

## **Hill Moorland Heft in Northern England** **Restocking After a Cull**

This case study demonstrates the practise of hefting in Cumbria and the difficulties they incurred to restock the entire common after they were culled in the 2001 Foot and Mouth epidemic. At the same time as restocking the common entered an ESA agreement.

A farm in Cumbria at 1000ft above sea level and with 75 inches of rain a year, has been farmed by the same family for 6 generations. The farm includes 107ha (265 acres) of in-bye ground and 110ha (272 acres) of fell grazing on Caldbeck Common. Caldbeck is a 4050ha (10,000 acre) common owned by the Lake District National Park Authority and runs as a single unit, unfenced from the Skiddaw massif of some 15,390ha (38,000 acres), between Caldbeck and Keswick, with Skiddaw itself rising to 931m above sea level. Caldbeck Common is a 'white fell', the dominant vegetation being white bent (*nardus stricta*).

The farm is wet, peaty land in need of drainage but, on a limestone substrate, the pH levels are good and there are no mineral deficiencies. The in-bye land is all grass, some 15 to 20ha (40 or 50 acres) of it having never been ploughed because it is too stony. As well as sheep a 50 cow suckler herd is kept, remaining in-bye all year round.



The flock on Caldbeck Common

During the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001 all the flocks hefted on Caldbeck Common were slaughtered. The prospect of re-stocking and re-hefting the flocks was a daunting one. Although occasionally one flock might be changed and new sheep introduced to a heft they were always surrounded by well settled hefted flocks who knew their own boundaries and so helped to keep the new sheep contained. Re-hefting an entire common at once had never been attempted before and no-one knew whether it could be done but the commoners were determined that it had to be. The farmer is full of praise for the approach and support offered by Natural England at the time. "They knew nothing about hefting but were open minded and keen to learn. They were determined to help us achieve what might have been the impossible."

Natural England provided funding in the form of a lump sum to the Commoner's Association who divided it amongst themselves on the basis of an hourly rate for shepherding work. When the new flock was first turned out on the common, in January 2002, the farmer visited them twice a day to feed them and shepherd back to their heft those that had strayed. This took around three hours a day and used twice the amount of feed that would have been necessary normally. The heft is accessible with a vehicle and so it was practical to take concentrates, sugar beet nuts and haylage out to the flock. Feeding was continued throughout the first summer, until shearing.

The commoners agreed on a mid morning feed time so that every heft was fed simultaneously. The sheep would soon associate the sound of a vehicle's engine and horn with feed and the aim was to avoid sheep learning to travel from one heft to the next in the hope of more food.

Initially all the sheep would wander away, then it would be smaller groups and then just individuals. Gradually most sheep learned where they belonged and the few individual animals that did not were removed from the common and brought in-bye. The farmer states, "It took two winters and two summers before they settled."

Walkers with dogs were a big problem at that time because if sheep were pushed off their heft they didn't have the knowledge to return. Knowledge of the nature as well as the boundaries of their heft is a trait that a flock takes time to develop, and cannot be bought in. A few weeks after re-stocking there was a heavy fall of snow and it was not possible to reach the sheep for a few days. When they could be visited again it was found that six sheep had perished in peat hags. Sheep from the old established flock would never have gone in there.

At the same time as re-stocking the commoners also entered an ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area) agreement on Caldbeck Common. This imposed a limitation on the stocking rate, but the reduction from 12,000 to 5000 sheep was achieved because many commoners did not wish to re-stock after foot and mouth. Some were too old for it to be worthwhile and either retired or reduced their farming early, whilst others opted for different farming systems and decided not to use the common. The number of graziers actively using Caldbeck Common went from 34 pre foot and mouth to 24 since.

Prior to foot and mouth the farmer kept a flock of 330 Swaledale ewes on Caldbeck common but since re-stocking, and to accommodate the ESA, he now has 230 ewes. The common as a whole has a limit of 5000 head in summer with 25% less in winter. The ESA offers an incentive of £32 per head per year, to reduce numbers. This is considered a generous compensation, but was agreed in the days of Ewe Premium payments, which would have been lost.



Swaledale

The farmer had always kept Swaledales and when re-stocking he tried to replace his flock with a similar type to those he lost, but this did not prove to be easy. The prices went right up after foot and mouth, probably because so many farmers needed replacement stock at the same time. The farmer states that, "Draft ewes were making £120 to £150 and shearlings were £200 plus. It was just not possible to get stock of the quality that we lost."

Now, six years later, the quality of the flock is improving, but has still not reached previous levels that had taken so long to attain. One particular issue is the type of wool. The farmer dislikes sheep with too much wool or with too much black wool. With milder winters due to climate change excessively long heavy fleeces are not necessary for warmth and compromise carcass quality. The farmer is aiming for wool as short as possible, without too much black on belly and legs because he finds that this type of ewe produces the best quality lamb.

Swaledale fleeces are worth 20p each but the sheep cost 60p each to shear. The wool is quite coarse and mainly used for carpets. The influence of the Blue Faced Leicester improves the quality and fleeces from mules are worth 35 to 38p, although they are so fine they weigh very little, the farmer explains.

Ewes are brought in from the Common around the 10<sup>th</sup> November for tugging. The ESA requires sheep to be removed from 15<sup>th</sup> November to 7<sup>th</sup> January, so they are turned out again then, although the farmer believes that earlier would be better. They come in again in the first week of April for lambing. Prior to the ESA stocking restrictions a lambing percentage of 110% would have been usual but this has risen to 150%. The farmer is unable to say whether this is due to more feed being available on the common or more time spent off the common on in-bye ground, or possibly a combination. Ewes and lambs are turned out to the common again between May and July. A ewe with twins can have difficulty feeding both lambs on the common so often wether lambs are taken away, leaving just the ewe lamb of the pair.

In mid July the flock is brought in for clipping, dipping and weaning. The ewes are turned back out to the common again whilst the lambs remain in-bye and are finished indoors. The aim is to finish the last lambs just before the ewes come in again for lambing the following spring.

Caldbeck Common has a strong Commoners Association and everyone brings their sheep in for dipping at the same times, three times a year, in July, October and January. There is consequently no sheep scab on the common and very few ticks.



Some of the flock on their heft

Ewes spend three winters living out on their heft and are then brought to in-bye land to breed mules. Some mule gimmer lambs are sold, but the demand is decreasing. 125 mule ewes are kept, which are then put to a Texel ram to breed a terminal lamb. Around 80 replacement ewe hoggs are retained each year and away wintered for their first winter on a dairy farm at a cost of £13 per head. The sheep will be returned to the fell in early April, before the dairy cows need the grass. This system allows the gimmers to put on condition before they are tupped and so be better able to care for their first lamb. However, it does mean that they have only known the fell during their first summer, as a lamb, so they may need shepherding at first.

One consequence of the higher lambing percentage is that the twins are smaller lambs and take longer to finish. More feed has to be purchased and there is more work involved but there are a greater number of lambs to sell. With straw included, the farmer estimates it costs him £1.30 per lamb per week when he brings them indoors, which last year averaged 62 days each. As finished lambs they made £46.60 last week, (w.c. 18/02/08) and would only be worth around £12 to £14 if sold as stores, so this remains a worthwhile enterprise. However, with feed costs still escalating a field of roots may be sown this year as an alternative.

The management of hefted flocks across Caldbeck Common is believed to be the only way to manage the grazing properly. There are parts with good grazing and parts with poor grazing but hefting ensures an even use. Even within a heft the lower areas are grazed more than the tops, but there is less keep on the higher ground anyway. Re-hefting Caldbeck Common was a remarkable achievement due largely to the dedication and determination of the commoners. The farmer said, "We didn't know whether we could do it, but it was unthinkable that it should not be done."