

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. For most of his working life, Bill was first and foremost a shepherd. In this part of the interview, Bill describes the challenges and yearly cycle for a hill shepherd.

Part Two. Shepherding

CG: The word shepherd, it runs right through our culture, right through every culture just about in the world as care, doesn't it? You associate shepherding with care, looking after, protecting from danger, protecting...

BB: And in them days we were shepherds. There were no four-wheel drive motorbikes. You walked, you walked everywhere. And when you were walking, you were seeing things.

CG: But what about the other particular cares, because I remember my mum talking about them tarring the sheep and putting stock on tar if they found things. If there were worms or things, they'd cut them out, but they'd treat everything individually, every sheep.

BB: When I were young, you didn't get worms in moorland sheep, 'cos they were so thin on that they didn't get a worm buried in 'em. If they got maggots, if they got blown, there was Stockholm tar, if you found 'em in time. If you were out and walking you saw all these things. 'Cos if they got blown, they tended for t' get in bracken beds, out of sight, and if you didn't see 'em, you always had a good dog, and dog 'd wind 'em, so you'd go with your dog. He'd find 'em.

Julia: When you were farming your sheep, can you describe the cycle of a year?

BB: Before lambing like, obviously you'd round up and some of sheep we lambed outside because we hadn't enough in-by land for t' bring 'em in for lambing and a fair lot, you know, they were lambed out in t' open. And you needed a good dog. And lambing time, I always loved lambing time. It were like Christmas. Then, when that'd finished, you'd have to set to and round 'em all up and ear-mark 'em. All lambs were ear-marked then, no tags or anything. Ear-marking was a series of notches in your lamb's ear. When they were notched, that were with 'em 'til they died.

CG: With this large number of sheep, did you feel that you knew them?

BB: Oh yeh, if some went missing, you knew that such a sheep were missing. Look at some of 'em pages, it gives you ear-marks for all these different farms. They all had a specific either horn burn, raddle-mark or ear-mark. These 'ere agricultural merchants as made all these things for agriculture, they made all these different shapes for each farm. I've still got me ear-markers, I've still got them.

CG: And when it came to shearing, when did you do your shearing?

BB: Usually July you'd start on shearing. It were still odd years, we'd shear and then the next morning you'd find one or two had frozen t' death, it was that cold. When you sheared, you rounded 'em up, brought 'em in, sheared 'em, dipped 'em in plenty of organo-phosphorus or arsenic dip for t' kill bugs on 'em, mark 'em, ready for t' let 'em out again next day, when you'd gather next piece of land in.

CG: Did you remember when the chemical dips first came in?

BB: It were a liquid form when I first remember, but me dad said when they first started it come in like a block of soap and that were arsenic. So, they had to cut it up, melt it in hot water for t' put it in dip. The big thing in them days was sheep scab. It 'ud decimated a lot of sheep flocks, so Government brought in that all sheep had got t' be dipped and immersed. Cooper, McDougal and Robertson, they made a lot of sheep dip in them days, and t' start off it come like a block of soap and then they perfected it into a liquid.

CG: Is this two different dips, the arsenic and the organo-phosphate?

BB: Organo-phosphates came in later on, in the '50s. We started with arsenical dip. It came in like a block and they made it up. I never heard tell of anybody dying from using that. Then there was dieldrin dip, organo-chlorine. That were killing eagles or something, if they ate dead sheep. As they went on, they got onto these organo-phosphorus stuff and forgot t' tell farmers, you know, be careful else it'll kill yer.

CG: So we've gone from these cycles where things are terribly bad for the environment and then terribly bad for people. I think we are back on the bad for people ones now, aren't we?

BB: I've no idea what's in dip nowadays.

CG: So, you were doing all that, did you get training from the ministry people?

BB: Training? No training. The only person that came out were policeman. You had to inform police you were dipping in them days, and they had to come out and get their watch out, see as sheep 'ad been in tub for a minute. Some of t' policeman come out and they'd stand there and time every sheep 'til they got fed up and went. Others 'ud come out and look at dip tub, have a cup of tea and bacon butty. When we finished, plug were knocked out of bottom of t' dip and it percolated in them days. Percolated.

CG: We've been through lambing and shearing and dipping in the summer....

BB: Then as you get t' back end, obviously you started selling lambs, your draft sheep and that. Now, when I left school, we walked 'em to Buxton market, sheep what we were selling, and it were my job with a dog on a piece of string to walk in front so that sheep couldn't get too far ahead, like. We used to walk 'em up Terrace Road in Buxton, into cattle market at Buxton. We walked them from halfway up Long Hill. We'd probably walk 'em about four mile. We'd go cross country part way then follow main road, but you didn't see many cars, though. And then there were a guy used to come from Northamptonshire, where me dad worked when he were first married, and he used to come and buy draft ewes. And he'd buy so many pens full, and he'd have trucks ordered off British Rail and we had t' walk 'em back down Terrace Road and put 'em in cattle pens at Buxton Station and then they'd go by rail down to Northampton. Draft ewes were sheep as 'ud done about three years on t' hill, they'd be starting wearing out a bit by then. Anything as me dad didn't like, you'd get some as 'ud be buggers for straying like. So, when we caught 'em, they had a piece of string tied in their ear. So, they all went to a fresh road. Surplus lambs, a few breeding tups, you'd take them.

CG: So, you'd be buying there as well?

BB: He'd only buy tups. Sheep sales were mainly round September going into October. If there was a tup as he'd fancy, he'd buy that, and they used to go t' Haslington market. I think it's Lancashire, Haslington. 'Cos there were a big sheep

sale there and he'd be able t' buy Gritstone tups there as well. Keep buying fresh blood. All ewes were Gritstone, home bred females. Once they'd got a flock established, they never bought any females.

Julia: Can you remember who the auctioneers were at that time?

BB: The auctioneer was Peter Hampson. He always sold sheep, Peter did. He had his trilby on, rubber trench coat, his brown long leggings on and brown boots. He worked for Hampson brothers, Buxton. He'd go round pens, sell 'em in pens, the sheep. And if he could get you a shilling, another shilling, he would do, Peter would. He was a proper gentleman. He'd been in Territorial Army. He was straight as a die, right 'til end, Peter were. If Peter said anything, everybody knew that were gospel. I think sales 'ud be once a fortnight and last sale were always October fair. I can't just think what day it were, but it was always right at end of October and very often it'd be snowing in Buxton.

CG: When would the tups go out with the ewes?

BB: 21st of November, they went out. 'Cos we brought all sheep in t' in-land, and it were sorting 'em out every day as 'ud been raddled, t' take pressure off land. We had Venetian red powder and engine oil, mixed it up in a tub and we had a flat sticker about so big and one lad caught tup, sat him up, other one went up and phwoop, rub some of this on his brisket. Next tup they raddled. So, when they mounted sheep, they left a red mark. And we'd have t' sort, we'd have 'em in every day riddling out. We'd have a race and they'd all run up through race, and there were a man at top with a little gate, anything with a red rump, that went in one pen and they went back out on t' moor. All others went in t' other pen and back in t' field. We used to raddle about every couple of days. Most of 'em 'ud be tupped within three weeks. Because you know, we hadn't enough grass for t' feed 'em all. The marked ones went through yard gate, we just tipped 'em out and next day they'd be back at Cat and Fiddle, back on their own ground. They'd all be back on their own territory. That would take us into winter, into December and then we only had a few cows then. They didn't take much maintenance. And then when it snowed, it were fox catching.

BB: We used to have horrendous problems with foxes when we were lambing out. If there were a bit of snow you saw where they were, and either sent for gamekeeper or popped a terrier in t' hole and when it came out he shot him. That went on all through t' winter. In them days, you'd 'appen have twenty or thirty, but me best year, and that'd be early '70s, I had a hundred and twenty adult foxes and twenty-two litters of young 'uns. And don't forget, Lord Derby had two or three full-time gamekeepers at top end of valley and on Axe Edge moors, they were at 'em all t' time. Coomb's Moss had a full-time gamekeeper on. We dug 'em out. Most of the cubs were born in April. If you didn't get the adult foxes, you couldn't leave any cubs, because they'd be gone within that night and you hadn't stopped your lamb killing. And, you know, these people who stand up on telly and say 'oh foxes won't kill a lamb', they bloody well do. Oh yes, I've seen it happen. You'd get a sheep down if you were having a difficult lambing, and if it couldn't get up, the next morning they'd rip its ear off. They love sheep's ears for some reason. Don't know why, what were tasty about them?

CG: What do you think about any other predators, because I've seen some grim things with crows and ravens and stuff if a sheep goes down?

BB: Oh, carrion crows, they were horrendous. We'd full battle against them. If your sheep went down for t' lamb, they'd creep up on it on blindside and whip its eye out. If

lamb weren't fully out, tongue and eyes out. This weren't just odd occasions, it were regular. We once had trouble with a gull killing lambs, it were pecking 'em on top of t' head. Newborn lambs, you know, a day or two old. Course they spend most of their time asleep. We started finding these lambs with two or three holes pecked in top of their head, and we didn't know what it were. And me dad went on top of hill with binoculars one day while we were lambing and just sat there, and he saw this great big gull. I think they were black-backed or something. This great big gull come, just walked up to this little lamb and pecked its head. So, then we watched for them coming and they got a lead injection.

BB: Foxes with cubs, they were terrible killers for us. If they hadn't got cubs, they might have an odd lamb, but they weren't as much trouble at all. We were lambing April into May. You were lambing ex number of sheep, trying to keep foxes off 'em and crows off 'em as well, so you'd be up as it come daylight in the morning and you didn't go t' bed 'til after dark at night. And if you'd a sheep as 'ud lost a lamb or something had killed lamb, you took it home. You'd either get a twin lamb or something as a sheep had died, you'd get that lamb and put skin on the new one and foster it out. So, you were doing that at nighttime, when you got round to it. We always had (cade) k-a-y-d lambs. And then if you'd got a lot left at end of season, if they were doing alright, you'd carry on feeding 'em, 'cos we'd always two house tows. But if you got fed up with 'em, take 'em on, load 'em up to Chalford market and sell 'em. Oh yes, we had pets. When I were little like, I didn't have playmates, I only had cade lambs.

BB: We had one and the Opera House borrowed it at Buxton. They'd got some sort of a play on and they wanted a sheep. So, someone used to come down for it every tea time. We put a halter on it and it used to jump in the back of this 'ere van and go off with it, gave them instructions when they brought it back after last performance, which shed t' put it in, yeh.

CG: What people are starting to say a little bit now, I know we are jumping right forward to now, but because of the blanket attack that sheep have on a landscape, that actually the skills of shepherding are very much needed again in uplands, where you can move sheep on before they've eaten out everything.

BB: Well, if you can get a proper moorland breed, you'd be familiar with hefting? Hefted flocks now, there's nobody would go and heft 'em and it's dying out. Hefting, it's a lamb that's born on an area of moorland and it's reared there and if you took it ten mile away it'd always go back to spot where it were born and sorta reared. It's a thing that's instilled in your hill breeds: the Swales, Herdwicks, your Rough Fells, and round 'ere in them days it were all Derbyshire Gritstones and Woodlands, in them days. It's their natural instinct. It'll keep going back through the generations and one ewe lamb, when it's lambed, its lamb will heft to that area, so long as you don't take 'em away, sell 'em, clear 'em out, it's self-motivated. Like its heft, I don't know, it might be fifty acres, might be ten acres, what that sheep 'd live on, but it'd know, its mother 'ud teach it where for t' go in twelve months as to what were growing and what were eatable and what would do. It were very rare you got a poorly one. If they did get poorly, alright they'd die and foxes 'ud eat 'em, you know, end of messing. And when it were big snow coming most of these old moorland ewes knew. They'd clear off from an area and go somewhere where they felt they were safer. Except in 1947 and your '63 winter when it was so severe and so big amounts of snow, it swamped 'em. Nowhere to go, they couldn't get anywhere.