledales and putting a small amount to a Texel tup.

They also keep a small number of cattle. When we visit in the winter, the cows – Belgian-Blue crossed with a Blonde Aquitaine bull – are in a shed close to the house, one of a collection of barns that the Hutchinsons have added, to complement the traditional barns, and use for shelter and for lambing. Harry says they are reducing the cattle. ‘They are a lot of work and there isn’t enough labour on the farm. Probably, looking back, would have been better going with shorthorns or Angus.’

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Winding down the cattle-side of the business is part of a longer term plan. Harry and Mary are ready to downsize considerably and will soon be moving to move into a smaller house, not far from Uldale, and have sheep on a smaller patch of land, just 150 acres. When they move on from Uldale, which they rent, it will go to another tenant. Neither of the Hutchinson’s two children want to take it on: their son, Wayne, has a well-established photography business, and their daughter, Rachel, farms with her husband not far from Kirkby Stephen. It is much harder than it used to be, though, Harry thinks, for someone to take on a farm tenancy.

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The Hutchinsons are unusual in staying so long at Uldale. Harry has looked at the records of tenants going back to 1813 and none has stayed longer than fourteen years. But Mary and Harry love the place. Although there is always the weather to contend with and there have been hard periods, with financial concerns in the first few years after their arrival and the impact of Foot and Mouth which saw them lose the third of the flock that was away wintering, they love it. Over the last three decades they have bought a small amount of land and have taken on the rental on four smaller farms nearby. ‘Each time they came and said, do you want to take this farm, we’ve taken it, haven’t we?’ This was a sound business decision, but is not altogether positive, says Harry. ‘All those were little farms at one time, they’re no longer viable really, but it would have been nice if actually those farms and farmhouses had been bought by a family making some living out of that farm, the community would have been more alive, wouldn’t it?’ At one time, there were seventeen farms at Fell End, and now there are fewer than five. ‘One of the aims of the Yorkshire Dales,’ says Harry, ‘is to try and keep the same number of farms in the National Park as there are at the moment.’

Harry sees farming as the ‘backbone’ of the Yorkshire Dales and while he feels well supported by some organisations, including the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority, he

feels less well understood by others who overlook, or don't appreciate, the personal investment farmers have in their flock and their land.

'They don't understand how much of your life and yourself you put in to those things. If you get a rainy day, and you're out there, and you're trying to save a lamb's life, it means something to you. It's not just a lamb. And if it dies, you'll be disappointed, you might get angry. But if it's not yours, you'll not be bothered, it's just a lamb that dies, it's just a pity. But it isn't *just a pity*, it's a lamb, it might be your best one, you might dream of that one making a thousand pounds as it's coming out of the sheep, you know.'

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'There's far more to it than an outsider thinks. They just don't understand it. They don't understand the mentality either. As an example, we sell pedigree tupes in the autumn. You'd spend weeks getting them ready. You've bred them, you know they're pedigrees.' He reflects on what happens if the sheep don't reach a good price in the ring. 'You come out of the ring and you think, well, nobody wants me, nobody likes me, and you feel totally – I don't know how you feel really, you feel totally rejected. And you think, well, that's no

good. Because it's yourself that's in that animal. It's not just the animals that you're looking after, you know, it's your *self* in those animals.'

It's similar with the land, which Harry and Mary feel very attached to and know intimately. 'Traditional farming as we do it is environmentally friendly – most of it in the hills is.' The Hutchinsons take pleasure in seeing lapwings, curlews and other birds, or stopping to watch black grouse lecking in the spring, but are concerned at falling numbers.

'When we first came here, we had loads of lapwings. The first thing we did was reduce the stock – reduce the cows, reduce the sheep. And our lapwings also reduced, but we have noticed that the badgers have increased, and the lapwings have disappeared, and the curlews have disappeared. It's not because of the way I farm, because the way I farm should encourage them. It's because no one is controlling these other vermin. There are just too many about.'

Harry also feels that there should be more monitoring of landscapes by the organisation, Natural England, that implements the schemes. A Higher Level Stewardship Scheme lasts for ten years, but there is very little monitoring and during a recent inspection the response was that sheep numbers could in fact be increased, but there is no flexibility for this in the scheme. Harry is watching the land become more and more 'tussocky' in places where sheep no longer graze, too overgrown even for ground nesting birds.

Like most farmers, Harry is of the opinion that grazing numbers were too high when payments were made per head of sheep, but schemes based on land may now be reducing grazing too much, he thinks. 'I think they're going too far the other way at the moment. People don't quite understand everything about the job. 'If I'd lived on the moon for thirty years, people would come and say, "My you're an expert on living on the moon. We better

ask you about how to live there.” I’ve lived at Uldale for thirty years, and faced up to the elements, been out in the rain, mended the walls, tended my sheep, but they’ll come along and say, “We’ll tell you how to do it.” They don’t know how to do it – they haven’t a clue – they’re not involved.’

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Harry and Mary recall some of the early days at Uldale. ‘The first winter we were here,’ says Harry, ‘we took a horse out when we fed the sheep, a horse and sled. We borrowed a horse and we got a sledge and put the hay on, went out up the fell. The horse was a pretty lazy thing – the chap didn’t lend me his best horse!’ Mary laughs, ‘To start with we were carrying it up ourselves.’ Harry interjects: ‘We’d just carry a bale up so far, put that down, have a rest, go back for the next one, bring that up, then take the other one up a little bit further.’ ‘Every morning,’ says Mary, ‘we’d say we’ll just go a bit further!’

The second winter, they had a three-wheeler bike, which allowed them to take a few bales up the hill at a time, but was precarious and could roll on the steep ground. The next year, they were the first in the dale to get a quad, and this has since made a difference to every chore, including gathering. ‘When we first came, you’d go gathering the sheep, two of us, a pair of wellies, a stick and a dog a piece – costs nothing, does it? Nowadays, two of us go, with two quads – ten, twelve thousand pounds. Different altogether. We actually prefer walking,’ says Harry. ‘It’s better for the dogs, it’s better for the sheep.’ Even so, the quad is useful and as Harry gets older it’s an essential tool, but he makes sure to drive at a walking pace.

When he’s gathering sheep in from the common, Harry identifies his sheep by their smit marks, or coloured marks on the fleeces. ‘Uldale has its particular smit mark – a winter one and a summer one – so that’s two different smit marks. And then we’ve got Tarn, a little farm, so that has its smit mark. And then Wray Green has its own smit mark, and then we’ve got Brigg, which has two hefts, so that’s got two smit marks. We also tag double tag them – a tag that depicts which family they’re in, different colours, and then the under tag has a different colour code for the sire. So if I catch a sheep and it’s got a grey tag, I know that belongs to what we call Kenny Grey Face family, and the tag underneath tells me which sire it was. And it’s got its own individual ID number as well.’ When they first moved here, the sheep would have had lug marks, or cuts in their ears, but the tagging means they no longer do this.

Looking back, Harry comments that winters are not as harsh as they used to be. ‘Nowadays a lot of the younger farmers wouldn’t know how to cope. We always listen to the weather forecast in the winter, quite assiduously don’t we, for fear there might be a storm coming, because we need to know where the sheep are and where to put them if it’s going to come a lot of snow. When I first came here I went to talk to an old chap who’d farmed this place



in the 1940s, and we talked about winters and things like that. If somebody else comes, they'll probably not ask the question, and that is how knowledge gets lost.'

Mary and Harry have been talking about moving on from Uldale for a few years, setting up plans, and then deciding to see another cycle of seasons. It's hard to leave, and an optimistic spirit and a strong working partnership keeps them going. When I ask Harry what the best times are, he smiles and addresses Mary. 'Every day's a good day, isn't it? Best days? We got third prize for our ewes at Kirkby Stephen draft ewes sale, so that was quite good. Seven, eight thousand pounds for a tup, so that's a good day. But gathering the sheep on a good day, you know, clipping the sheep, looking at your stock, they're all good days, aren't they? Some of the most satisfying things, they're not things you really see. Sheep dogs are an integral part, they're our friends. Sometimes you go up on the common, you might have some sheep that are about three quarters of a mile away. You stand on a tussock of grass and you send your dog for the sheep, and he comes back with the sheep. It's pretty good is that.'

Mary makes a point that things aren't always good – a lambing time when forty lambs were taken by foxes, for instance, and Harry acknowledges that he can get very grumpy when things go wrong. But in general, he's optimistic, keeps a smile on his face and seems to be driven by curiosity. The last lambing time, Mary says, 'there were a lot of black grouse lecking. You used to stop and listen to them, didn't you, that was your highlight.' Harry smiles. 'We went round lambing sheep, stopped to listen to them, sneaked up to get a good view. It's all sorts, seeing a fox walking through the field and not taking your lambs. All sorts of things you like to see and do. Just being alive, and all the beauty.'

Harry pauses. 'Another thing – faith plays a lot of part in it in these places. These communities were held together a lot by the chapel, the church. The Methodist revival played a big part in these areas, and the Quaker movement – it shaped the way people thought and how they lived, and it still does in some places. I think every time a church disappears or a chapel is closed then something is taken away from that community. I've a faith that there's a God and to enjoy what God has made gives me pleasure, I enjoy it.'



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