VOICES FROM THE LAND

Stuart Hird
Yockenthwaite, Langstrothdale

Yockenthwaite farmhouse overlooks the River Wharfe as it winds its way through Langstrothdale. Built in the 1600s, originally as part of the hunting estate Langstrothdale Chase, it is rather grand looking, and, from the outside at least, has changed little over the centuries. Stuart's family have been farming here since 1842, which makes him the fifth generation to farm here. The family rents the farm from the National Trust on a generational tenancy. 'We look after it as though it was our own - that's the advantage of a long tenancy.'

Around the farm, inbye land is walled in by dry stone walls. This accounts for roughly 400 acres of grazing, and with rights to graze on two commons, Raisgill Hagg and Yockenthwaite Moor, the total grazing land is over 2000 acres. Stuart runs a flock of around 1000 breeding ewes (Dalesbred and Swaledale) and a small number of cattle, which are kept more as a management tool for the land than for any financial return.

Like many farms in the Dales, Yockenthwaite has public footpaths running through its land. The Dales Way passes in front of the house and across the small bridge that arches over the river, linking the farm with the road. Stuart's wife Liz organises a refreshment stop for walkers, with help-yourself hot drinks and home-made flapjacks in a traditional stone barn. Liz is a farmer's daughter, and might have been hands on at the farm if it wasn't for the success of the family's granola business.

'It grew out of us doing bed and breakfast,' says Stuart. 'Bed and Breakfast was an obvious one for us, because of the locality, but after foot and mouth[1] Bed & Breakfast wasn't quite as good because people had got used to not coming. It is still an important part of the Dales economy, but we felt that it was too seasonal, and what you were making in the summer

[1] 2001

you were having to put back into your house to get it ready for the next year. The granola is all year round and easier to manage.' This side of the business has grown massively in the and production has moved from the farm to premises in Skipton: Yockenthwaite Granolas are sold nationwide, and online sales have been doubling every three months over the last year.

Stuart and Liz have two sons who are involved in both sides of the family business. 'Edward's the farmer. David, works more on the granola side.' So Stuart finds himself working on the farm alongside Edward, and for most of the year it is just the two of them. 'And then for lambing time and on weekends there's Edward's fiancée. If we need more hands, there's my wife and David. David turns up for hay time and that sort of thing, and Liz helps at lambing time and any other times that she can. But we try to keep staffing to a minimum. We do all our own shearing. We do occasionally get contractors in if we need any: if we're a bit behind with walling, and fencing and silaging.'

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In managing the farm, Stuart signs up to an agri-environment scheme, as most farmers do. 'The schemes are quite an important part of our business: a system that encourages us to farm in what some would call more old-fashioned ways or traditional ways, without having to intensify, and consequently maintain the landscape and environment that people enjoy visiting.'

The schemes, with the details determined by each individual farmer in negotiation with Natural England, involve agreements about many aspects of farming, including stocking levels of sheep and cows, preservation of meadow land with restrictions on cutting dates, tree planting, and upkeep of walls. Stuart has also joined a pilot project with the National Park and the National Trust where payments are based on outcomes; the project follows on from a project known as Higher Nature Value farming.

Stuart explains his approach to the schemes. 'We've taken advantage of the schemes and we have been able to reduce the stock intensity on the farm. What we get from the livestock isn't a patch on what we get from the agri-environment schemes. But this is the way that we're being asked to go. I mean they talk about public good: politicians have to justify where money's spent, and how it's spent. And the perception is that the agri-environment route is the way forward, especially for areas like this. We could go down a more intensive production route but whether you would have a landscape that would meet with everybody's approval - well it doesn't meet with everybody's approval as it is now.' Stuart refers to a 'resistance' from townspeople, many of whom, he thinks, have little idea of the role of farming in looking after the landscape. 'When they come out walking they want to see these sort of areas and landscape preserved as they are. But you can't afford to turn them into museums – the easiest way of conserving anything is to keep it in use.'

Stuart talks about the pressure for farmers to respond to the desires of others, and the predicament this leaves them in. 'It's one of my bug bears, the fact that farmers are blamed for a lot of the damage that's been done in the environment, in the countryside, allegedly.

The truth of the matter is since the Second World War up until the mid '80s, we were paid to produce more and more food. Farmers delivered it. Intensive agriculture allowed cheap food production, but cheap food doesn't benefit farmers. I went to Newton Rigg College when I was seventeen. They had a 12-acre field there that produced as much lamb as I do now on about 2500 acres. The fertiliser usage was horrendous. It wasn't nice to see, but those lambs were about half price what our lambs were. It all comes down to price at the end of the day.'

Practices have changed since then, and one aim of stewardship schemes is to reduce the amount of land that is 'improved' with fertiliser, with the money paid under the schemes intended to make up for the loss of income arising from lower sheep production. But the schemes themselves, both in content and in their continuation, are uncertain with the impact on hill farming from the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Stuart considers what might happen. 'I think that the basic payment scheme will be severely curtailed. I think that the men in the lowlands will be allowed to farm as they want and the public will have to lump it, even if they don't like what they're doing. If there's no public money going into it, then there's nothing they can really do to influence it. Areas like this, I think there will be support of one form or another. There are areas of outstanding beauty which will attract an awful lot of money, and then there'll be other bits that won't, that perhaps we'll be able to intensify a little bit. But we're not going to intensify that much – it just isn't viable. And what happens with Brexit, well, yes, I think to be honest it'll be a monumental fudge.'

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There may be some positives, though, Stuart thinks. 'When the pound was at the level that it was, it was easier for us to import food from outside Europe. Now anything that we import is going to be more and more expensive. So that, to my way of thinking, means there is an opportunity for British agriculture. Provided we pull our fingers out, and do it right, I think we've a good opportunity. It's interesting times. But, I think farmers will rise to the challenge.'

The challenge of meeting the changes that come with Brexit is one of the most talked-about issues at the moment, but adapting to change is not new: farmers have been doing this for centuries. Economic pressures shift, policies alter, and trends in public opinions rise and fall. Stuart refers to those who advocate the removal of livestock as part of what is popularly called rewilding. 'I may be wrong,' he says, 'but I don't think the National Parks would really be in favour of re-wilding. They're wanting what's been maintained over the land for the last 50, 60 years, or however long they've been. You get some people who think that we don't really need the stone walls – they say, can we consign them to history like the coal mines were?' Stuart is unhappy with the imposition of ideas and policies developed elsewhere. 'We haven't time to keep battling everybody that's got an idea from London, or from down south or whatever it is, that thinks it'd be nice if this happened in the Yorkshire Dales. That's what I as a farmer resent. It's a

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different world when you go over the top.' Stuart gestures to the land around him. 'It can be sunshine there, and it can be raining once you get round that corner or past that bridge at the bottom of Kidstones. Policies need to be designed by people that are familiar with the area, not people from a long way away.' Schemes that pay by results actually involve farmers in reporting on and monitoring their own land. 'Hopefully the environmental bodies are starting to come round to that way of thinking.'

And in the Yorkshire Dales, where the landscape is celebrated for its appearance, the dry stone walls and traditional barns are an important element. Yockenthwaite Farm has a new, large barn, which is better for livestock and for storage, but also has fourteen traditional barns. 'We use most of them for storing hay, and some we use for livestock,' says Stuart. Although they're in use, they are in need of adaptation to make them more practical and accessible with new machinery and larger tractors. 'They could all do with a big double door in the end of them so we can actually get in and out, to clean them out. We don't mind carrying stuff in but it's shovelling stuff out that we don't really like.'

One of Stuart's perpetual challenges is the weather. 'I've been fuming for the last three or four days because the weather forecast was inaccurate. We could have probably got a bit of hay if we'd have known it was going to be as sunny as this, but it was forecasting rain. You can't rely on them, not unless it's forecast to be a heat wave or wall-to-wall sunshine for a month, that's fine. But it is very, very frustrating because, if we're going to have ten days of sunshine, we could all get hay time done, you're not worrying about it.' In reality, often it is the weather itself, as well as the computer-driven forecasts, that is unpredictable and unfavourable. 'Hay time's one of those things. It's not like lambing time. When lambing time

starts, it carries on because the sheep are going to lamb whenever they're ready. There's no stopping them. Whereas with hay time, if it's going to be wet, you have to stop, it's as simple as that. It can last a week, it can last 3 months.'

When the weather is favourable for hay, or for making silage, collection and baling are simpler now with upgraded tractors and technology. Stuart recalls the challenge of working with old baling machines and having to add the wrap, a task needing two men. Now it can be done with one machine and one man. 'There was a lot of faffing about in those days. But not too long before that they were doing everything with horses. Technology's moving on all the time.' How about the internet? Has this changed anything? 'My wife uses social media for promoting the granola side of the business. We do internet banking, and we use the internet to try and forecast the weather, but that's a mug's game!' Stuart is seldom on the computer though – it's something his sons are much more comfortable with. Edward uses it when pedigree flock catalogues are printed. 'He can look at a pedigree flock catalogue anywhere in the country. So, in that respect, you can decide whether it's worth going to a sale or not: just little bits like that save you a day.'

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It is perhaps unavoidable as a farmer, the need to make the most of the time available and to keep on top of a never-ending list of tasks. 'When I was Edward's age,' says Stuart, 'I wouldn't have sat down and done this with you, I just wouldn't have had time to do it. You're always under pressure. As I've got older and he's there, I know I can do this, and we're not going to lose out too much. One of the problems with farming is that it's usually done by individuals, and if anybody asks them a question, they nearly always ask it at a difficult time, so you can come across as being short and unpleasant. But, having said that, we live in a world where people feel a need to be informed, and we as farmers have to do more of that.' During the interview several walkers come into the barn, help themselves to a drink, and stop to chat, so it seems that Stuart certainly is doing his part and giving an idea of the commitment and passion that underpin what he does.

'All I ever wanted to do was farm,' he says. Stuart says he doesn't do the soppy side of things, doesn't get emotional, but nevertheless shares something of his enjoyment. 'At this time of year, if I know the sun's out and I'm going to get my field of hay gathered up, that can put a smile on my face. But I don't particularly care for summer, it can be a stressful time because of the weather. But when it gets to about five o'clock or half past five at night, I like nothing better than to set off and go walling for a couple of hours, and just have a think about the day and what perhaps I'd like to get done the following day. And then I go walling again the following night wondering why I didn't get it done!' But out there, walling, despite chores that go undone, is Stuart happy being here? 'Yeah, I am. Yeah, I can't think of anywhere else I'd like to be.'

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