VOICES FROM THE LAND

Sarah Hoggarth
Birkhaw, Howgills

Birkhaw sits against the western flanks of the Howgills, with the Tebay valley spread out below it, and the Kendal Fells opposite. The buildings are hundreds of years old and Sarah's family have been farming here for one hundred and sixty years. Her mother and father, Judith and Frank Capstick, live in the farmhouse here but have given over most of the farm work now to Sarah. Sarah lives in Sedbergh with her husband, Paul, who is a builder. She works on the farm every day, with help from Paul on evenings and weekends.

It's the school holidays when we visit, so Sarah's two daughters are with her: Fiona, who's nine, and Laura, seven. They are involved in the farm work, and they're keen. 'My dad and uncle farmed together, and they showed their sheep for years,' Sarah tells us. 'Foot and mouth year, they stopped. Now my two kids have taken over. They have their small flock and have been out showing them for the last three or four years.' Even Laura, the younger girl, has the ability to recognise and remember individual sheep in the flock. 'She kens them,' says Sarah.

Born and raised at Birkhaw, Sarah has always been hands on. She has around 200 Rough Fell ewes and 100 hoggs[i]. Sarah likes her pure breed rough fells but each year puts about twenty to the Blue Faced Leicester ram to breed mules. The sheep have eighty acres of inside land to graze on but for much of the year spend their time on the common land behind the farm, which spreads over the rolling backs of the Howgills, rising to the Calf, a summit of 2220 feet. There are twenty-eight active graziers on this vast expanse of land, so sheep from the Howgills, Tebay, Borrowdale and Ravenstonedale all roam up here.

With so many flocks grazing these fells, the traditional and cooperative way of managing sheep is just as important now as it was in previous generations. Each flock is hefted, which means that it knows a certain area of fell, and will stick to it; each lamb learns from its mother. When it's time to gather the flocks in, neighbouring farmers often work together.

Sarah's dad, Frank Capstick, loves gathering the sheep in from the fells: 'Neighbour's sheep, they'll branch off, they'll just separate themselves to go to where their own piece is. It's amazing to see it happening, four or five different flocks and they'll split off themselves.' Sarah describes the finer detail: 'You drop down into Matthew's pens and there the track forks, and as long as you give them enough time, his will walk up to the right, ours'll carry on. They know where they should be. And we feed up there in winter, in sight of another three people feeding, and you can go and they're in four different flocks – they don't mix. It's pretty amazing what they know.'

With such a mixture of flocks on any gather it's almost certain that one farmer may bring in a few of another farmer's sheep. Identification is important and the old methods persist: wool marks, lug marks and a horn burn. The lugs or ears are cut when the sheep are two or three weeks old. 'Our ear mark is cropped on the near ear and a heart hole punch in the middle of the near ear. The horn burn is JC – I suppose that goes back to Joseph Capstick.'

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Until very recently regular shepherds' meets were held for people to bring and reclaim stragglers. Birkhaw was one of the meeting points. 'On the first Tuesday of July, that would be the sheep meeting in this area. Tebay would have theirs a few days later or earlier, so all the Tebay sheep would be there. And then Ravenstonedale.' The meets stopped just a few years ago. 'I think farming methods have changed slightly and not many people in this area by the first of July had clipped,' says Sarah. 'Going back there would be clipping days when they all went round farm to farm. They'd all have their set day and then the sheep meeting would be on the first Tuesday in July. I think because people got later and later getting contractors in, things have slipped by the wayside.'

The day before we met at the farm, I had spoken to Sarah on her mobile phone while she was up on the fells, gathering sheep, in the driving rain, helping a neighbour, Robert Thexton, who has sheep on Winder[ii]. They had set off in clear weather, and the rain took them by surprise. 'Everything disappeared, the mist just came in! We'd taken Joanne, Julie's daughter, and Tony, her boyfriend, with us. Tony's very experienced – thankfully –and I'd sent him up above me, Joanne in the bottom. Said, yeah, you'll be fine, we'll walk into this basin, everybody will push in and we'll just come down with 'em. He went onto the top, then he disappeared out of sight because the mist came down, and I was like: will we ever see him again! I had good walking boots on which are usually waterproof and I was tipping water out of them.'

The last few weeks have been very wet, which can cause a problem when it comes to cutting grass and making hay. Both Sarah and her father believe the summers have been getting wetter. 'The trend at the moment seems to be there's a hot spell early on in June, and a wet summer, and then maybe a slightly better September, October,' says Sarah. 'Winters aren't as bad I think, nowhere near. We don't get the snow that we used to get.

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Sarah takes cows in for grazing in the summer months but no longer keeps her own. Sarah remembers her and her sisters drinking fresh milk when they were girls but the family stopped milking about fifteen years ago. The byre that today has some rough fell tups sheltering in it has room for 36 cows each side. 'That was where they lived, for the winter. They were fed hay and cake, in front of them, a water bowl in front of them. The vet used to come and look round the byre and he loved it – they were so happy: warm byre and everything, and because they were tied by the neck there was no bullying, no bad feet. They were happy and I suppose it was the way you'd always done it, wasn't it? They were a bit skitty when you first let them out in summer, found their legs again.'

When regulations changed, requiring cows to be untied, and with too few female calves being born, Sarah's father and uncle who were in charge at the time decided to stop. 'Well, it would have meant new buildings, and Dad and Edmund were getting near to the end of their farming life, rather than the beginning.' Now it's the sheep that take up the majority of the time, alongside maintenance of the farm, and at this time of year there are more than three hundred to shear. Sarah loves this job, and prefers to clip by hand.' I've done some this time with the old fashioned clipping shears, and there's new scissor action ones. Our hoggs have a very hard rise because it's the first clip, and because they're out on the fell, I clip them with a proper pair of shears, and that really does hurt your hand. But these new ones, they seem sharper or easier, and I did most of the fell yows with them.'

If they're working together, Sarah and Frank manage to clip between 60 and 70 a day. 'You're catching, wrapping, everything. It's not a speed thing. We dip at clipping time as well, so you have to mark, clip, dose. For some of them we have pens in the fields. If you're clipping by hand, you can literally go with the bike and a trailer, and a carpet or board, and do them where they are.'

Clipping is not an easy job, and it's certainly very physical. 'Head up to your chin sometimes, the bigger yows when you turn them over. It's quite a long way round them.' I wonder if being a woman holds any particular challenges, or if there is any different attitude to women. Sarah doesn't sense any difference, and although some of the heavier work is easier for men, her dad tells me she's good with tractor work and he'll ask her to do the baling, rather than do it himself. 'I think I can pretty much do anything that I have to do,' she says, smiling. 'And at auction and things, no you're not treated any different. You tend to pick up the secretary jobs, and I trained as a secretary so I suppose I'm suited to that. I'm secretary for Brantfell Commoners, Frotstrow Commoners, and I also do Rydal Sheep Dog Trials and Hound Show, Ambleside.'

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At present, the common is not in an agri-environment scheme. 'We did have a meeting but it didn't work. Some people really wanted to go in it. Some people didn't want to go in it. And then Natural England didn't have anything to offer us at the time, so it was left in the balance really. It keeps rumbling that there is going to be something else but at the moment we don't know what's happening.' Agri-environment schemes, among other things, can make stipulations about hay cutting times or the upkeep of walls. On Birkhaw, there are few wire fences – the boundaries are all dry stone walls or hedges. Frank is proud of the hedges and he and Sarah both get a lot of satisfaction out of caring for them. 'The hedgerows are something we pride ourselves in. Wife used to work at Weasdale nurseries, so we've been planting thorns for years and years.' Once a hedge is established, cutting and laying it is an important maintenance task, and Sarah loves this. 'Two years ago, Mother's day, my husband and kids got me an axe.' She laughs, 'So, yeah, that was my mothers' day present. Practical. An axe, proper axe. it's just satisfying when you look back at what you've done.'

Walling is another ongoing but satisfying job. 'A sheep will find a wall gap and jump it. So once it's jumped a wall gap, it'll look at a wall differently – you're encouraging bad behaviour in your sheep. Once they find that bounce, they're away, you won't stop them.' Any wall gap, then, needs to be mended quickly. 'When you take the wall gap out, you think, *pfff*, where we're going to start with this? And then you get about half way up, and then you look back at it, and then you've done it. Pretty satisfying. As a kid, you put the fillings in, and then progress on. Now, these two help put the fillings in, fill a box ready for you, it's just part of it really.'

It's not just a case of stacking stones on top of one another: walling is a skilled job needing careful thought, patience, and knowledge. 'Foundations are your main – putting good foundations in. And then building up. You put a stone on, put your row of stones on, put in fillings, keep the middle full so you've got a base to keep going on. And then about a foot and a half you put a row of throughs in, which is a large stone which crosses both sides. Up another couple of foot, throughs again, then a bit on the top and you put your top stones on, which hold it all together I suppose.'

While gathering may not have changed much, one thing that has changed recently is the increased use of social media. 'I'm quite active in the Rough Fell Sheep Breeders

Association,' says Sarah, 'trying to promote the Rough. That's why I set up a Birkhaw Rough twitter page to try and promote the breed. Somebody's set up a rough fell twitter page and she's very good – does a lot of promotion on that side.'

Gaining new members and promoting the breed is a constant task, Sarah tells me, and I wonder why she would recommend Rough Fells above a Swaledale. Frank says, 'The mule out of a rough has more weight and body, the wool's a bit better.' Sarah adds, 'At the end of the day, a Rough Fell wether[iii] lamb will be making as much as a Swaledale wether lamb. That's your bread and butter.' Making ends meet in farming is a challenge 'When you look at this valley,' says Frank, 'these were once just small farms, dependent on the land. It's all diversification now. There's none now that are self-sufficient on the farm.' For Sarah, Paul's income is a crucial part of the family's income, and the combination works well for them. Her enthusiasm for farming is infectious. Her two young daughters seem equally keen, and with their recent successes at the shows, and the attention to breeding that comes from that, it seems they may follow in her footsteps.

'We've just put our sheep to the fell for a few weeks to get the gimmer[iv] lambs hefted, so we've sorted all them out. Last week there's been a lot of driving away and taking them back, and taking them to where they should be. You get there, you look around, you know your dogs've done well, it gives you a buzz. Yeah, it's good. It's what you do and when it goes right, it's good. I don't know, I just love it. It's hard but it's satisfying. To breed a good sheep and work with the dogs – that's my passion in life.'

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[i] A hogg is a sheep that's still in its first year, not yet ready for breeding, and hasn't been sheared. After the first shear, the sheep is known as a shearling.
[ii] Winder is one of the fells in the Howgills, 'to the right' as Sarah says.
[iii] A wether lamb is a castrated male lamb.
[iv] A female lamb is called a gimmer.