

Implications of Agri-environment Schemes on Hefting in Northern England

This case study demonstrates the implications of agri-environmental schemes in the Lake District National Park. This farm is subject of an ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area) agreement. The farm lies at the South Eastern end of Buttermere lake in the Cumbrian Mountains. This is a very hard fell farm in the heart of rough fell country, with sheer rock face and scree slopes and much inaccessible land.

The family has farmed this farm since 1932 when the present farmer's grandfather took the farm, along with its hefted Herdwick flock, as a tenant. The farm was bought, complete with the sheep in 1963. The bloodlines of the present flock have been hefted here for as long as anyone can remember.



A hard fell farm

The farmstead lies at around 100m above sea level with fell land rising to over 800m. There are 20ha (50 acres) of in-bye land on the farm, and another 25ha (62 acres) a few miles away. The rest of the farm is harsh rough grazing including 365ha (900 acres) of intake and 1944ha (4,800 acres) of open fell.

The farm now runs two and a half thousand sheep including both Swaledales and Herdwicks. The farmer states that the Herdwicks are tougher than the Swaledales, producing three crops of lambs to the Swaledale's two. At present there are 800 ewes out on the fell. Ewes are not tupp until their third year.

Due to the ESA stocking restriction ewe hoggs and gimmer shearlings are sent away to grass keep for their first two winters, from 1st November to 1st April. This year 1100 were sent away at a cost of £12 to £14 a head. Young gimmer hoggs were always sent away to grass keep for one winter but, prior to the ESA, shearlings would have been turned onto the fell.

This new practice means that replacement ewes have limited experience of living on the fell in their early years and they do not learn their heft so well. They therefore tend to wander more than would have been the case when they spent less time away. Adjacent common land is subject of an HLS (Higher Level Stewardship) agreement which requires all stock to be removed over winter. This lack of pressure from neighbouring sheep encourages sheep from the farm to spread out onto the neighbouring Common, a previously unknown occurrence.



Herdwicks on the fell

Another consequence of replacement ewes spending their first two winters at grass keep is a marked increase in the lambing percentage. Prior to the ESA 80% would have been expected but this is now commonly 120%. Ewes come into in-bye ground or intakes for lambing and supplementary feed is offered to the ewes scanned as carrying doubles. The Swaledales eat this eagerly but the Herdwicks will not often accept it. The ewes cannot manage to feed two lambs on fell grazing so the wether lambs of doubles are taken off before the ewes are turned back to the fell after lambing. Wether lambs are sent to the in-bye ground a few miles away to fatten and are supplemented with an 18%

protein concentrate. Around half reach 30kg and are sold as light lambs between October and December whilst the other half will finish between February and March weighing perhaps 40 to 45kg.

Replacement ewes brought up on in-bye ground are softer than they would be if they had spent more of their life on the fell. Twinters (yearlings) now look for Rumevite blocks, which they never used to eat.

An additional grazing incentive is offered by Natural England of £40 per head per year to keep 100 wethers out on Fleetwith Pike. The object is to encourage grazing of certain coarse vegetation on the top, at 648m above sea level, which it is believed the ewes would disregard and wethers naturally go to the tops. So wethers born of ewes hefted to Fleetwith Pike are marked at birth and, after spending a year away on in-bye ground, they are turned back there.



Fleetwith Pike

The nature of the rough fell land makes shepherding very difficult. Much of the land is completely inaccessible to any vehicle, even a quad bike or a horse, and can only be reached on foot. Every summer a charter helicopter makes deliveries of feed and drops a store of Rumevite blocks up in the fells. Over the winter this store can be reached on foot weekly and the blocks opened up and put out for the ewes on the high land. At £700 an hour this is an expensive operation, but is the only way to take any feed out there.

Gathering all the sheep takes a week to ten days, depending on the weather, with three or sometimes four people working with up to 18 dogs. Good dogs

are vital in this country and it is usual to have a range of ages, so that there is always a senior, experienced dog and a young one coming on. Working on the steep hills develops big shoulder muscles, often turning out their elbows, and the dogs' feet become splayed from constantly jumping down.

Herdwicks are the hardiest sheep in Britain renowned for their exceptional hefting instincts and as an ancient Lake District breed are part of the heritage of the area. The Lake District is the only area where Herdwicks are kept on a commercial scale and most are managed as hefted flocks out on the fells.

