

Bill Brocklehurst

Bill was born in 1943. He 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 on the high moors. His Grandfather started his working life in the gun powder mill in the Goyt Valley before moving on to do other jobs, which eventually led to him living at Oldfield farm and taking the grazing rights on 5,300 acres of high moorland around the Cat and Fiddle, and where Bill and his father also worked. In this section, Bill recounts the changes in the Goyt Valley and its environs that have affected the local people, landscape, and wildlife over what must be almost a full century.

Part Four. A century of changes

BB: 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 where they wanted to put the pipelines. Then they sorta got bought out by Northwest Water who got bought by United Utilities. In them days, they wouldn't allow any cattle on the catchment area. All farms and houses on the catchment area, they were all moved out and t' farms were all flattened. I think they flattened about thirteen properties in Goyt. They wouldn't have the sewage in case it leaked in t' drinking water, but you could have sheep muck. And they wouldn't have cattle, 'cos cattle were too big and made too much muck. So, you had to work with the water authority and all top end of moor, Lord Derby he rented about two and a half thousand acre grouse shooting rights. So, we worked in with Derbyshire's gamekeepers as well and everybody seemed to get on well. Fernilee were built int '30s.

CG: So, your Mum and Dad would remember this amazing change to the landscape. Did it make them sad?

BB: Everybody in t' area were saddened, because a lot of farming families went phwoop, out you go. 'Cos they compulsorily purchased all this land and all these farms, then evicted 'em all. Some of 'em went into farming, rented different farms and all that, 'cos they were nearly all rented properties, belonging to various estates. And there are still some of t' families about. I don't know how many of 'em still be farming or not.

CG: These are amazing shocks, aren't they? It is kinda the arrival of the modern world, like new water systems, everything changing and a landscape that is totally changed forever. Also, it's where town meets the countryside in a way, because of the demands of burgeoning urban areas, like Ladybower and Sheffield. And it was happening all over Britain really.

BB: Oh yeh, water was a scarce commodity, and it was accepted. Quite a lot of land as they took belonged to estates and Erwood especially. That were on its way out, 'cos they were about dying out. Like Harper Crewe, they were spinsters and bachelors.

CG: There was a big shift in terms of hill farming through the war, actually inbetween the wars, there was a big concentration on putting more and more out in the north and the west of the whole of Britain, so can you remember much advice or interference or contact with the ministry?

BB: I first sorta got involved with Ministry once they started bringing sheep subsidies in. All your big hill farmers, phwoar, get as many sheep as we can. And course the Ministry chap had to come out and count 'em and if you were straight with him, he were straight with you. Some people, they'd rush all sheep through, take him for a cuppa tea half way through his count and that. They were known for t' go back and have another count.

CG: So, it was all about intensification?

BB: Very intensive. That's when your environmentalists started jumping up and down, 'cos stuff were disappearing. I think it'd be in t' '60s. Before that, we had what they called 'deficiency payments' or known locally as 'the make-up'. When you took your lambs or ya beef to market, there was a grader and he graded 'em and if the Government price was six pounds a lamb on the day and butchers only bid up to four pounds, the Government made you that money up. But they had to be graded at a certain quality and that before they give you that. But you got paid on what you produced and if people who were producing mongrel half-hearted lambs, as butcher didn't want, they'd take them back and grader, 'don't want them'. When the Government in their wisdom did away with that, the markets were full of every Heinz fifty-seven odds and sods and all-sorts.

BB: Forestry Commission came in in '64 and started planting. They took two and a half thousand acres, Forestry Commission.

CG: So, 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: What did you think about the impact it had on the look of the landscape at the time?

BB: It were a bit sad seeing all heather moorlands ploughed up and that, but then trees started growing and forester they sent for t' oversee it all, they employed all local labour, all local labour. He were a grand chap, he liked a game of darts, a mug of cocoa and a pint of Mackeson. He fitted in well wit' locals even though he were disfiguring all t' countryside.

Julia: Why where they planting that number of trees on the moorland?

BB: Ladbitch Wood were felled, I think it were in t' First World War, for war effort for all t' timber and it was down that it'd got to be replaced. It were on Forestry Commission's list to re-forest, but rather than plant up what had been felled, they'd a lot more besides. They fetched a big crawler in and one furrow ploughed, it were about that deep and about that wide [demonstration] for a single furrow plough. They planted mainly lodgepole pine. It was a pioneer crop. It'd survive and it'd break up and as stuff rotted down and that, it'd bring fertility up a little bit. Then they put quite a bit of larch in as well in trial plots and then as they started cutting down they planted up with Sitka spruce, 'cos they were good for the yield, tremendous yield. But it was money, it was money. I think we still import round about eighty percent of our total timber needs. The Government at the moment are moving away from replenishing our forests. These 'ere Woodland Trust and everybody, and National Parks, they all want to plant hardwoods, which are never going t' make the country any money, if they survive grey squirrels and deer. They're not gonna make money and in the meantime

our timber, in another fifty years time, our timber imports they'll go through t' roof. There is plenty of marginal land what they can plant conifers on.

CG: The trouble is that they did go for some of the most beautiful landscapes of Britain, didn't they? They went for uplands that were of no agricultural use, so they went for the wonderful slopes.

Julia: When you think about the heather and the moorland and what you were walking over then, as compared to now, was it very different?

BB: The moors were a lot better cared for then, 'cos grouse shooting rules supreme among heather moors and they were all well kept; they were burnt, they were looked after. And even on t' lower ground, like our in-land, there were curlew, peewits, ring ouzels, hundreds of 'em, there were hundreds of 'em. They were everywhere.

CG: There is a lot of argument now that the burning is very destructive to birds, to waders?

BB: I can't see how it can be, the burning happens in t' autumn and in t' winter. Burning's finished before your waders come back. But there's so few keepers practicing the grouse moor management now in the way that they did. Everywhere you look, you'd go through towns, it's full of crows' nests, magpie nests, and they've all got t' feed. And whether you like it or not, badgers love eggs. In them days there weren't many badgers around, 'cos game-keepers kept them to a lower level. There were badgers but there weren't thousands of 'em.

CG: So, in terms of wildlife, Julia was saying you can remember things looking very much healthier up on the moors. When did it change?

BB: It started altering when Forestry Commission came, 'cos they started planting about a hundred acres a year and re-planting. And after about five year, foxes really got going then, because obviously they had hundred acres of lovely thicket trees to live in. They really got going then. Round about that time, National Park were getting going and really interfering with things. They were encouraging people to come into t' Goyt Valley. And people came into Goyt Valley, vandalism came, theft came, rubbish came and it were from then that things went downhill. They come in, stuff started getting pinched. No idea where abouts they were coming from. Our world had been invaded, they objected to you for being there. If they saw you, if you were going shooting or something, they were pulling a face. What we were doing was quite legitimate. And dogs, they all brought their dogs with 'em. Sheep worrying escalated. Public access was a big nuisance, 'cos you know, people didn't come with an odd dog, they brought two or three dogs. And most of their dogs weren't under control and the odd few people who did come with their dog under control were amazed at all these people that would just come round and run riot.

CG: By the time you made the shift out of farming in '96, the National Park was well established. What effect did that have on you?

BB: You couldn't put a building up or alter a building, else they'd dropped on you like a ton of bricks. At the early end, the National Park ranger for t' Goyt were a chap called Geoff Howell and I've known him all me life. He started off working in filter house down below us. He were a very helpful chap. Then as it progressed from that, their job description seemed for t' alter. They seemed t' be there to do a lot of spying and policing. Geoff, he retired before his time, because he said the job wasn't what he joined to do. English Nature weren't about much in them days, it were still MAFF and

ADAS, they were sort of running the countryside for want of a better word, and they were very helpful. Some of the chaps at office at Bakewell, you couldn't fault em. Free advice. If they could help you, they would help you. Then when English Nature got going, they got more militant.

CG: Do you think it's because these terrible losses of waders and all of that, they coincide with increasing intensification. So obviously, this intensification wasn't part of your farming regime at all, and the big changes were happening lower down. You've got silage, losing all the hay meadows, all of that. So, it's forcing more waders into your territory, because they were deserting the White Peak and moving to in-by moorland. So, did you notice a greater influx of curlews coming up?

BB: Curlews didn't move onto fresh territory, they just disappeared. Them on t' moorland, they stayed. Whether it works like your hefted sheep flock, but your curlews on t' moor, they stayed. They didn't go any more [increase] as they lost territory outside. It was a net loss. There was a scheme where they were paying farmers for t' let more rushes grow on the fields and not do the drainage. They encouraged farmers for t' leave rush fields for nesting cover. Well rushes grew that well, there was no nesting cover. So, that was another thing they lost. You do need the human intervention, but there's got to be a shilling in it for everybody, for t' farmer, for t' birds. There were plenty of subsidies, but now, especially in t' Lake District and some places round 'ere, they've cleared sheep off. Paid farmers to clear sheep off hills. What a waste of money. Why didn't they cut the numbers [of sheep] down to an acceptable level? They've cut it down too much. A lot of these moors now that aren't grazed, they're a firebomb waiting to happen. And the vegetation's grown up that much, your waders won't nest in them, they can't nest in it. They've got for t' get stock back on the hills in reasonable numbers, but this here opened ended giving farmers and landowners a bucket of money every year just for not keeping things on t' hills, it's gonna dry up one day, that is.

CG: What you are talking about really, when there were far more sheep on the hill, there was a much higher level of contact and management with those sheep from you and your family and people like you, but the thing is, that wasn't happening in the '70s and '80s so much, people weren't.....

BB: Put some sheep back on t' hills, cattle in some places where it's acceptable, and do away with four wheeler motorbikes. Make the people shepherd the animals, not whiz round on a motorbike, scaring everything. That's not sheep farming.

CG: That kinda seems to be the solution, if you've got the slower ways, the proper ways, the thorough ways of doing things, then it naturally kinda unfolds into the wildlife as well, doesn't it?

BB: Instead of paying farmer big bag of money for t' not, pay him a lesser amount of money for t' pay towards a man's wage for going shepherding them sheep. And make 'em do it, not draw money and never go near 'em.

CG: Do you think we've got the skills left, the skills that you've acquired throughout your life?

BB: They've got all these training establishments, surely if they can't knock a bit of sense into a teenager's head, for t' put one foot in front of t' other and look at sheep. We only knew cos our fathers taught us. It'll get rid of the obesity, it'll learn 'em how for t' use a dog.

CG: And then if you are a shepherd working in these careful, sensitive ways with the landscape, then you are also actually working with wildlife.

BB: Yeh, and while he's doing that, he'll know how many curlews are on t' moor, how many golden plover, or if he sees a ring ouzel, give him another ten pound a week or something for keeping his eyes open.

CG: This is the way forward isn't it, to marry the two jobs up?

BB: There must be young folk out there, they all want t' work for Natural England and be environmentalists, but if you could get farming environmentalists to do the same job, then we'd be in a much better state.

CG: Does it hurt you to see what we've lost in terms of wildlife?

BB: Especially on t' moorland, with knowing what wildlife there was on the moors. And now some of these moors, Roaches and Warslow especially, you've got heather this high what's good for nothing. You know, it's sad.

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 everywhere they were. They're now very, very rare. I don't think there's so many ring ouzels stay. When I were on t' 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 further north. By time I finished on t' Roaches, that didn't happen anymore.

CG: How would you like to see the moorlands managed in the future? We've heard some of your ideas for that, but what would you really like to see for the future of this landscape that you know so well?

BB: I do think we've got to get some livestock back on t' moors, they've got t' get rid of a lot of this long heather, either burn it or cut it. A lot of places, it's quite feasible for t' cut it now. If you go on Google Earth and look at top end of Goyt Valley, that's well mown. And Coomb's Moss, that's well mown, so it can be done. But they've got to have feet on the ground.

Julia: What do you think for farming over the next ten years? What do you think will happen with it?

BB: I think farming is gonna go through some very, very hard times. All this money flooding out of Europe, that won't be there, I can see that going. 'Cos Joe Public's not getting anything for his money. Government, I don't know whether they're supposed to put a little bit to it or something. If they've got nothing, they're not gonna put nothing to it are they? They've either got to pull out of the EU and fund the farming and the wildlife theirselves, that's going t' hurt int it? Or they've got to stop with EU and be told what for t' do, which is gonna hurt. So, where you go, I don't know.

CG: What do you think can be done to heal this perceived rift between people like Natural England, the National Park, the conservation movement, the wildlife lobby if you like, and farmers?

BB: Get rid of half of Natural England, employ some people who can talk to the country people without saying 'you will do this and you will do that'. They've got for t' talk to 'em. It's no use turning to a farmer and saying 'you've six cows in that field, I only want one in that, so because you've been naughty boy, I'm not giving you any of your

money'. It's gonna ruin the farms, it's gonna sour the relationship between your farmer and your environmentalist, full stop. But there's just too many people out there telling your farmer what he must do. Farmer probably knows what for t' do for t' make a living. 'Cos if he can't make a living, he's not gonna do it, is he? And it's no use saying we'll give you a handout for not doing anything when the money's not there one day. It's not in a farmers nature to want to do nothing. They're farming to farm and t' make a living, aren't they?