

Summer



I've lived in the country for a lot of my life but I've never felt that I belonged . . . It is so strange . . . I have never experienced such an atmosphere . . . as exists here . . . I have to talk about it simply because it is so curious. It is the power which the children have to resist everybody and everything outside of the village . . . The village children . . . are convinced that they have something which none of the newcomers can ever have, some kind of mysterious life which is so perfect that it is a waste of time to search for anything else.

Daphne Ellington, teacher,
quoted in Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield* (1969)

There is no beginning, and there is no end. The sun rises, and falls, each day, and the seasons come and go. The days, months and years alternate through sunshine, rain, hail, wind, snow and frost. The leaves fall each autumn and burst forth again each spring. The earth spins through the vastness of space. The grass comes and goes with the warmth of the sun. The farms and the flocks endure, bigger than the life of a single person. We are born, live our working lives and die, passing like the oak leaves that blow across our land in the winter. We are each a tiny part of something enduring, something that feels solid, real and true. Our farming way of life has roots deeper than five thousand years into the soil of this landscape.

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I was born in late July 1974, into a world that centred on an old man and his two farms. He was a proud farmer called William Hugh Rebanks, ‘Hughie’ to his mates, ‘Granddad’ to me. He had a rough whiskery face when you kissed him goodnight. He smelt of sheep and cattle, and only had one yellow tooth, but he could clean the meat off a lamb chop with it like a jackal.

He had three children. Two daughters, who had married good farmers, and my father. Dad was the youngest, the one who was to carry on his farm. I was his youngest grandson, but the only one with his name. From my

first memories until his dying day, I thought the sun shone out of his backside. Even as a small child, I could see that he was the king of his own world, like a biblical patriarch. He doffed his cap to no man. No one told him what to do. He lived a modest life but was proud and free and independent, with a presence that said he belonged in this place in the world. My first memories are of him, and knowing I wanted to be just like him some day.

We live and work our small hill farm in the far north-west of England, in the Lake District. We farm in a valley called Matterdale, between the first two rounded fells (mountains) that emerge on your left as you travel west on the main road from Penrith. From the summit of the fell behind our house, you can see north across the silver glimmering of the distant Solway estuary to Scotland. There is a stolen moment each early summer when I climb that fell and sit with my sheepdogs and have half an hour to take the world in. To the east you can see the backbone of England, the Pennines, with the good farming land of the Eden Valley opening up below. I smile at the thought that the entire history of our family has played out in the fields and villages stretching away beneath that fell, between Lake District and Pennines, for at least six centuries, and probably longer. We shaped this landscape, and we were shaped by it in turn. My people lived, worked and died down there for countless generations. It is what it is because of them and people like them.

It is, above all, a peopled landscape. Every acre of it has been defined by the actions of men and women over

the past ten thousand years. Even the mountains were riddled with mines and pocked with quarries, and the seemingly wild woodland behind us was once intensively harvested and coppiced. Almost everyone I am related to and care about lives within sight of that fell. When we call it 'our' landscape, we mean it as a physical and intellectual reality. There is nothing chosen about it. This landscape is our home and we rarely stray far from it, or endure anywhere else for long before returning. This may seem like a lack of imagination or adventure, but I don't care. I love this place; for me it is the beginning and the end of everything, and everywhere else feels like nowhere.

From that fell, I look out over a place crafted by largely forgotten working people. It is a unique man-made place, a landscape divided and defined by fields, walls, hedges, dykes, roads, becks, drains, barns, quarries, woods and lanes. I can see our fields and a hundred jobs that I should be doing instead of idling up on the fell. I see sheep climbing a wall into a hay meadow down below, and I know I have to stop messing about, day-dreaming like a bloody poet or day-tripper and get some work done. To the west, I see the high fells of the Lake District, often covered for half the year in snow, and from the highest of those you can see the Irish Sea. To the south, the fells block my view, but somewhere beyond them is the rest of England. The Lake District is relatively small, being only about 800 square miles. So, if you looked down on our land from outer space, you would see we are on the eastern edge of a small cluster

of mountain valleys. Our valley is small, even by the standards of the Lake District, a basin of enclosed land and meadows surrounded by fells, scattered with little farmsteads. I can drive through it from one end to the other in five minutes. I look across to my neighbours on the other side of the valley a mile away and can hear them gathering their sheep on the fell sides. The valley where we live and farm stretches beneath me like an old man's upturned cupped hands.

There is something about this landscape that people love. It would, in summer, seem to most people around the world to be exceptionally green and lush. It is a 'pastoral landscape' and 'temperate', a place of heavy rainfall and warm summers, an excellent place, in short, for growing grass in the summer. As writers have long noted, it is an intimate landscape on a human scale. Whitewashed farmhouses hug the fell sides just beneath the ancient common land of the fells. Other farmsteads dot the valley floor on higher ground, or riggs, that rise from the rushes of the sodden land in the valley bottom, including the one where my grandfather lived. We are one of maybe 300 farming families who sustain this landscape and its ancient way of life.

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My grandfather was born in 1918 into a fairly anonymous and unexceptional farming family. At that time they mostly lived and farmed down in the heart of the Eden Valley. The written records, for what they are

worth, show that my grandfather belonged to an agricultural family struggling by from generation to generation, occasionally making it into the ranks of relatively established farmers, before sinking back into being tenants, or farm-workers, or in the workhouse, or worse. The written story peters out into an illegible sixteenth-century script of births, deaths and marriages, in church records belonging to little villages close to where their descendants still live and work. My grandfather is, quite simply, one of the great forgotten silent majority of people who lived, worked, loved and died without leaving much written trace that they were ever there. He was, and we his descendants remain, essentially nobodies as far as anyone else is concerned. But that's the point. Landscapes like ours were created by, and survive through, the efforts of nobodies. That's why I was so shocked to be given a 'dead, rich, white man' version of its history at school. This is a landscape of modest, hard-working people. The real history of our landscape should be the history of the nobodies.

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The alarm clock vibrates on the bedside table. My hand swipes across and kills it: 4.30 a.m. I was only half-asleep anyway. The room is already half-lit with the coming dawn. I see my wife's shoulder, and her leg curled over the sheet, and my two-year-old son lying between us, where he came in during the night. I move quietly out of the room with a fistful of clothes. The sun will rise soon over the edge of the fell.

In the kitchen I swig at a carton of milk. I throw on my clothes robotically, half-awake. I have half an hour before we are meeting at the fell gate. We are going to gather the fell flock in for clipping (shearing). My mind is on a kind of checklist autopilot.

Right clothes: check.

Breakfast: check.

Sandwiches: check.

Boots: check.

As I get to the barn, my sheepdogs Floss and Tan jump, wriggle and make whining noises until I unchain them. They know we are going to the fell. I feed them so they'll have energy later when they need it. A shepherd on a fell without a good sheepdog, or dogs, is useless. The fell sheep are half-wild, can smell weakness, and would escape and create chaos without good sheepdogs. Men can't get to lots of places the dogs can – to the crags and rocky screes, to chase the ewes down. When I head out, Tan bolts for the barn door and jumps on the quad bike. Floss follows.

Sheepdogs fed and loaded: check.

Quad bike: check.

Fuel: check.

The swallows explode outwards from the barn door, disturbed by the dogs. They fledged a couple of days ago and whole families head out over my head to the fields where they hawk all day over the grass and thistles.

Fingers of pink and orange light are now creeping over the fell sides. Sunrise.

These are the hottest days of summer. As I go along

the road, I feel the heat rising from the tarmac. Sun. Dust. Flies. Blue skies. It is too hot in the heat of the day for moving sheep, something we would scarcely have believed possible for the past eight or nine months of cold wet weather. By midday they will be panting, or hiding in the nooks and crannies for shade, and we will miss lots of them. It is too hot for sheepdogs as well. You can kill dogs working them too hard in the heat and humidity. So we intend to start early and do the work before the sun burns high in the sky.

I didn't know anything about gathering today until last night. I had been in the bath when the phone rang. My wife brought it in and I pretended I wasn't in the bath. It was my neighbour Alan, an older, well-respected farmer who has a lot of sheep on the fell and has done it much longer than me. He's the boss, the elder statesman, if you like, and he organizes the commoners to work together. Organizing fell farmers to do anything collectively is not easy, so I don't envy his job one bit. He doesn't waste words unnecessarily.

'We are gathering the fell tomorrow.'

'OK.'

'Meet at the fell gate at 5 a.m.'

'Right.'

Then he hangs up to call someone else.

I knew it was impending because of the date, and because it is time to clip the ewes, but it is a communal job that needs the right weather, and men to be free

of other work to do it. So it's a bit like waiting for D-Day – you never know until the phone call, or shout from the road as he passes, to say 'It's on tomorrow'.

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Gathering is ancient communal work that consists of everyone with rights to graze sheep on the unfenced common land working together with their sheepdogs to bring in the flocks from the fells. There are about ten different flocks of sheep on our fell, a vast unenclosed piece of moorland and mountain. Because there are no large predators, the sheep are left to graze alone, but are brought down several times a year for lambing, clipping and other key activities in the life of the flock. Beyond our common lie other unfenced areas of mountain land, other fells, farmed by other commoners, so in theory our sheep could wander right across the Lake District. But they don't because they know their place on the mountains. They are 'hefted' – taught their sense of belonging by their mothers as lambs – an unbroken chain of learning that goes back thousands of years. So the sheep can never be sold from the fell without breaking that ancient link. This is, they say, the greatest concentration of common land in Western Europe; and on it survives a kind of farming that is older than that which exists across much of the world today.

The fell land we are gathering today doesn't belong to us, it belongs to the National Trust. Other fells belong to other landowners, but we have an ancient legal right

to graze a set number of sheep on it. Many of these mountainous areas of land were bought and given to the National Trust by wealthy benefactors like Beatrix Potter, who trusted them to protect the landscape and its unique way of life. The bequests often stressed that the fell flocks had to remain Herdwick sheep.

There are different kinds of ownership on one piece of land. The grazing rights on our fell are divided into something called ‘stints’ (a share of the common rights); and each stint you own, or rent, entitles you to graze a certain number of sheep (six per stint on our fell). We buy and sell and rent stints so that older farmers can retire and their grazing rights and flocks can be taken forward by the next generation. The owner of the fell sometimes owns no stints and cannot therefore graze his own land unless there are surplus grazing rights. The rights to graze are held in common with our fellow commoners. ‘Commoner’ isn’t a dirty word here; it is a thing to be proud of. It means you have rights to something of value, that you contribute to the management of the fells, and that you take part in our way of life as an equal with the other farmers. If you farm Herdwick or Swaledale sheep and they are hefted to the common grazing land on the fells, then you, by definition, often belong to an association of ‘commoners’. This is all a strange hangover from a feudal past when we paid dues (including bearing arms) to the Lord of the Manor in return for the right to graze the poor mountain land. But no dues have been paid for a long time now. The aristocrats either disappeared or couldn’t be bothered to contest

our rights, because we are troublesome and stubborn when crossed. It was more effort than it was worth, so we, the peasants, won. We are a tiny part of an ancient farming system and way of life that somehow has survived in these mountains because of their historic poverty, relative isolation, and because it was protected from change by the early conservation movement.

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My ewes and lambs have been up in the mountains for nearly eight weeks. They are Herdwick sheep, native to the Lake District fells and bred for centuries to suit this landscape, this climate and this way of farming. They have two functions: survive the winters and the tough times, and in the spring and summer months produce good lambs and rear them in the mountains so the flock is sustained with ewe lambs and the farms have a surplus of lambs to sell.

In the eight weeks since I brought them here, I have not seen many of them. They have looked after themselves on the abundant summer grass. Our shepherding culture includes periods when the sheep graze the fells away from our supervision. Only the ewes with twins stay down on the lower slopes on our own fenced land, called ‘intakes’ or ‘allotments’, because they need better nutrition to rear twins than the mountains offer. So I am anxious to see them again, keen to check that they are alive and well. Above all, I am interested to see how

much my lambs have grown since I brought them up when they were just a month old in May. It is now the second week in July. Mist hangs in the hollows as I head across the high ground to the fell gate. It is already starting to burn off with the rising sun.

I reach the fell gate second. One shepherd always gets there first. I suspect he is an insomniac.

Fell gate on time: check.

Soon the fell gate is a meeting place for eight or ten men and women. An assorted pack of sheepdogs, and other willing mongrels, circle excitedly. Occasionally, there is a snarl-up. Everyone is in short sleeves, booted and in an array of sunhats that won't win any fashion prizes. Over shoulders are slung tatty old bait-bags, packed with sandwiches, pop and cake. On bad days we stare nervously at the skyline and the clouds hugging the fells. Sometimes we have to turn back if the clouds are too low, and return later. It is dangerous up there in bad weather. Snow makes it potentially lethal. But today there is only one worry: the heat. One of the shepherds is late, so everyone is impatient and frustrated. We stand and curse him.

'He is always late.'

'Can't get up, that bugger.'

'Let's go without him. He will catch up.'

'No, we better wait.'

'Oh, here he is.'

A quad bike races up the fell-side road. A slightly flustered shepherd mumbles his apologies. He has been

gathering up some lambs down below that had escaped on to the road.

It doesn't matter. We need to get going. Move fast. The ewes and lambs are high up on the fells where the land meets the sky.

The oldest shepherd performs the function of a general on a battlefield. There is a bit in the movie *Zulu* when the natives' battle plan is described like the 'horns of a buffalo . . . that come around like pincers and encircle you'. That's a bit like the way we gather our fell. It takes six or eight people and a dozen or more dogs, involves hours of walking (though is made a little quicker by a quad bike on the driveable bits) and requires everyone to work more or less as a team. As you pass over the fell, you try to use your judgement to carve through between the flocks of our common and the sheep of the next, by judging their 'smit marks' – the coloured paint marks that identify the sheep to specific farms. Anyone ignorant of the flocks and the marks and the lie of land can make a terrible mess and push sheep on to a neighbouring common and thus make unnecessary work for everyone. We stand and chat, but it's a serious business. We must do what we're told. No fucking around.

One of the most experienced shepherds, called Shoddy, is sent over the fell tops to clear out some distant crags, high up where the green meets the blue. The best men and dogs are sent to the hardest places. He will define the far end of the gather, and act like a blocker when the sheep try to flee away from us, tucking them back down at the far end.

Joe, a younger fell shepherd with good dogs, is sent to clear out a long deep ravine (we call them ‘ghylls’, carved out by the beck over many centuries) on the left-hand arm of the gather where our common meets the next one. A great dog can bring sheep carefully out of the crags, moving left or right or stopping on a sixpence at a whistled command. A young or poorly trained dog would just fail to get them down, or worse, scare them into danger on the scree or rock faces.

These are good fell shepherds with a pack of good dogs apiece. They disappear off, one on a quad bike, the other loping off across the heather.

Two or three of us are sent up the left-hand side of the fell, after Joe, to sweep out the sheep across the fell to the right, with one of us peeling off to hold them that way every half mile or so. Each of us has a landmark we are to hold at.

Each of us is responsible for not letting any sheep break back past us – easy with a good dog, impossible without one. Farming the fells is only possible because of the bond between men and sheepdogs.

I’m the last one on this arm of the gather. I am to meet Shoddy at the far end. Wait at the Stones for the others, I’m told. Right.

The eldest shepherd takes a couple of men with him along a dusty old track to the right. He will form a break before the next common, pushing their sheep away and fetching ours back: he will form the right arm of the gather.

Men bawl to their dogs, who are excited and heading off after the wrong shepherds. We will meet them in a

few hours at the far end, past the peat hags – raised peat bogs that rise up out of the sward, like green, or brown, islands slowly emerging out of the earth. They form a sea of raised mounds, some twenty or thirty feet across, others acres in size. They are carved apart by little gulleys and valleys worn by the water, forming dangerous cliffs of black peat the height of a man, or deeper, that you can tumble into. The sheep rub their backs on these peaty cliff faces, giving their fleeces a coal-black hue that tells us this is where they live. In the sheltered low ground between the peat hags, sheep can be lost from sight and the quad bike can be easily turned over, so you have to pay attention to navigate through the bogs and ensure the flock is cleared out of them and pushed by the dogs away homewards. Beyond them, we meet at Wolf Crag and form a kind of noose, with all of the fell encircled and the sheep heading in the right direction for home.

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After the noise at the fell gate gathering, it quickly becomes a quieter and lonelier day's work. Most of it is spent far from other people, working with them, but far beyond talking distance. It is a day to work with the dogs. A fell dog is a special thing, tough as old boots, smart and capable of working semi-independently a long way across the mountain. I'm a lucky man to have two fine 'field' sheepdogs – Border collies. There isn't much they can't do in the valley bottom. They'll creep and crawl, and dart every which way, and hold sheep spellbound

with a look. They are my pride and joy, but they are not great fell dogs (not yet anyway). That's a totally different thing altogether. Fell dogs are their own type: they need to be strong and smart, and less about eye and more about following instruction or using their wits when beyond command.

As we head across the fell, we see some ewes that should be on our common beyond a deep ghyll on the mountainside opposite. I fear they are too far away to get them today. They will, I assume, come in with the neighbouring common and we will collect them later. But Joe, who is cleaning out that ghyll, has sent his dogs to get them. From where he is, he can scarcely see the sheep they are so far away. He is further away than we are. The dog lurches back, onwards, up and up, climbing higher and higher towards the distant skyline. A whistle or two reassures it that it should keep going for sheep it cannot see yet because of the lie of the land. Then the dog sees the sheep it has been sent for, and knows what to do. It circles behind them and pushes them out of the crags. They twist and turn ever downwards and back towards us, then disappear down the far side of the ghyll. Ten minutes after the dogs were sent for them, the sheep rise up out of the ghyll close to our feet. They are beaten and they know it. They trot obediently across the moorland and join the flow of sheep heading home. The dog sees that we have them now and turns back down to its master deep below. Joe gives us a distant wave and heads off. A dog like that is worth its

weight in gold. My mouth was slightly open in awe when I saw how distant it was on the skyline. I had to shut it not to seem silly. My dogs, for all their merits, couldn't have done that. We aren't easily impressed but there is a kind of respectful hush at what we have just seen.

An old shepherd turns to me and says, 'That is a proper fell dog.'

'Yes,' I acknowledge, 'but don't tell him. His head will swell.'

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At the far end of the fell, I wait as I've been told. I'm not sure whether it is seconds, minutes or hours that pass there, because there is no sense of time.

I watch small trickles of sheep heading home, pushed by the men left behind me. Joe has almost cleared the ghyll out and I join up with him to cut across the far end of the fell. We pause to admire a Herdwick tup (ram) lamb that is passing us, chased by the dogs.

'Look at that.'

'Yes.'

'It is one of yours.'

'I know.'

'The mother just passed without it a minute ago.'

'It will win shows that one.'

'Maybe.'

'Time will tell.'

He cuts behind me and pushes the sheep across the heather. And I head around the skyline, pushing sheep down to Joe and clearing out the peat hags. I am the furthest point from home now. I see my world stretched beneath us, the three kinds of farmland that make up our world: meadows (or ‘in-bye’), intake and fells. The farming year here revolves around the managed movement of the sheep between these three kinds of land.

A fell farm is at heart a simple thing. It is a way of farming that has evolved to take advantage of the summer growth of grass in the mountains to produce things that farmers can consume themselves, in a subsistence model, or sell to earn their keep.

Nothing makes sense without reference to what went before, and what comes afterwards. It is literally a chicken and egg thing (or a sheep and lamb thing, if you prefer). But it might help if I explain briefly the basic structure of our working year. At its simplest it works like this . . .

Midsummer we keep the lambs healthy, gather the ewes and lambs down from the fells or intakes for clipping and make the hay for winter.

Autumn sees us bring the sheep down from the fells or higher ground again, for the autumn sales and shows, taking the lambs from their mothers (who can then recover from their efforts) and preparing and selling the surplus lambs and ewes in the ‘harvest of the fells’. In these few short weeks we make most of our annual income, from selling surplus breeding females to the lowlands and a handful of breeding males that are good enough to be sold to other breeders at a premium.

Late autumn is about starting the breeding cycle by putting the tups with the ewes, including the newly bought tups from other flocks. It is also when the retained lambs (those required for the future of the flock) are sent away for winter to lowland farms. Through late autumn and winter we also fatten and sell our spare male (wether) lambs to butchers for meat. Our farming is largely about producing breeding sheep for sale to other farmers (who value the daughters of the fell flocks because they are tough and productive on lower ground) and male lambs for meat from the abundance of grass in the mountains between May and October. There is an intermediate trade in these lambs called selling them 'store', which has a middleman buy them and fatten them. What money we make is from these two kinds of production.

Winter is about looking after the core breeding flock through the worst weather of the year, feeding them when needed. Our sheep eat grass for much of the year until it disappears in the winter months, when we need to feed them the hay.

Late winter/early spring we tend to the pregnant ewes and prepare for lambing time.

Spring revolves around lambing the ewes on the best land we have (the in-bye), and looking after hundreds of young lambs.

Late spring/early summer we are marking, vaccinating and worming the ewes and lambs and pushing them to the fells and intakes to take advantage of the summer growth of grass, freeing the valley bottoms to grow the hay for winter.

And then we do it all again, just as our forefathers did before us. It is a farming pattern fundamentally unchanged from many centuries ago. It has changed in scale (as farms have amalgamated to survive, so there are fewer of us), but not in its basic content. You could bring a Viking man to stand on our fell with me and he would understand what we were doing and the basic pattern of our farming year. The timing of each task varies depending on the different valleys and farms. Things are driven by the seasons and necessity, not by our will.

Sometimes you are left alone somewhere on the mountain, waiting for the others, alone in the silence. Skylarks rise, ascending in song. Sometimes there are moments when not a sheep or a man can be seen. Away in the distance you can see the main roads and the villages. No one really knows how long this fell gathering has been happening, but quite possibly for as many as five thousand years.

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Beneath my feet and all around me is the rough mountainous grazing land. Traditionally, Lake District farms like ours had common grazing rights for a set number of sheep on the common belonging to their manor. The numbers were fixed by custom and communal management to reflect the grazing capacity of the fell and the winter grazing capacity of the farms down below. This was, and is, a system that requires rules and customs to prevent abuse, cheating or mismanagement. Before

mobile phones or email, the only way that people could work collectively to manage this land was to have agreed traditions and practices – making it clear what everyone was supposed to do, when and how. There were even manorial courts to punish wrongdoing with fines, a practice that still exists through the commoners' associations. We collect stray sheep from each other at our shepherds' meet in November, or we are fined by the other commoners. Travelling by road from one side of a common to the other to collect a stray can be a ninety-mile, or more, round trip. Some farms still have stocks on different commons, so some fell shepherds spend a lot of their lives gathering different fells. Some farm lads specialize in this kind of gathering as an extra way to earn their living, and have packs of sheepdogs for the work.

There is a poetic fantasy that shepherds, and farmers, live a kind of isolated existence alone with nature. Wordsworth encouraged that idea, offering the world an image from his childhood of the shepherd alone in the fells with his dogs, at one with nature. At times this is physically true to life – men like my grandfather were sometimes alone with their sheep and the natural world. But it is equally true that shepherds don't exist alone, culturally or economically. My grandfather had a field called the 'Football Pitch'. There were enough young men working on the neighbouring farms that they could muster two teams for a match. And his work was about dealing with, and ultimately impressing and earning the respect of, other people.

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Apparently the Bedouin can navigate the Sahara because they have an extensive knowledge of the dunes and sandy ridges, and even though these move slowly over time, they can count the ridges and know with a degree of accuracy where they are and how to get to where they are going. Our cultural navigation, our placing of ourselves and other people, works on a similar structural basis – if you understand the bones of it, you can navigate the detail.

My grandfather and father could go just about anywhere in northern England and they'd usually know who farmed the land and often who had been there previously, or who farmed next door. The whole landscape here is a complex web of relationships between farms, flocks and families. My old man can hardly spell common words, but has an encyclopaedic knowledge of landscape. I think it makes a mockery of conventional ideas about who is and isn't 'intelligent'. Some of the smartest people I have ever known are semi-literate.

If my grandfather could find out where someone farmed, the breeds of livestock they kept, and which auction mart they frequented, he could quickly find common ground with any farmer in the north of England, or even in the rest of the UK. He knew what everyone was likely to be doing at any given time of year. 'Don't bother going to see the Wilsons . . . They'll be too busy dressing mule hogs [the beautiful ewe lambs they sold each autumn for breeding on lowland farms] today,' he'd say. And if you went to the farm over the hill that he was talking about, you'd see that he would be right.