VOICES FROM THE LAND

Chris Akrigg
Manor Farm, Cray, Wharfedale

At the north end of Wharfedale, waterfalls tumble with dramatic force down limestone drops, but only after rain – when the weather's dry, they shrink to a trickle. The limestone landscape here is dramatic, with far reaching views and rocky outcrops interrupting slopes of green. Manor House Farm, in Cray is set into these fells at a height of about 1000 feet, where it nestles among trees.

When we meet Chris, the rain is lashing down and the stream beside the house is raging. It's the end of July and we seem to have left the summer's warmth in the valley behind us. 'It can be misty and pouring down here, but down in Skipton it can be fine. We have sheep wintering on a farm that's only seven miles away, and in the winter it's just a different world here. The weather is our main challenge.'

The land that goes with Manor House Farm extends higher up the fell where the weather can be yet more inclement, but it brings with it superb views and grazing that suits the sheep – around 900 Swaledale ewes and a 'handful' of Texdales or Swaledales crossed with a Texel tup. 'We have a bit of land in Buckden, but most of the land goes up from here. Buckden Pike, which is the highest part round here, is about 2,300 feet.'

Chris came to Manor Farm 32 years ago with his wife Gwyneth, who works as a nurse. It is an improvement on the farm he left, Cockley Beck in the Lake District, which was his first farm. A son and grandson of farmers, Chris had gone to university but his heart was set on farming. He worked on his own, fencing and shearing, until he was finally successful with a tenancy application. At Cockley Beck, he kept mostly Herdwick sheep. 'Even though this is the last farm in the dale, as Cockley Beck was, it is a much kinder area.' With this last month having rain most days, I wonder if they have managed to cut grass and make hay. 'We haven't so much of that, you know high up in the dale. The sheep get the first cut, if you will, and the grass takes a lot longer to come up here. Nothing really comes until well into May. The singles never come anywhere near the meadows, it's only the twins. Consequently, we're never early with the crop but it is getting towards the time we ought to try and get it off.'

Chris farms with his sons: Thomas and William, and John, who also works as a land agent. Manor House Farm is rented from the National Trust but it is not the only land that the Akriggs farm. 'We have another farm over the top at the head of Bishopdale. It's called Kidstones farm. We bought that in various stages, starting in the late 90s. That's where our cattle enterprise is, as we haven't many modern buildings here. We have another farm as well, Bishopdale Head, that we rent off a shooting estate. We look after the inside ground and then we have the moor in summer as and when the shooting syndicate feel it needs grazing. It's adjacent to Kidstones, so our three farms all join up.' In total, the land that the Akriggs work encompasses almost 2000 acres, including the grazing on the moor.

'Our livestock's our main interest,' says Chris, 'and the Swaledale sheep are our passion. The boys have had some success with selling the tups, and we have a reasonable following for our breeding stock.' They also have about fifty suckler cows, plus calves, mostly British Blue Limousin cross. John has pedigree British Blues and Tom endeavours to breed a few show potential calves. Tom, who is sitting with us at the kitchen table, says he shows less than he used to: 'We have reduced cattle numbers because there's not such good financial return on these higher hill farms. We try and make it as easy to manage as possible really, just go for easy-calving breeds.' I ask if this means he's favouring the native breeds. 'To be honest, we haven't gone down that route yet. But if Higher Level Stewardship is to encourage us to do that, we might consider it.'

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The farm's current agri-environment stewardship scheme has been running for several years and is due to end in 2018. There's uncertainty about what might happen next, with Brexit approaching. In the past, the Akriggs have been part of a research group looking at 'Higher Nature Value Farming'. As part of this, Tom and John went to Devon to find out about a scheme there. 'I thought it was quite interesting that the actual people managing the land had more of an input into how the schemes were structured,' says Tom, 'and how the land was managed. I think it takes into account how the land's been managed in the past to deliver what's already there, which can only be a good thing.' In the past, schemes have not always worked, says Tom. 'In some cases, Natural England have set prescriptions which have been designated for a wide area to try and improve habitats; the habitat was already good and then they applied prescriptions and there's not necessarily an improvement – sometimes it's a backward step.'

Chris sits back and gives an example. 'There was one piece of ground where we used to have lots of waders. We went into a scheme which was to enhance wading birds and curlews in particular, but when the grazing regime was cut down, the curlews virtually abandoned it. It got so *lowky*.' Once the scheme ended, Chris began to graze the area more heavily again, as he used to do ('to what we thought was right'), and the curlews came back. 'Now there's rough bits, and there's marsh, the other bits kept beautifully down. That's what they like: they like to have open ground to feed on and look for predators, and then shoot back into the grass – it's perfect for waders. The best place we have is one that we keep out of any schemes. It's a place where we gather to, where we mother out of, and we calve cows there. So it's well grazed but it's not over-grazed, and that is the highest population of waders.'

It's very obvious that Chris and his family love the birds that are on the farm. 'That's our speciality in the conservation line: ground nesting birds, waders. Every day you hear that lapwings and wading birds are going down, but we have loads of them. The lapwings always seem to come to early, before lambing time, and it always snows after they come back. I don't know where they go when it snows, but they land back a week or two later. And we have redshank in certain areas.' Chris thinks that bird numbers are rising, but is still unsure if his observations count. 'The trouble is, when you try to tell people that sort of thing, they think you're trying to pull the wool over their eyes. They think you're trying to have the grazing *and* the payment for the bird.' As schemes change, though, Chris believes there may be more attention paid to what farmers say about the land they know. 'I think that's being recognised and that's why pilot schemes and groups have started, towards payment by results. Whether it will continue now - who knows what is going to happen with Brexit?'

Cray Moss, above the farmhouse, is one of several botanically rich areas under the Akrigg's care, and is internationally recognised for the quality of its flora. Trees are also part of the landscape. 'We like trees and we try to utilise them for shelter. If we're going to put a fence up, we try to incorporate some tree planting. In our new scheme which Tom is organising we've got quite a bit of hedges between pastures and meadows, so trees are quite important.' Even so, boundaries held by hedges and trees are in the minority: across the three farms, the Akriggs have to look after about 26 miles of drystone walls.

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These walls may have stood for as long as a hundred years, during which time much has changed. The biggest change is the quad bike. 'I don't know how on earth we managed without it in the old days. At lambing time, you'd spot something and it might be afternoon before you got back to it. And by the time you'd got near with the tractor and the box – depending on the weather, you might be able to get near if it was dry, well if it wasn't, you'd have to walk it down and it could take an hour. Of course, I'd've never got round the rest of them, just had a skimpy quick round. Whereas nowadays, stock does get more attention because of the bikes – you can be there in five minutes. The only thing is, the dogs are worse now. You needed much better dogs in the old days, that's a fact.'

Making big bale silage has also been a positive change. 'In the old days if you weren't making big bales, you got it if you were lucky with good weather, or sometimes you didn't get it, which was an absolute disaster. Baling has revolutionised that.' But of course, there's plenty of work on a farm that you can't automate. 'You're not going to get some virtual farmer – somebody's got to get the wool off the sheep. There's plenty of that kind of work. Though the work that you can mechanise or make easy – hydraulic rather than handraulic – you want to be doing it.'

The Akriggs are always busy with a project, Chris tells me, typically to do with improving infrastructure. After we have chatted in the house, we take the car up and over the brow of the hill to Kidstones where the sheep have been in a huge shed for shearing. This is where the family can store tractors and equipment, and gather livestock when they need to. Chris shows

me a machine for weighing sheep accurately, and a new dip they have had built – two automated additions that will certainly cut down on the time that routine tasks take, and make their lives easier.

Another thing that has changed is the increase in the number of twin lambs that are born. 'People feed the sheep better than they used to but also with the schemes, because we've got restricted grazing at certain times of the year, whole areas can be grazed later on. They tend to get really fit, once you've weaned the lambs, so by tup time they're in ideal condition to conceive more lambs. Once that's started you tend to be breeding off sheep that have had twins, so it becomes genetic as well as management-driven.'

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It has now become common practice to scan the ewes and identify which are carrying twins. 'We embraced that the first year we came here. The singles don't need to come onto the better ground, and we can leave that to the twins. You can plan for it, and feed them better. It is a great tool and it's not expensive.'

When it's time for the lambs to be born, the work load is at its maximum and things can become quite intense. Chris's favourite time of year is when lambing is over. 'We can move onto other jobs. Everything's coming green, the trees are coming out. It's been all livestock until then, every hour of the day, there's always something going wrong – and then when you get to June, you can just take a breather.' In contrast, his least favourite time of year is during winter. 'I don't like it when it goes dark at four o' clock, I think there's a psychological effect. And just before lambing, that's often when you get a bit of trouble. It's often wet. I think those are the worst periods.'

These cycles come year after year, and Chris has a lifetime's experience. What does he think, though, about the future, and how farming may look for his sons and grandchildren? 'Well I know that farms have had to get bigger – we have three farms now in this family. But that's not necessarily a good thing. Before, it was like five families living off these farms. That makes a community. So it's a great shame that the number of people has been cut down. And also it's such a difficult job managing when you get bigger: the maintenance of the walls and that sort of thing. But, it's just a fact that you have to have it to make a living. It's like that in a lot of businesses, I guess – you've got to get bigger or get out. But there's got to be a limit to that, because you can only manage so much livestock at the end of the day.'

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With more and more farms becoming amalgamated, it seems that in time there will be fewer farms, and fewer farmers. 'Yes, but that's always been the case,' says Chris. 'It's also been difficult to get into it. Long hours, hard work, and lots of farmers' sons don't want to do it. The thing is, not just in the Dales but across the country, once they changed the payments to a land-based payment, you no longer had to be an active producer to get the money. We got invited to a few stakeholder groups to discuss the new proposals and we were all dead against it being put on the land, because we wanted it to be kept with an active farmer. Once they changed it, you knew where it was going: you get an older retired guy who before had to give over or employ somebody, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to draw the money. But now he can keep the payments, and sit where he is.'

Chris thinks there's some way to go before the payment schemes become effective, sustainable and fair. 'When they say 'subsidise agriculture' I always say that it's the food-eating public that are being subsidised. It just comes through farmers to do it: we're price takers rather than price makers. You do need the support to sell the food at that price. For every action there is a reaction, and it needs a bit more long-term thinking.'

'One thing I do feel strongly about is that farmers always seem to be getting the blame. Take over-grazing for example, or putting grips in the moorlands in the past. What you've got to remember is that they were all government schemes that caused those: a person from the ministry came along, asked you if you were interested in doing this for a payment, and of course you did it, and you got paid. An *expert* came along and told you where to put them. We didn't realise they were going to gouge out and go ten-foot deep, spoil the countryside. Same with the over-grazing. They put the headage payment on the sheep – so what did people do? They kept more sheep. The farmers have only ever reacted. The schemes weren't well enough thought through.'

I ask Chris, if someone were to ask why it is good to have farmers in the dales, what he might say. He smiles. 'I'd just say, well, let it speak for itself. It was recognised all those years ago - I think it was one of the first national parks - recognised as iconic because of what it is: the flower meadows, the stone walls, the pastures, the heather moors. It has been moulded and made by farmers, and you need farmers to maintain it. That would be my attitude to it.'

'It's a great part of the world to be farming in,' he continues. 'Of course, I'm like everybody else, I'd love the winters to be two months shorter and the summers to be two months longer, but it's not going to happen!' When Chris goes out of the valley, he's always happy to come back to Cray. 'I'm always so grateful to turn back up the dale, to get as far as Kilnsey, to be home again, out of it all. Just because you don't wax lyrical and write poetry about it, people don't think that you appreciate living in these places, but you do.'

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