
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**FORTY YEARS WITH SHEEP**

Herdwicks as Companions

Watching closely, learning slowly and imagining a living future for wethers.

DIANNA BOWLES OBE**EMERITUS PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF YORK****“**

"I regard interacting with my Herdwick flock to be a blessing. Being a shepherd makes me often laugh... sometimes cry... and always marvel."

DIANNA BOWLES

One of the Herdwicks Dianna still keeps today.

Learning to Really Look

On intelligence, responsibility and the everyday work of shepherding.

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"The longer you look, really look, the more you see."

HOW IT BEGAN

"I started keeping Herdwicks some 40 years ago - two young ewes, with very little land to keep them on and zero idea of how to become a shepherd. I was intrigued and knew nothing, except their undoubted intelligence caught me by surprise. Their response to the local Yorkshire sheep breeds - no interaction nor interest whatsoever - made me laugh."

A QUIET FIELD CAN BE DECEPTIVE

"Sheep and their shepherds often appear to passers-by to be doing very little. This can lull the newcomer who has acquired a few sheep into a false sense of confidence."

Interest and commitment to welfare matter, but they do not replace knowledge. Books, suitable land, fencing, veterinary help and continuing expense soon become part of life with even a very small flock.

NOT A SIMPLE COMPANION

"Sheep are much more complicated than your average canine companion, not least because they live outdoors in nature and more things can go wrong. Dependent on the individual sheep and its genetics, some remain distrusting of human contact for a month, a year or forever. Others will follow you immediately."

WATCHING IS THE WORK

"Sheep need dosing, spraying, foot clipping, wool shearing and... and, and, and. But also, perhaps most of all, watching - close observation during daily visits."

For about ten years I kept asking experienced older shepherds, "How did you notice that?" They could see that a ewe was "not herself" before pneumonia became obvious. Slowly, close attention became knowledge.

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THE DAILY WALKABOUT

"My first two Herdwicks went on walkabout every day, departing after breakfast and returning before I came home from work. My neighbours told me about their travels and marvelled at their timekeeping. Even years later, when my flock approached 150, I still needed wall-top netting to keep their wanderlust in check."



A Herdwick portrait and some of the few sheep Dianna still keeps today.

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"Often the amount of expertise needed to keep sheep is under-rated by the public at large."

WELFARE FIRST

A Different Future for Wethers

Companionship can offer gentle males a life beyond the food chain.

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"It makes far more sense for a companionship flock to consist of wethers, rather than ewes."

THE MALES A FLOCK DOES NOT NEED

"Every large breeding flock will produce males and, dependent on the genetics, around 50% of the lambs each year will be male. Unfortunately, only a very small number of those tup lambs will have the genetic qualities to be studs. The rest - very, very, very many - will be killed, simply because their breeding quality is not high enough and not many are needed. A single male can serve at least 50, if not 150, females each season."

A VISIBLE ALTERNATIVE

"Realistically, the numbers not killed will always be minuscule compared with those still killed. But perhaps their increasing presence in the fields as companions will introduce an alternative way forward for newcomers to take on and get to know shepherding and sheep."

GENTLE SOULS

"When I had a lot of Herdwicks, it was always an issue if the males were not up to being studs, yet were gentle souls that deserved a longer life."

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"Wethers in sheep farming make meat. To offer them an alternative within a companion flock is to avoid their death."

"I think the concept of companion sheep is a good one, and using wethers gives them an alternative, and living, way forward rather than to the abattoir."

"So, yes, I certainly support the notion of companion sheep."

PERSONAL SUPPORT FOR THE WETHER MISSION



The shearing on the right won the cup for best Herdwick at Dianna's final show in 2019.



Dianna with Clive, Tom and a prize-winning Herdwick during the memorable show years.



A quiet moment together: practical care and a relationship built over time.

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"Sheep can keep one sane and always smile as a daily event. Having these companions and co-workers outdoors in the natural world can lead to new knowledge and new experiences. Being alongside an 'other' through changing times and seasons can help us all to recognise those 'still points in the turning world', and discover a simplicity of joy."

DIANNA BOWLES