

'A YEAR IN HILL FARMING'- PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN BENTLE

THE STORY BEHIND THE EXHIBITION

Gallery on the Green Settle

January 8 – March 10 2021

'A Year in Hill Farming' documents the sheep farming year in the uplands of Yorkshire and Cumbria. I am fascinated by the cycle and traditions of the farming year, the diversity of sheep and farming practices and the dedication of individual farmers and localities to particular breeds. To me it is very important to document the industry as it stands and to be very respectful of the history, skills and traditions of sheep farming and its social and economic importance to the Dales and the rural north of England. There are many uncertainties and pressures on the industry and this past year has, of course, also seen the impact of Covid-19, meaning that the gatherings for the traditional shows and sales have not taken place in the usual way. The photographs in the exhibition document the sheep breeds, the people who rear them, the workings of the farming calendar and the environment and the infrastructure of hill farming.

'Hill farming' is the extensive farming of upland areas, primarily the rearing of sheep. This involves grazing enclosed pastures and open fells. Sheep grazing the open fells are mostly hardy varieties, such as Swaledale, Dalesbred, Herdwick, Cheviot and Rough Fell breeds. The open fell sheep are 'hefted', which means that the ewes involved know from inherited experience where to graze on open land and this knowledge is passed on to their lambs.

The centuries-old traditions of hill farming have, in many ways, changed little over the past hundred years or so. There are many modern innovations such as the use of quad-bikes, scanning for pregnancy, dipping and vaccination. However, the basic annual cycle of Autumn 'tupping' (putting the rams or 'tups' with the ewes or 'yows'), Spring lambing, Summer shearing and haymaking and bringing sheep off the fells is very old and the origins of the sheep breeds themselves go back centuries.

Uplands are by their nature poor quality farm land and so the complex rearing and breeding of sheep reflects this. As an example, hardy upland breeds of ewe are mated with other breeds of ram to produce offspring that are good for meat but need to be reared in areas with a less harsh climate and better quality farmland. One of the most common examples is probably the crossing

of Swaledale ewes with Blue Faced Leicester rams to produce the North Country Mule sheep, which are widely seen on farms across Britain. Unfortunately the wool of upland breeds of sheep is now of little value (particularly due to the widespread adoption of synthetic fabrics) and the shearing of sheep is now primarily done for the animals' welfare. >>>> At one time a sheep's wool could be of greater value than its meat, but those days have long passed.

Given the poor land quality of uplands and the competition from more favoured and intensive sheep farming areas, for many years maintaining hill farming has been dependent on subsidy from the Government and under the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU. Many farms have therefore diversified to help make ends meet, for example into caravan and camping sites or producing specialist food products. The industry faces challenging times ahead, with uncertainties over the future of government farm subsidies and the unknown outcomes of post-Brexit trade deals).

In making the case for upland farming it is important to recognise how it has fundamentally shaped the environment, ecosystems and landscape of areas such as the Yorkshire Dales and the Lake District and continues to do so. The character of our national parks has been fashioned and maintained by farming, with the much cherished stone barns (or more accurately 'cow houses') and dry-stone walls being obvious examples. In addition most of the enterprises are family farms, in contrast with the large scale agri-businesses of much of lowland Britain. Small farms in the uplands play an important role in maintaining a local community at a time when there is concern about the spread of holiday / second homes and the lack of employment in the countryside.

I hope the photographs illustrate the rich tradition of hill farming.

John Bentley

About the photographer: John lives in Settle and has a wide range of photographic interests including live concert photography, landscape, travel and documentary photography. While John contributes news and stock photographs to national press agencies he is retired from full-time employment and able to devote his time to his personal photographic projects. In 2016/17 he was a contributor to the 'Voices from the Land' exhibition (initially staged at Hawes Countryside Centre), which focussed on farming in

the Yorkshire Dales National Park. His wide range of photographic work can be viewed online at-

https://www.flickr.com/photos/john_arc-images/collections