

Making cakes for Muker Show where one breed of sheep rules



Ernest and Doreen Whitehead at home in Keld. Picture: Bruce Rollinson

By
CHRIS BERRY

Twenty-five years ago, in my then new role as editor of a farming magazine for Yorkshire I started writing about agricultural shows and attended something like 50 throughout the county. I had loved the pomp, size, friendliness and magnificence of the Great Yorkshire Show in Harrogate as I still do today; the East Riding's jewel of Driffield Show; the rustic beauty of Ryedale Show; and Moors and Dales shows such as Danby, Egton and Kilnsey. I had fallen in love with them all but visiting Muker Show in Swaledale for the first time was, and still is, countryside heaven.

I had cut across the dale via Richmond on a beautiful day while listening to tinkly piano music reminiscent of the BBC theme tune to *All Creatures Great & Small* and was immediately immersed into a land and show that seemed unchanged since the 60s and 70s. Muker Show is quite simply a gem. It has sheep and no other livestock. Indeed, the sheep are all one breed. All you get up here are Swaledales. It has the excellent Muker Band,

judging of sticks, vintage tractors and machinery, sheepdog trials, a trickle of trade stands, produce and craft marquee, children's races, fell races and that's about it. What it also has in abundance are real characters and one of those is the lovely Doreen Whitehead. I met her that first year when she was in charge of the lunches in Muker Public Hall. If ever there was someone who sparkled at a show, happy in her own environment it was Doreen. She's not in charge anymore but she's still making cakes for the show, for Hawes Auction Mart and for her two daughters' cafes in Hawes and Norfolk. "I love Muker Show," she says with that same big beaming smile she had when she had looked after me back in 1991.

"You know I used to holler quite a lot at the other girls at times either in the hall or Hawes Mart café or my own café, but I was in a shop in Leyburn not long since and saw a girl called Sandra who worked with me as a schoolgirl. She turned to someone else and said 'she was the best boss I ever had' I said 'hell Sandra, the amount of times I hollered too'.

Doreen comes from Masham originally and moved north when she took work as the clerk at Hawes railway station in the days when trains still came through from Bradford via Garsdale Head. She married Ernest in November 1980. Her first husband Edmund with whom she had three children, two daughters Pat and June and son Robert, had passed away. Ernest has been Muker Show chairman since 1978. "We always say that Ernest married me so I would carry on doing the catering for the show and I married him so I could sit on the top table."

Doreen's dining debut at Muker came about through the café she ran in Hawes in the 70s. 'I'd always been keen on baking and my first husband and I had bought the café that is now The Bull's Head holiday accommodation, which had been a pub. It was Alan Blades at the Spar shop who set the ball rolling with Muker when he asked me to do the catering for his wedding at Muker Public Hall. He married the show secretary's daughter and when her father came to pay the bill he said, 'By tha' made a good job o' that lass, tha' wouldn't like to do Muker Show would tha'?" The die was cast and Doreen became one of the many wonderful characters at the show.

She took over Hawes Auction Mart Café in 1979 and was there until 2000. She first got together with Ernest while collecting glasses in the White Hart pub in Hawes. Ernest had been born at Raveuseat and had farmed with his uncle at East Stonesdale farm overlooking the village of Keld. "One winter Ernest said 'we either get married or I'm not trailing over here (Hawes) anymore' and so we did.

"We bought East Stonesdale Farm and farmed there until 1996. We'd started doing B&B accommodation too but then moved to the six-bedroomed Butt House in Keld where we concentrated on the B&B side before selling up and moving to Kisdon View in the village in 2008. Ernest enjoyed both careers of farming and running holiday accommodation. 'I have COPD which is a lung disease and the doctor said I would be better out of farming," he says. "We'd had 500 Swaledales and over the years with my uncle and my father we had done pretty well with them, but it was time to leave it behind apart from a little bit of help I used to give to my brother-in-law Clifford Harker. "The chance came up to buy Butt House and we took it. I think there's probably a little less pressure on farming than there is on B&B. When you're doing B&B you have a lot of people around that you have to please. The sheep

don't talk back or complain.”

The 111th Muker Show takes place on Wednesday, September 7. Ernest Whitehead has not missed a single one since his first in 1945, but he had not had an involvement with the show committee at all before he went to a meeting in 1978. ‘Ten minutes later I was chairman and I’m still here now. The show has spread out a bit and now attracts about 2,000-3,000. Quite a lot of people now come up for the week booking into the holiday cottages, so it’s great for the dale. The fell racing is really popular and last year we had over 70 in the open age race and over 50 in the under 14s.’

Read more at: <http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/making-cakes-for-muker-show-where-one-breed-of-sheep-rules-1-8102446>