



Gavin Bland treads lightly in the coves below Helvellyn, England's second-highest peak, to gather in sheep from the chilled heights. Being out in winter, he says, is part of what makes these sheep strong. But gathering in from the snow may soon be a thing of the past as shepherds are being asked to keep their sheep off the commons over winter in the hope that this will help blanket bog to thrive, which is considered important for carbon storage.

The fight for the fells

On the rugged uplands of Cumbria, environmental measures aimed at preserving indigenous ecosystems are driving to extinction the sheep farmers and a way of life that goes back more than 1,000 years.

By **Harriet Fraser**. Photographs by **Rob Fraser**



Straddling a bale of hay in a barn with a sheep between my legs seems like a strange way to spend a morning. I'm sewing a soft piece of cloth over a sheep's back end to act as a chastity belt during the mating season. I have been trusted to do this job, known as 'clouting', by the farmer, Anthony Hartley.

This is one of countless insights I have gained from spending time with farmers while making a two-year study of upland farming in Cumbria, with my husband, the photographer Rob Fraser. Talking to farmers, and to other environmental agencies, has cast light on the conflicting demands of England's biggest national park.

Hartley's family have farmed this area for generations, with sheep – Herdwick and Swaledale – grazing on fells rising up to Conistone Old Man. There is a sense of permanence on Turner Hall Farm. The terrain and the climate dictate a relationship between land, sheep and dogs that has changed little over the centuries, and sheep are as much a part of the landscape as the rivers and lakes.

Yet many believe that this way of life is under threat. Hill farmers face falls in income; many lack succession, as the young take up alternative careers; and there is pressure to reduce stock numbers. Upland farming could not continue without payments from government stewardship schemes, which often stipulate a reduction in flock size in order to protect sensitive habitats.

Recent calls by environmentalists such as George Monbiot to remove sheep from the Cumbrian fells mobilised farmers keen for their voices to be heard as decisions are made about agri-environment payments, allocation of land, and government-led stipulations about stocking numbers. According to

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the National Farmers Union, Britain may lose 20 per cent of its hill farmers in the next 20 years. ‘There's a distinct feeling that hill farmers are a dying breed,’ Robin Milton, the NFU representative for the uplands, says. ‘The question is, when will we reach the tipping point?’

Rory Stewart, the MP for Penrith and the Border, regularly speaks up for the hill farmers in his constituency. When I meet him on a rainy day in Shap, on the eastern edge of the national park, he throws up his hands. He is worried about ‘a series of government legislations that, if not challenged, will mean that in 30, 40 years' time, we will not have farmers living on our fells, or very, very few.’ He goes on, ‘How do you create real opposition to a world where there is so much power and jargon and money on one side, with the people on the other side saying, “This is my land, I've lived here for a very long time, I understand it very well, and this is what I do”’. The agencies claim to be consultative, but are at their worst pseudo colonial.’

Apprehension is widespread. ‘We're fighting for our existence,’ Joe Relph, a farmer in Borrowdale, tells me, ‘and when it's gone, it's gone. There's no going back.’ In the yard of Yew Tree Farm Relph explains that hill sheep, particularly Herdwicks,



Will Rawling farms in Ennerdale with his son, Sam. He was created an MBE for his work on bringing together farmers, ecologists and policy makers, and his common is one of only two in the entire country where farmers are directly involved in the setting up of agri-environment agreements. 'We had to find 60 hectares that could be turned over to woodland,' he says. 'We have been advising Natural England and we're actually monitoring progress ourselves.'



Julia Aglionby is the chairman of the Foundation of Common Land, and works as a land agent, helping farmers, landowners and policy deliverers negotiate agri-environment stewardship schemes. 'Man's relationship with the environment is critical to our spiritual wellbeing,' she says. 'Biodiversity is clearly important – nobody is going to say it's unimportant – but there isn't the same attention given to the cultural landscape.'



Joe and Hazel Relph run a National Trust farm in the Borrowdale Valley, south of Keswick. They run a cafe and a B&B and sell Herdwick meat. They employ 14 people. But it is about more than work. 'It's not an industry, it's a culture – that's a big, big point,' Joe says. 'And we're just looking after these places. In the scheme of things it's just a blink of the eye, isn't it?'

become 'hefted' to the terrain: they learn where to graze, shelter and roam on unfenced land. But as numbers are reduced, there is huge pressure on the hefting system and the sustainability of both flocks and farming families. Isaac Benson, who farms in Little Langdale, a few valleys away from Relph, sums it up neatly. 'The Herdwick breed needs a big enough gene pool to keep it healthy. If you keep reducing the sheep, you reduce the labour requirement. If you reduce the labour requirement, where's the next generation? It's not sustainable.'

Debate about the role of sheep on the fells has hit the news. 'At the moment,' Benson says, 'a lot of the bodies in charge see sheep as a nuisance because of what they want to achieve.' Bodies such as the RSPB, United Utilities and Natural England want to increase biodiversity on the fells, improve the quality of peat bogs and their capacity to store carbon, and ensure the clarity of water running from the hills into the reservoirs. This kind of management frequently entails tree planting and grazing reduction or exclusion. It's a tricky situation to get right, and all too often farmers feel sidelined. While none of the farmers I have met disagree with the importance of biodiversity, they are keen to ensure their part within it is assured. Tim Farron, the MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale, tells me that, in his view, the current focus on environment is skewed. 'I think there's a slightly warped environmentalism that doesn't understand that human beings managing the countryside is a good thing,' he says.

The challenge is, in Cumbria as in many other upland areas of Britain, how to deliver the environmental gains and keep sheep on the hills. Simon Humphries, the area manager for Natural England, which delivers agri-environment policies and negotiates agreements with individual farmers, stresses that his role is to protect both. 'My point of view,' he says, 'is that it's a discussion around the occasionally elusive concept of "balance", which everyone strives to achieve for our much-loved countryside.' The Lake District National Park Authority is also looking for a balance, or what the CEO, Richard Leafe, calls 'the sweet spot in the middle'.

On an overcast August day Michael Longworth, a skilled younger farmer who has been helping Hartley for eight years, is mending a wall. Later Hartley tells me that Longworth is ready to run his own farm. He has twice applied for local tenancies, without success. 'There are few that ken the sheep like Michael does.' Hartley's voice is tinged with sadness. 'There are that many,' he says, stretching out four fingers of his work-worn hand, 'that many young ones who could take over a farm in Cumbria. How will you find another like that?' It is a question that is troubling many farmers now.

Julia Aglionby, the chairman of the Foundation for Common Land, outlines the importance of continuing a system of commoning in the 21st century. Twenty-five per cent of the uplands in Cumbria is common land – that is, privately owned (the main landowners in Cumbria are the Lake District National Park, the RSPB, United Utilities and the National Trust) but typically unfenced and worked by farmers who have grazing rights. This unique system has evolved to fit this landscape. 'Commons provide more benefits to the public and the environment than any other category of farmland,' Aglionby says. 'You're looking at water, you're





Isaac Benson has been at the National Trust-owned Fell Foot Farm since 2006. His Herdwick flock has been here for generations, and he wonders what would happen if there were no sheep on the fells. 'Who'd maintain this lot?' he asks. 'Do you want it full of deer? Something's going to graze it. It's the heartbeat of the local community, too – schools, fetes, galas.'

Anthony Hartley is one of only a handful of farmers who still practise 'clouting'. He does not have enough enclosed land to keep those ewes too young to breed separate from the rams, so each winter he sews a cloth, or a clout, over the tails of more than a hundred of them: these soft 'chastity belts' are made from colourful remnants of material found in local markets.

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looking at carbon and you're looking at people's spiritual wellbeing.' She stresses, 'The cultural landscape shouldn't be put at risk.'

The value of culture may be hard to put a price on, but the Lake District is England's largest national park, visited by more than 15 million people a year. James Rebanks, who farms in Matterdale, also holds a double first from the University of Oxford, and as a consultant is commissioned by Unesco, among others. He is an advocate for the Lake District's bid to gain World Heritage Site status in the hope that this will protect its precious cultural elements amid inevitable agricultural changes. Yet beneath it all, his driving passion is farming. 'It's about a powerful sense of belonging,' he tells me as I help him wash his rams. 'It is social and cultural. I love this place, its landscape, its people, and, yes, its sheep, more than anything. Helping in however small a way to keep it going feels to me like a life well lived.'

Land Keepers by Harriet and Rob Fraser is at the Wordsworth Museum, Grasmere, until May 10 (landkeepers.co.uk)