

Bill Brocklehurst

Bill was born in 1943. His grandfather was farm bailiff at a farm near Buxton, and later the family had the grazing rights on 5,300 acres of high moorland around the Cat and Fiddle. Bill Brocklehurst knows the moors of the South West Peak in ways that few people can ever know a landscape. Bill became Peak District National Park warden on the Roaches in 1999 before he retired in 2013, but for most of his life he was first and foremost a shepherd.

Part One. Three generations of moorland sheep farmers

CG: You were born at a period where we are on the edge of some of the biggest changes in agriculture were just going to start, so could you tell us a bit about your family and your family's life going back to your earliest childhood years.

BB: Me father, when he left school at thirteen he got a job at Ford Hall at Chapel-en-le-Frith as head horseman. Thirteen year old, and he were there quite a few years. 'Cos Ford Hall in them days, it was quite an estate. He were reared with two of his Uncles and an Aunt, and before he left school, he said at hay time, he had to go out, get some horses, rig 'em up, and he had to mow an acre of grass before he went to school in the morning. So, he were well prepared for dealing with horses and he went to Ford Hall and he were head horseman, 'cos there weren't another horseman. There were some hired labour. One were called David Slack and a chap called Joe Wardle who finished up at Orchard Farm at Flash. As well as his horseman duties, he'd got to help out on the estate and that. And he could recollect, it were middle of June, going up on top of Cowburn Tunnel between Edale and Chapel-en-le-Frith, near big chimney where smoke comes out from tunnel, catching sheep what they'd missed at shearing time. And he said 'in folds, big holes in ground, they'd still have snow in 'em'. That were middle of June.

BB: And he met me mother, she was a cook in Chapel-en-le-Frith at the doctors. She came out of Chester-le-Street, County Durham. That's perhaps where I've got my funny accent from. They got married, they went down into Northamptonshire, he'd got a shepherd's job. He took me mother down there. Me eldest sister, she was born down there, and then when we came back up 'ere they had two lads, me and me brother.

CG: So, obviously the work of a shepherd, this is another world now, the idea that your entire life is wrapped around taking care of a flock of sheep. What did that work involve?

BB: He'd got for tend 'em, lamb 'em and of course, in them days everything were outside and they grew a lot of turnips, so they folded 'em through winter, put pens round 'em, ate 'em off, then move 'em onto another bit. And me dad always reckoned winters when east wind were blowing, it were a damn sight colder in Northamptonshire than it were in Derbyshire, 'cos there were nowt t' stop it. This farm grew a lot of turnips, some for t' sheep and that, and they grew a big lot for some jam company. These turnips, they went in for bulking jam up, the strawberry jam. This was done during and after the war. They didn't have to say what was in it then, did they.

BB: Then me grandfather, he got the grazing rights on the catchment area of Fernilee Reservoir. But in them days, there were very few sheep and he wanted some help, so me dad moved back up. He lived at Normanwood farm at Taxal and when he moved back up, they hadn't many sheep and he got a job as rabbit catcher through winter months and he were rabbit catcher all through winter months in Goyt Valley and up round Errwood for a gamekeeper from up there, chap called Tom Bell who lived at Tunnel Farm. And he caught rabbits all through winter, snared 'em, and if it froze 'ard, they ferreted 'em. His best tally, he said, one night's snaring were four hundred and eighty rabbits. They were a big pest and they were a source of income.

CG: So, you've got your farm, what was on the farm?

BB: In them days I think Dad only an odd cow and everything were just geared round sheep. The cow were just for our own use to make us self-sufficient.

CG: And how many sheep did you have at the time?

BB: Me grandad used to say 'a wise man never asks, and a fool never knows'. So, don't ask me that question. You don't ask them questions.

CG: Normanwood farm was owned by who?

BB: All farms in area then were owned by Stockport Corporation. When they bought the valley that made Fernilee Reservoir, they bought all the farms below the dam as well so they could have a say-so as to what happened or where they wanted to put the pipelines.

CG: So, how long were your parents and you still farming on there?

BB: We were at Normanwood 'til I was nine year old and me granddad he retired from Oldfield and went across living in Fernilee village. I was born '43, it was the early to mid fifties. We moved, it's only about quarter of a mile. So, we moved over there.

CG: Had your Grandad been farming all that time?

BB: No, he started off, his first job he worked down in gunpowder mill in Goyt, he worked there. He did a spell as a policeman in Manchester, that's where he met me Granny Brocklehurst. She come from Wisbeach. She were up in service in Manchester. Me granddad met up with her there and he packed that up and come back to Fernilee on Tom Farm and he were a farm bailiff at a farm just outside Buxton. Then when the opportunity came for t' get this farm at Oldfield, and this big area of land for running sheep on, he took it.

CG: What sort of land area did you have for grazing. Was it a big, big area?

BB: I think we had about 5,300 acres, something like that. Huge area. There were nobody else on at the start and then as the years went on, one of me uncles, he came in with me granddad as well and one or two people round top boundaries, they ran a few sheep on. There'd probably only be four or five men. It was really hard work. It was all walking. If you started rounding your sheep up at Cat and Fiddle you walked up there first. It were four mile or more, and you'd be out on the hill all day.

CG: Was this a good way to spend your childhood and youth would you say?

BB: It was all I knew, it was all I knew.

CG: You can remember that as a teenager going out with your Dad all the time?

BB: I left school at fifteen and me dad bought me a good working dog and a pair of horse-hide boots built on a full-sprung last, if you know what them are. The toes turn up on 'em. He bought them from a firm at Gothbury called Rogersons and they specialised in making hill boots for game-keepers and hill shepherds. And they were made out of horse-hide and a pair'd last me two years. I can't even remember when I did have wellingtons, that's always what we wore, boots. And he said 'get a saw and go down to wood and cut yourself a stick'. So, I was a shepherd then, pound a week and me keep. I worked for me dad. There were no thought of getting a job or doing anything else. The labour was needed at home. Me brother was already working on farm. He's five years older and when we buried him, one of me lads said he'd never seen such a big coffin. He was a bit overweight me brother.

CG: So how many of you were working on the farm?

BB: There was me sister who's still living, she lives up Mac Forest. She's eighty, she's full of knowledge from Goyt Valley still. There were me sister, me brother and me. And me sister got married and went, just as I were leaving school.

CG: So, we're on your farm now, and into your twenties, you still working for your Dad. Was that okay?

BB: Yes, I was still working for me dad. It were alright. All through summer it were sheep, sheep, sheep, that were all we knew. We didn't make a lot of hay. They made a bit but you know, sheep weren't thick on and there was food for 'em for t'eat. He made a bit of hay in case of emergencies. Then 12th of August, that were always a big thing to look forward to for the grouse shooting. We always went beating and you met up with people as you've not seen for twelve months or so on. It were always a great get-gather that were. We'd go up sometimes a couple of days a week, sometimes couple of days a fortnight. But we helped keepers out because they did us a lot of good if they saw anything up with sheep up top end, like. You know they'd let ya know or put it right.

CG: Do you like sheep?

BB: Yes, I've been in sheep all me life. When I were showing Gritstones in about 1988 I won the male and female champion at Royal Show with Gritstones. I won champion Gritstone at Royal Welsh Show for three years in late '80s, early '90s. Now I've got a big carrier bag full of rosettes from me dad. He showed sheep all his life. Wherever Royal Show were in them days, 'cos it moved around, him and a few other farmers in area, they'd troop off and be there for t' week. Me dad kept Derbyshire Gritstones always. They were lovely sheep. They're very versatile, hardy, got a good long carcass, and a good fleece. Most of Gritstone wool went for hosiery. It were that good.

CG: That was the next thing to say about, 'cause the wonderful value of sheep, half of it is pretty much lost now, isn't it. The wool...

BB: Wool's worth nothing now. When I were still going to school I used for t' go round shows with me dad, just showing wool. And Todmorden Show up at Lancashire, me dad always went there showing. I think I were unbeaten for donkeys years in wool class. They always showed it on hoof, still on sheep. Then in latter years we started showing fleeces, 'cos they did away with on hoof fleece classes. So, we had t' take actual fleeces and we had some very nice trophies what I've won from them. When we were younger, Patons and Baldwins at Holmfirth took all our wool. I think you can still buy knitting wool made be them. Course, then everything got swallowed up by British Wool Marketing Board. But every time wool went in, me dad always loaded us lads up and we went up and saw it graded and had a big hot dinner off 'em and it was very eye-opening. So, we selected our rams not only for meat quality, but for wool quality, because in them days your fleece was quite a worthwhile project.

CG: Everything you're saying, there's a tremendous pride in what you were doing. You knew that what you were doing was immensely valuable to several industries really. To feed people and clothe them, I mean, what could be more valuable than that in a way.

CG: You were on the farm, so what was your thinking about that? Were you thinking I'll stay here and take over from Dad or how did you feel about it?

BB: It didn't go through your mind in them days. You didn't think about anything like that. I stayed on farm then me dad retired, he pulled out of big sheep run and be that time we'd lost about half of it. Forestry Commission came in in '64 and started planting. They took two and a half thousand acres, Forestry Commission.

CG: Half of the territory that was open moorland became planted up. What did you think about that at the time?

BB: It was work, we got extra work with it. Fencing, rabbit shooting, fire watching, fence-walking. It appealed to us, glad of the work.

CG: Your Dad retired when?

BB: Me dad retired in '80s, he died in '84. He worked up 'til when he retired. He had a heart attack and that slowed him down. And we started diversifying, we had some livery horses, I rented some ground round and I started running me own pheasant and grouse shoot, grew a few Christmas trees, did some forestry contracting, you know. I continued enjoying it up there. You had enough money to survive, but only survive. Kids were growing up, the three of them. Me daughter lives just outside Cardigan, she spent a fair number of years at Machynlleth. I've a lad at Peak Forest, the youngest, he went straight from school to Blue Circle Cement Works. Been there ever since, mechanic-ing. The other lad he's up in Market Weighton, in East Yorkshire.

CG: Coming back to you and your farm. So, you're doing a bit of forestry work and working with the sheep...

BB: Forestry and part-time game-keeping, I enjoyed it, you know.

CG: But you ended up working for the National Park. What made you make that shift?

BB: I started wit' National Park in '99, I did thirteen years on Roaches. We packed up, sold up from farming in '96. I thought, 'wouldn't it be nice if we had a wage paid every week instead of having to go out there'. We owned the farm at this point. Me Dad had bought farm off water board in '68. So, things were going downhill. Farming, well it still is, one of the few industries 'as take the produce to market and take what they're given. You have a factory, you tell the person who's buying it how much it's going to cost him. Farming, you go to market and the other end give you what they want give you and it were no good. Just all your costs were going up. Everything you touched went up. You didn't buy much machinery. Your basics were your tractor, perhaps a loader, we always had a mowing machine and you'd have a trailer. You just didn't have a lot of machinery. The money wasn't there to buy a lot of machinery and you didn't need it. Same as silaging and such like, there were plenty of people contracting out.

CG: So you were the ranger for the Roaches? What did that involve?

BB: I was the warden on the Roaches. It involved keeping Joe Public on the straight and narrow, predator control, fencing, dry stone walling, path repairs, path drainage, you name it. Not everyone could have done this job unless they'd come from another moorland background. Getting your dry stone walling skills, your heather burning skills and your predator control skills together, they're not all there in everybody. My experience made me suitable for the job. I've no certificates for anything, never been to university or anything. I enjoyed it. I've been retired two years, that's why I can say what I want.

CG: Tell us what you used to see? Can you give us a list of what was around?

BB: It were mainly your curlews, golden plover, they were everywhere. Your ring ouzels, ring ouzels everywhere they were. They're now very, very rare. I don't think there's so many ring ouzels stay. When I were on Roaches when I started, we used to monitor them, one or two nest sites and you'd have bunches perhaps in teens would stop off in spring and feed as they flew farther north. By time I finished on Roaches, that didn't happen anymore. When I started on Roaches, there were a few wheatears still, and part of me job were predator control. After about three or four years, I got rid of a lot of stoats and weasels and crows and stuff, there were wheatears everywhere. They're a grand little bird. What there is now, I've no idea. Stonechats came back. Whinchats came back. There were snipe on the top of Goldstitch Moss. You'd see odd one on Roaches. Curlews, they'd about gone off Roaches but they did come back once I got me burning regime in place. And then these 'ere model aeroplane men insisted on flying their model aeroplanes and curlews went.