The History of the Swaledale Sheep Breed

Introduction

The Swaledale sheep breed has become well known for being a bold, hardy hill sheep capable of grazing and enduring the hardships of wild fells and bleak Pennine moorland up to over two thousand feet above sea level and has deservedly earned its right to be the emblem of the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

These sheep are heughed, or hefted, to the moorland on which they graze, meaning they will seldom roam far even though there no walls or fences to stop them, and this instinctive knowledge is passed down from ewe to lamb, Hefts are defined areas of unfenced moorland that each farm has access rights to, and were probably introduced by Cistercian monks who transformed huge areas of open fell land into sheep pastures. Susan Haywood suggests in her excellent book 'The Hefted Farmer' that it was probably between 1300 – 1800 AD that this farming practice eroded the woodland of the dale and changed the landscape to what it is today. The woodlands of the dales were also depleted by the constant demand for fuel for the many smelt mills of the lead mines on both side of the valley. Tenant farmers 'inherit' a number of heughed sheep that belong to a particular farm, this flock is then managed and bred by him and when he gives up the tenancy he must ensure he leaves the same number of sheep for the next tenant farmer to take up and manage – often the tenancy stays within the same family for generations. Tenant farmers, and farmers who own their farms outright, recognise that they are the custodians of these sheep and the land they graze on; it is in their blood to care for, preserve and improve these pedigree stock lines and they consider it a privilege and honour to achieve this within their lifetimes.

The Swaledale can now be found in both the hills and lowlands of Britain, producing both pure bred and the popular North of England Mule - when a Swaledale ewe is crossed with a Blue Faced Leicester. The Swaledale is a tough and intelligent sheep and is the most prolific hill breed, the ewes are excellent mothers and in trials have proven to carry the highest weight of lamb per weight of ewe.

History

The breed's origin almost certainly emerged from the indigenous genetic group of horned sheep from which also came the Blackface, the Rough Fell, and other localised types. Slowly over time a 'Swaledale' breed type emerged from within these horned sheep.

Just after the First World War in 1919, a group of farmers living within a 7 mile radius of Tan Hill, held their first meeting to form a breed society and the Swaledale Sheep Breeder's Association was formed.

On 10th May 1920 there was a joint meeting of members from both the Swaledale Sheep Breeders Association and the Black-faced Dales-bred Sheep Society, it was decided the two bodies should be merged to form the 'Swaledale Dales-Bred Sheep-Breeders Association' with Kirkby Stephen being recognised as the centre of the district covered. Within the agreed area three 'sub districts' were formed with each having its own committee elected within its area. The districts were A (Barnard Castle) B (Swaledale) and C (Kirkby Stephen). It was not until 1923 that the 'dales bred' was dropped so the official name of the breed from this date on was then simply Swaledale.

The mark of the Association consisted of a Crown and all registered tups had their horns branded with this crown, along with the district number whereas ewes only had the Crown branded onto their horns.

The original first 1920 Flock Book stated three Association objectives:

1. The encouragement of the breeding of Swaledale Dales-bred sheep and the maintenance of their purity.

2. The establishment of a flock book of recognised and pure-bred sires and the annual registration of the pedigrees (which had to be to the satisfaction of the General Committee)

3. The investigation of cases of doubtful and suspected pedigrees and the general protection of the interests of the breed.

Members had to be bona-fide Swaledale sheep breeders, pay an annual fee of £1 1s, be able to attend the annual meeting and allow an annual inspection of their sheep in order to qualify for entry in each year's flock book.

At a General Meeting in Barnard Castle on 23rd June 1920 a resolution was passed that all sheep had to be of 25 years Swaledale crossing to be eligible for registration, so indicating that the breed was therefore much older than the actual Association itself.

Specifications of the type of sheep were also described in detail and a point system allocated to each characteristic; for example:

A good head could earn you 10 points and it stipulated *' face of medium length, strong in feature, with a tuft of wool on the forehead. Upper part of the face is dark complexioned, the lower part is grey, the eyes are quick and bright, a deep jaw and short broad teeth.*

Or a fleece 25 points *'White (except back of the head where it is mixed with part black), with a thick deep bed with a curly top, medium length, not coarse and which hangs down in shanks. The wool has a good bind and fills the hand well.*

In the Swaledale district it lists 54 members – all names that have been farming for generations and continue to do so today – Alderson, Calvert, Harker, Clarkson, Metcalfe, Peacock, Rukin, Thornborrow and Waggett, and there was a total membership across all three districts of 159. In these early years the sheep auction sales were held locally, in Mr Guy's paddock, next to Muker Show field and the 1926 catalogue of entries reveals some rather grand and fanciful names of the tups being presented, such as Hartlakes Beauty, Shunnerfell Rash Hero, Kisdon Pride, Swaledale Wild Boy, Stone House Star Boy, and Stonesdale Sergeant to name but a few!

Despite some initial issues in 1921 when it was reported the Association nearly collapsed, it then grew quickly, with membership increasing to 183 by this year, and established its position among the leading Sheep Breed Societies. As William Rees, Head Secretary, wrote in his report in the 1922 Flock book :' *Like the type of hardy sheep which it represents, the association now possesses well rounded ribs, a broad level back, firm loins, good sized feet, and walks well with a characteristic tail in the shape of a thick and woolly balance to its credit at the bank'.*

This was the year that an exceptional price of £55 was made on a shearling tup bred by my great, great uncle, George Clarkson of Pry House. By 1924 Swaledale was the first district to reach 100 members but there seems to have been some objections from farmers over the dates of their annual inspections as they were asked not to *'grouse about their allocated date and appreciate that there are many farmsteads to cover by the inspectors'*. Also in this year the President of the Association, Mr Dugdale donated 'The Swaledale Challenge Cup.' The winner could keep the cup for the year, but if an individual won the cup twice then the 1926 rules stated that '*he may claim it as his own property'* and so keep it for good. In later years this changed to 3 successive wins or 5 times in total, but it is now a perpetual challenge cup and so can no longer be owned outright.

By 1923 registered membership stood at 217 across the three districts.

In 1925 the princely sum of £100 was paid for a Swaledale tup, up to this point this figure would have seemed impossible but gives an indication of the growing reputation and value the Swaledale breed was building. The Annual General Meeting of all three districts was held in Muker, and it was reported that despite the 'somewhat isolated nature of it situation the Metropolis of Upper Swaledale was a decided draw'. There were various important agenda points to be covered and voted on and it seems this was not an easy or organised affair. As William Rees reported *' Counting the show of hands is always a difficult matter and when the arms of some members bob up and down with the precision and frequency of a drill Instructor demonstrating the mysteries of 'physical jerks' it becomes almost an impossibility.*' By 5pm it was reported that many members were 'possessed of a distinct restlessness which was attributed to the knowledge that a meat tea was being laid out in the nearby Institute' - however it is also recorded that the excellent quality of the said tea entirely justified the earlier restlessness!

It was also reported that the Association was in good health at that time and perhaps (to quote) '*it would be better to wait until it develops symptoms or disease or decay, before being too eager to change its diet or prescribe doses of medicine'.*

It is also evident that the Head Secretary, William Rees, had a fine dales sense of humour as he included in his annual report the following:

'Whilst in a congratulatory mood I feel that I cannot refrain from extending hearty congratulations to the member who, having failed to return his Lamb Marking Form, wrote a most 'polite note' explaining "Missus must have destroyed the form when spring cleaning" If he is so fortunate as to never have lost anything more valuable during that delightful annual mix-up, so dearly beloved by our women folk, he is indeed entitled to the envy of the great majority of us'

However there was not universal, or indeed national, appreciation for this new breed. There was a scathing review of the Swaledale breed by the Agricultural Representative of the Whitby Gazette. He likens the expansion of Swaledale sheep to '*Bolshevism, dishonesty, thieving, plundering, bigamy and perjury which are all also on the increase*'. He makes reference to the recent consignment of Swaledale tups sent up to the Perth tup sales, the scots did not take to the breed, probably seeing it as a direct threat and rival to their beloved native Scottish Black Face. He rants on, with some vitriol, about this free-roaming breed that respects no boundaries or fences and goes on to write: *'If they tire of the hill-top they will swarm down into the valleys, not particular whether they eat the roses at somebody's front door or sit down to*

rest in the middle of a cornfield. The present day idea the world over is for closer cultivation, intensive agriculture and the Swaledale sheep is a born enemy to anything of that kind'. Strong words indeed!

In 1928 it was sadly reported that two of the original Swaledale committee members and judges had passed away – Ernest Peacock and my great-grandfather, John Clarkson who was described as a 'breezy type, adept at the art of good natured leg-pulling and how the association would miss his cheery chaff and blithe banter.' Membership in 1928 stood at 356.

In 1929 the rivalry between the Swaledale and Scottish Black Face was the topic of a key debate that was held up in Alston. Despite the roads been 'choked with snow' over 400 members managed to get up there and attend which gives an indication as to the importance of the topic. It is also interesting to note that that year's flock book is nearly twice as thick as the initial 1920 book.

In these early days a lot of effort was put in to securing classes for the Swaledale breed at the local and larger Royal shows, and a lot of the Association's income was spent on prize money for these events. This no doubt helped promote and establish the Swaledale as a recognised prestigious and important breed.

After WW2 hill sheep breeders from the Isle of Man began to buy Swaledale tups at the annual sales. In 1948 breeders from the Outer Hebrides began buying tups from Kirkby Stephen and then other Scottish breeders began to realise the benefits of bringing Swaledale tups into their flocks and went on to also bring in Swaledale ewes.

In 1973 the Association donated 300 lambs to the Institute for Research for Animal Disease in Berkshire, the lambs played an important role in a project for the genetic control of scrapie, a terrible disease that affected sheep by destroying their brain structure and central nervous system for which there was no cure. The surviving sheep went on to produce a resistant flock which was used in commercial breeding and the development of an effective scrapie gene testing programme.

By 1998 there were 1356 members in the Swaledale Sheep Breeders Association and membership currently stands at 1120.

Sheep farming – a typical year

The sheep farming year never stops and is a repeating cycle of tupping and lambing time, shearing, spaining (separating the lambs from the ewes), dipping (that replaced salving) and at one time also washing but this does not happen now.

The sheep are still bred and reared in traditional farming ways that have been practised for generations. Many years ago a few farms might employ a shepherd to look after a number of flocks and he would stay up on the moors in a simple dwelling, little more than a stone roofed sheep fold. He would carry out the branding of the sheep's horns which has now been replaced with ear tags and farm and heugh marks on the fleece. These buildings are no longer needed today and are now just used to gather sheep like the smaller folds that are dotted all over the moorland, known as 'liggins' or 'liggin folds' , that provide the sheep with shelter from the harshest of weather. Older sheep can sense the bad weather up to a day before it presents and will make for these folds, with the younger animals following and so learning.

Every farm is different, and there are a huge variety of systems and schedules in use across the UK. Even in Swaledale sheep further down the dale will lamb earlier than those at the top of the dale, a mere 12 miles difference, where the weather can be more severe later into the spring. Winters can be brutal for both sheep and the farmer who has to turn out regardless of the weather to feed his stock. In years gone by a farmer had to ride out on a horse with hay, or walk up to his sheep. The old railway huts dotted around the moorland provided a convenient and essential way of storing hay up on the moor for these hard times. When the weather turns the sheep instinctively will seek shelter against dry stone walls or the overhang of peat hags, where any snow will drift due to the driving winds. Once under snow a sheep cannot free itself and some farmers have reported digging out live sheep after six weeks of being buried in snow drifts. They survive by eating every available bit of herbage around them and even their own wool in extreme circumstances. A good sheepdog that can 'set' or seek the sheep out under many feet of snow is priceless during these harshest of times.

Even if the winter and spring have been bad, Swaledale ewes will still try to mother their lambs when other hill breeds would simply leave them; due to this strong mothering instinct ewes and lambs can be turned back out onto the moors when the lambs are very young.

Farmers check the condition of their ewes in September to make sure they are ready for mating with the tup. Ewes that are too thin are less likely to conceive

lambs or raise them successfully. After scoring their ewes, farmers might split them into different groups based on their condition and graze each group on particular pasture to adjust their weight. This provides a valuable insight into just how complex sheep farming is and how highly skilled and knowledgeable farmers need to be.

In November new tups that have been bought to bring fresh blood into the flock are put out with the ewes for 'tupping'. Their chests are marked with a dye which transfers onto the back of any ewe so the farmer can keep track of which ewe a tup has serviced but also when she will lamb, as the colour can be changed regularly to indicate which week she fell pregnant.

Only the hardiest of grasses can grow on these exposed hills so the nutritional value is low, heather provides a good source of nutrition but is also beneficial to the grouse population that is so carefully managed by the local gamekeepers. The surrounding moorland of Swaledale contains some of the finest grouse shooting land in the country so it is a delicate balance between the needs of the sheep farmer and gamekeeper. Sheep grazing ensures the heather does not get too high or woody, which is beneficial to the young chicks who need the fresh new shoots in spring by which time the sheep are eating the new grasses and moss, which is more favourable to them than the heather.

Schemes were introduced to encourage farmers to remove and overwinter their younger sheep on lowland farms so allowing the heather to recover, but this can result in some areas being under-grazed and the requirement of large scale heather burning to encourage the new growth. Ultimately the moorland landscape would not be as it is without the constant grazing of the sheep and estate management of the gamekeepers.

Nowadays young females (gimmer hoggs) and ewes are sent away over winter to lower farmland to graze to help regenerate the heather, but in earlier times they were put into stone hogg houses and fed hay at night, then let out onto the fell during the day. Farms now have silage supplies to fall back on if the winter is bad but in years gone by if the summers were bad and hay stocks were low or poor, and then winters were bad a farmer could lose a lot of sheep as withstanding the rain, snow and wind takes a lot out of the animals. Back then there was no hay to buy and certainly no way of transporting it up the dale. It is now a common sight in the winter months to see sheep gathering by the roadside, at their feeding points, patiently waiting for the farmer to bring up the supplementary hay or silage, or even sugar beet from March.

Ewes carry their lambs for approximately 145 days. A contractor trained in scanning sheep will bring all the equipment to the farm and check each ewe

individually to see if they're carrying lambs and establish their due dates. Lowland farm will try to maximise their ewes producing twins, but hill farmers do not have the same objective as a ewe with two lambs cannot be put out for moorland grazing, as this will only provide her with enough energy to feed one lamb. Ewes with twins are grazed in the lower pastureland where the grass is richer. Equally a sheep having triplets also present problems as the ewe can only feed two lambs so one has to be taken off her.

In the run up to lambing, farmers increase the nutrient of the feed they are giving their ewes, often feeding more nuts or pellets (a concentrated high-nutrient feed) and less forage (hay). This is because the nutritional demands of the ewe rise rapidly prior to lambing, but the volume of food she can eat decreases as the lambs growing inside her push harder on the ewe's four stomachs so shrinking the amount of space she has available for digestion.

Ewes can be lambed indoors or outdoors, depending on their breed and how they are being managed. Traditionally, the hardier hill and upland breeds were more likely to be lambed outdoors, as they are better adapted to face the elements. Now more farms have lambing sheds and the sheep are brought indoors to lamb. One reason for this is that the mothering instinct in Swaledale's is so strong that some sheep actually think they have lambed when in fact they haven't and will try to steal another sheep's lamb. This could affect the pedigree blood lines so a close watch has to be maintained and any 'abducted babies' returned to their rightful mother.

Spring comes late to Swaledale and so April and May are peak lambing times.

Lambing is a very busy time for farmers, literally 24 hours a day. Ewes don't stop lambing when the sun goes down, so somebody needs to be on hand to keep an eye on them day and night. If a lamb is large or in a difficult position, the farmer or a helper sometimes needs to intervene and assist the ewe. When a lamb is born, it is important that the sheep is left to nurse it in order to establish a bond between the ewe and the lamb. It is vital that lambs receive colostrum early on, within the first two hours of life and again throughout their first 24 hours, in order to help them avoid disease and infection. Not all ewes produce enough high-quality colostrum for their lambs so farmers sometimes have to use bought-in colostrum. If the lambs have been born inside, the farmer will try and turn them out as soon as possible, as they are outdoor animals and thrive best in the fields. Depending on how healthy the lamb is and on the weather conditions, this can be as little as 12 hours after the lamb has been born. Experienced ewes are capable of lambing outdoors in the fields but will still have a close eye kept on them in case of any difficulties.

Mid-May will see the sheep and lambs moved onto the fells to allow the pasture land to grow for hay making, so providing next winter's hay supply.

June see the grass grow quickly and farmers watching the weather forecast with a keen interest. Rain can flatten the grass and makes drying it difficult, too little rain will result in less growth. If a farm is in the Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme, the grass cannot be cut until the wild flowers have seeded and DEFRA determine the date when haymaking can begin. These dates tend to be later in the year so once the DEFRA-agreed date come round these farms will have the men and machines out until all hours as they have less time to get their hay in.

Before the introduction of farm machinery all hay had to be cut by scythe, this was a skilled job and each man had his own scythe which he alone maintained, set and sharpened. Men would work in unison, with each sweep cutting down vast swathes of grass. Women and children would follow to strew the grass out to help it dry, it would then be turned with wooden rakes and collected into small hay cocks for collection by loading onto a horse – drawn sledge and taken to the cow'uss to be stored for winter feeding. Everyone helped and hay making was a huge social event with the women bringing refreshments and meals out to the meadows.

Late June would traditionally be the time to wash the sheep. This process helped remove dirt and the previous year's salve and raise the new wool so pushing up the old fleece ready for clipping about 10 -15 days later. Also a better price was paid for clean, washed wool. The old stone folds can still be seen near many becks where sheep would be gathered and driven through a pool made in the beck to wash them prior to dipping. The pool would be made by damming up the beck with sods and stones and the men would stand in the cold water for hours waiting for each sheep to literally thrown into the pool by men standing on the bank. The knack was to throw them in bottom first, as if they went in head first they would panic and thrash about. The washers would wear two layers of clothing or some even stood in barrels weighted down by stones.

Again, this was a local event that attracted big crowds of spectators, farming families would help each other out and make a social event of it with picnics, sports and games and not to mention probably quite a lot of drinking! Many place names give an indication that sheep washing once happened in that location, for example Washfold near Hurst, Dubbing Duck Bridge near Muker and Dubbin Garth near Haverdale House.

As soon as hay time is over, the attention turns to the clipping or shearing of the sheep.

Shearing is typically in early summer, when the weather turns warmer, to ensure sheep do not get too hot and start to attract flies. The price farmers can get for their wool has dropped considerably over the decades and now does not even cover the cost of clipping. At one time a farmer could pay his rent for a whole year on what he got for his wool and all sheep had to be clipped by hand, but now electric shears are used. The price for wool varies considerably between sheep breeds. Currently a Swaledale fleece makes around 25p but actually costs the farmer £1.25 to clip. Swaledale wool was used extensively in carpets but now more homes have hard wood floors and so demand has dropped. At one time knitting provided a valuable second income for farming and lead mining families. Wool merchants would drop off supplies of wool at the local village markets and the whole family would knit stockings in the evenings, these would then be bought back by the merchants and a fresh supply of wool provided. All the family knitted – children and even the lead miners while on their long walks up the mines. Clipping was again a big social event as well as an essential one on the farming calendar. A farmer would send word around and men would come from miles away and help with up to 1000 sheep a day; some would clip, others might help catch the sheep or wrap the fleeces. The clippers would sit on stools (also used for salving) and work in rows.

In earlier times sheep were 'salved' to kill parasites which was a labour-intensive task. This involved holding the sheep down on a 'greasing' or 'clipping' stool and parting the wool to apply a salve of mixed tar and oily fat which had to be rubbed into every inch of the skin by hand to weather proof the sheep. It was considered a good day's work if a man could get fifteen sheep salved. This method was used for centuries as revealed in a 1298 Bolton Abbey accounts entry *'oil, tallow and tar used for smearing sheep £4 10s 7 ½ d.'* It was not the most popular farming job as it was sheer hard work, one sheep could take up to an hour, and the smell of the salve was sickening as it had to be done under cover so the sheep were kept dry, so I am sure many a farmer was pleased to see salving replaced by dipping which became compulsory from 1905. Now due to the restrictive regulations over the dipping process many farmers inject their sheep instead to protect them against disease.

Over the summer months, the lambs get bigger and fatter on grass. Towards the end of the year the annual tup sales take place at Kirkby Stephen and

Hawes. Huge amounts of money can be made and reputations built on these eagerly-awaited important events. Sales of over £100,000 are now being made, a far cry from the £55 back in 1921!

Lambs intended for meat are generally sent for slaughter at nine to twelve months old. Some ewe lambs, about three quarters, may be kept on the farm to provide replacements for older ewes and go on to produce lambs of their own. Of the male lambs the best are left 'entire' for the tup sales and the rest are castrated and sold for meat in their first year. The ewes have a three year cycle on the heugh, and are then sold on to the lowland farms for another three years breeding.

Annual flock inspections were a required rule for any tup to be registered in the early flock books, and these still take place today very much in the same tradition with each district responsible for organising their own. Typically two Swaledale breeders will inspect the animals on farms in Wensleydale and vice versa. From these inspections the best animals are selected for registration. The farmer concerned will have already inspected his flock and 'shortlisted' his recommendations, and so pride can take a tumble if the inspecting farmers then decide on completely different tups to register. Now ear tags are used instead of the earlier horn burning.

Of course for a Swaledale breeder the most important events in the farming year are the sheep shows, in Swaledale the two most important being Tan Hill and Muker show, the origins of which started on a Thwaite Fair Day around 1890 when a few sheep were traded. They were tied to the chapel railings while the owners frequented a 'pop-up pub' which had been set up in an empty house for the day. Apparently two farmers got into an argument over some tups and it was decided to have a proper organised show with official unbiased judges. For a few years after this unofficial 'shows' would occur in various places until it was decided to start up a proper annual show in a permanent location.

So in 1893 a meeting was held in Muker Literary Institute and the Swaledale Agricultural Society was created. The first show took place on the 27th September 1893 and Gunnerside Brass band were asked to play. One of the required criteria for showing sheep was that the sheep had to have been on the moor from the 1st June until 10 days before the show date. The early shows included trotting races, cattle, pigs and both black faced and white-faced sheep which were Leicester, sometime after 1911 the black-faced sheep classes were called Swaledale classes.

The Tan Hill show may well have had its origins as a 'Shepherd Meet'. Nowadays if a farmer finds a strayed sheep within his flock he can simply telephone the owner and arrange to have it picked up. In days of old returning strayed flock would take place through prearranged Shepherd's Meets. Stray sheep would be brought to an agreed place and then everyone would claim back their animals. Tan Hill was such a place and farmers met here twice yearly – July and November, and it is probably fair to say that the farmers may have had a pint or two whilst collecting their sheep. In 1951 it was suggested that an actual show should take place at Tan Hill since it was in the 'home area' of the breed i.e. between Stainmore and Upper Swaledale. The first show was in May 1952 and called 'The Northern Swaledale Sheep Show' and was won by Mr Iceton with his tup shearling 'Mossdale Migs'. For the second show in 1953 it was renamed 'The Tan Hill Open Swaledale Sheep Show'. The show is for all districts and breeders travel miles as it is every farmer's ambition to produce a Tan Hill Champion. These shows also have a social aspect and allow farmers to catch up on news and relax after a hard winter and lambing season.

There are many shows that have classes for Swaledale sheep but for the Swaledale 'B' district Tan Hill, Muker, Reeth and Mossdale are considered to be the main important shows. A huge amount of effort goes into preparing the selected sheep for these events – shampooing, plucking, preening and pampering on a level probably far exceeding that of some Hollywood actors before Oscar night!

There are many challenges to hill sheep farming – poor grazing, long winters and unpredictable weather to name but a few. However one event could have wiped the entire Swaledale breed out – the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001. This is a terrifying virus that can mutate and spread across the country with lightening speed. The 2001 source was unknown, but it was suspected it may have been brought into the country via infected imported frozen carcasses.

Although the virus never came into Swaledale, a lot of the flocks were overwintering in other parts of the country where it did strike, particularly in Durham and Cumbria which were hugely affected. It was reported that over 70% of the 1340 Swaledale Association members were affected by this outbreak. Carnage and devastation were common descriptors used in the ongoing newspaper reports and these words did not come anywhere near to accurately describing the impact on farming communities.

If an outbreak was confirmed at any farm, then all animals at any other farms within a three mile radius had to be slaughtered – regardless of if they were infected or not. Some farmers had to hear the devastating news that they

were to have hundreds of their sheep slaughtered to try and prevent the spread. This resulted in entire bloodlines built up through generations of careful breeding gone within days, essentially the farmer's life work just taken away from him. Stanley Brogden, of Helbeck farm at Kirkby Stephen lost over 550 breeding ewes amongst other animals culled. In a 2002 newspaper article he said *'Our sheep are our whole life. We never travelled or went on holiday, so when they came to take our sheep they took our whole life away'.* Ten weeks later he was told the blood tests from his animals had come back negative. Another Cumbrian farmer had to endure losing 80% of his breeding ewes and all his cattle in 9 separate culls over a six month period and none of them were confirmed to have had the disease. One cannot even begin to imagine what that must have felt like and how on earth you move on from that.

The disease moved into the Kirkby Stephen area and then Nateby, and farmers at the top of Swaledale held their breath to see if it travelled over the moors. They went to desperate measures to try and keep it out of Swaledale, including spreading straw across the road and dousing it in disinfectant and local men manned a 24 hour roadside wheel wash for all vehicles coming in. It was uncertain how the disease had come about and how it was moving around the country; was it airborne, carried by foxes or badgers, or were the official Ministry of Agriculture vehicles actually spreading it as they visited each farm to do the testing and culling? Farmers just had to sit, wait, pray and hope their flock that had stayed on their own farms did not become infected.

Amazingly it did not get into Swaledale, if it had it could have meant the end to Swaledale sheep farming as replacement sheep could not have simply been brought in as they would not be heughed to the moor and so would have simply wandered all over the land. Any sheep unaffected has to stay where they had been overwintered as the movement of animals was prohibited, so Swaledale farmers had to go to their animals wherever they were to lamb them and shear them, and it was a year before they could bring them home. This also incurred a lot of additional cost as the farms that had agreed to overwinter them needed their land back to grow crops. Farmers who lost sheep due to the mandatory culls were compensated, but there is not price on earth that can replace pedigree bloodlines built up through generations of dedicated flock management and sheer hard manual work. Farmers who did not lose sheep still suffered during this awful time as there was a ban on any movement of animals so they could not take any animals to market.

Many farmers may well have simply walked away, but the dales hill farmers are made of sturdy stuff and are resilient to the core. Farmers started to

rebuild their flock and more importantly, re-establish the lost bloodlines. Genetic records carefully recorded in flock books dating back to 1920 enabled this process and farmers helped each other out with private sales throughout the country. Eventually flock numbers recovered but the fear of another outbreak must never go away entirely. Some sheep had been away over a year and yet when they eventually came back they still knew their heugh and did not stray when put back out on the moor – they were probably just pleased to be home!

Hill sheep farming cannot be learnt from books, or from attending college or university; it is a unique skill set that is passed down through the generations. Farming practices that are kept as pure as the Swaledale pedigree bloodlines. If the Swaledale sheep is famous for its ability to graze and never stray from its moorland heugh, then the same must also be said for the farmers who turn out in all weathers to care for these animals. The majority of family names contained in the very first 1920 flock book are still farming and breeding these sheep in Swaledale today and are as heughed to the land as the animals they farm and care for.

A farmer will come and go, as will his animals, but he knows he is the custodian of this iconic breed and the land he farms and cultivates. He respects and cares for both, hoping to leave a legacy for the next generation to build on. The Swaledale breed may only have been formally recognised for the past 100 years but these animals have grazed these moors and fells for centuries, you can see it in their timeless and ancient eyes as they silently watch the cars pass them by on the moorland roads. Let's hope they are still here for centuries to come.

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