

## **Karen Ballington**

Roy Critchlow and Karen Ballington farm at Heathylee House Farm, near Hollinsclough. This is a 200 acre hill farm at 1200 to 1500 feet above sea level. They have a menagerie of animals that include miniature donkeys, guanaco (the wild ancestor of today's llamas), and rare breeds of cattle, goats and pigs. Roy has farmed in the area all his life, while Karen previously worked in the army as a telecoms engineer. Sheila Hine interviewed Karen in August 2017.

### **Part One. Diversification**

SH: Karen would you like to tell me a brief history about the farm and then how you came here.

KB: Roy took on a little bit of rough ground up here off his family when he was about 14 and started messing about with a cow or two. There wasn't a fence or wall that would hold any animals, so everything he's had to do himself. There weren't any buildings, so he set to putting a little shed up and so over the years he's worked away to make the money to put the sheds up.

SH: What sort of work was he doing?

KB: I think he used to do farming work, contracting work, wagon driving, all sorts. Anything really that's needed up in these hills, isn't it. And oh, he used to work for the council as well. And when I met him, he was working for the council and working here as well.

SH: What was he doing for the council?

KB: Building work, where they wanted dry stone walling and that sort of thing. So that's where he was when I met him, which would be about 15 years ago now.

SH: What was your background then?

KB: Well, I joined the army and then I went engineering, putting in the telecoms systems and working abroad and then I retired, came back because I'm originally from Bakewell.

SH: So, what did you do in the army?

KB: Telecoms. When you're moving deployment, you put telecoms systems up temporary so that people can communicate and that's what I was doing, repairing, restoring when we're out and moving about. So it followed on that mobile phones were just coming in when I left the army, so that's where I went and did that.

SH: So, how did you meet up?

KB: I bought a building in Longnor and was renovating the building and I started a café downstairs and Roy came in and then started supplying me with eggs. That's how I met him, and after a couple of years I sort of found myself in slavery on the farm, full time, grubbing about looking after the animals and living in a caravan. I mean Roy

never even had a kettle at the farm when I met him, he used to just come up, work all day then go home. In the time I've met him we've managed to put another new shed up and built the house.

SH: What was he keeping in those early days?

KB: He had a great ruck of Warrens, which was his laying flock, so he always had eggs. So that's why he was supplying the café with eggs, and a lot of beef cattle. So, when I come along, first of all it was animals to tempt me to come. So, I'd said I'd always fancied some Alpacas. Well, he went and bought a male Guanaco, it wasn't an alpaca, it was a guanaco and then it was "You haven't been to see your animal today", and this is how it started. Then it was some fluffy sheep, some grey faced Dartmoors, three of those, because I liked the look of them and "You haven't been to see your sheep today". So of course, then you get tied into it don't you? From the Warrens I said "You've got all these eggs laying about, why not sell some of these hens?" but this was before backyard hen keeping was very popular. Well, he advertised these hens for sale and they were gone within two weeks. So, then we got some more, sold them, then we got some more, sold them so we no longer do eggs. He was wanting to sell the eggs, but you used to have stacks and stacks of eggs, but of course it's time consuming getting round selling the eggs isn't it, so we sold the hens instead and that kept going. So now we don't do eggs, we do chickens. We were one of the first and I'd say for a couple of years that was a very, very good business, but everybody jumps on it, it's like with anything, if you've farmed a little niche that's successful everyone piles in on it, don't they? So, it's ticking along at the moment. I've got to go and fetch another hundred in the next few days. So that's the history of how I ended up here.

SH: Right. How big is your farm?

KB: Now it's about a 160 acres ring fenced, and 20 acres over that side that I've bought, but that's handy for putting new lambs on and anything that wants to be separate. When you sit here you can see it, so you can keep an eye on stock on it.

SH: I presume the banks are reasonably dry, are they? They're steep banks.

KB: They're drier down the valley at the bottom.

SH: And you've got a lot of very wet land, haven't you?

KB: A lot yes.

SH: A lot of rushes.

KB: Yes, a lot of rushes.

SH: So, it's really tough land to farm.

KB: I'd say you were wasting your time thinking you were farming it, you're just surviving, yeah, and same with the stock. Our stock is hardy and when we've sold calves and things to other people and they've gone anywhere from here you always get the feedback a few weeks later, "By, them cattle have grown, tell me when you're

selling some more”, because folk appreciate that they’ve come from an environment like this, anywhere else you put them is going to be easy on that cattle. It’s going to grow better, isn’t it? So, no it’s tough.

SH: So, do you keep rare breeds then?

KB: This started with me, with this something a little bit different to try and tempt me to get involved in the farm and then Roy decided he liked this kind of goose and that kind of goose, you know and so, Roy like’s buying things, and that’s how we ended up with the rare breeds. And I made a mistake, because his grandad had started years and years and years ago the British Whites, the grandad from down Hollinsclough, he was famous for British Whites. Well, Roy’s still got his genetics in some of his cows you see, because his grandad had given him a couple of calves to get started with when he was little, and not knowing cow breeds, I bought him a cow for Christmas, a pedigree, but I bought a White Park with the horns. So....

SH: So, are the British Whites the polled ones?

KB: Yes, they are, but they look the same, white with little black ears, don’t they? So, this is how we ended up in White Park cattle, because I bought him a pedigree cow off Arthur Gee actually, and then of course once you’ve got a pedigree cow that’s in calf you want another one and another one, don’t you, because Roy likes to keep building up. So now he’s got a herd of pedigree White Park cattle and he’s still running his commercial suckler herd, which is all Limousin bred to old fashioned Herefords and some of his British White genetics. And actually, the White Park cattle when they occasionally have a black calf, must be some throw back to their ancient history, they’re still actually pure bred White Park, but they make a good cross breed to a Limousin, so they go into them.

SH: So, how many White Park cattle have you now?

KB: He’s not got so many now, because he’s lost heart with the White Park Cattle Society, because like with a lot of these societies it’s been dominated by some very old men. Some of them don’t even keep White Park cattle any more, want to keep the cattle as niche, so don’t really want to promote the breed. Well, for somebody like Roy who needs to sell them, you want a society that’s busy promoting them, not trying to keep them niche and exclusive. So yeah, he’s lost heart a bit with them, so I think he’s got about 20 up there.

SH: So how do you make the best use of those, do you sell them for breeding or do you use the meat?

KB: Well, this is the problem isn’t it, we are that busy farming, that farmers forget the actual last 5 minutes is the sale, which is where you make your money. He doesn’t put the effort into the marketing so much, more into the breeding and looking after them. That’s where we fall down as a hill farm, we’re that busy with our nose to the grindstone, the marketing which is the bit where you make your money, we’re not good at. This is why you see a lot of these people that come into cattle, get a rare breed, they’re not from cattle stock, but they make a living out of it, because they’re excellent

at marketing that beef. Well, up here we don't really fatten beef, we have to sell them as stores, because it's just far too expensive to get them to fat compared to other parts of the country. So, we tend to sell it as breeding stock and this is where the internet's been brilliant for us.

KB: Roy once had a phone call asking if we could supply this restaurant with White Park beef. He says "Oh no I'm not interested, I cannot fatten 'em." and it was only like a month later when Claridges was on the telephone, that's them that phoned up he says. Roy didn't know who Claridges was, never heard of them. So yeh, it's difficult the marketing.

S: Have I seen some Belties as I came down as well?

KB: You have, don't talk about them. Roy bought them on a whim, because he likes Belties.

SH: Well, I thought it'd be good Belty country here.

KB: It is good Belty country, but he bought them when he had no money. Well, actually when they arrived, he told me he'd bought three and one of the kids from next door was there when they came off the waggon. The kids told me, seven. So, he told me he'd bought three, but no, seven came off the wagon.

SH: They'd bred in the wagon.

KB: Obviously, obviously, but they are cute and well we started of the mind if you can't make any money out of them, then you might as well like the look of them, because you're seeing them every day, aren't you? But yeah, they're up the top aren't they with the Limousin that's resting at the moment, because we've got another Limousin down the bottom with the rest of the cows.

SW: And have you still got pigs?

KB: Yeah, we have got a few at the moment, but we used to breed Middle Whites and we did quite well with them.

KB: Middle Whites.

KB: Yeah, yeah as a rare breed and I've actually got a Middle White sow with piglets on at the moment.

SH: So, were they for meat or for breeding?

KB: We used to make the money out of breeding stock and cater to small holders that wanted 2 or 3 for fattening for their own meat scheme, you know they're very popular for that. They're quite a nice friendly little breed and then I got to the stage where I'd got 7 or 8 breeding sows on and we bought a boar in and I think he must have brought some sort of virus in with him. And I don't think I had a good litter after he came and although we vaccinated for parvo virus and all this lot, well then I lost heart. So, all the Middle Whites went and we just started buying little weaners in, taking them to fat and then selling them on, because we get waste food products, cheese. So, that's a really

nice job that Roy's got me doing, is opening maggoty cheese in this weather. It's not so bad in the winter, in the summer I sit there for an hour, opening cheese.

SH: So, what about the sheep side of things?

KB: We don't spend a lot of money on sheep, we've got some Jacob's, most of them are mules. Mostly we sell them as stores, we don't sell meat direct off the farm. Again, they need to go somewhere else for that little bit of polish to put on them, don't they? Some do go as far as fat. We sell a few of the Jacobs to small holders.

SH: For breeding?

KB: Yeah, 'cos they're popular, pretty looking breed and most small holders want something a bit different don't they, ordinary sheep aren't very exciting.

SH: You supply a lot of things to small holders whether its poultry.....

KB: We do do, yeah. We have done in the past. Roy's into his goats as well. Now people are made for goats, aren't they?

SH: What breeds?

KB: Well, they go mad for pygmies and we have had some pygmies on there and if they're a little bit bigger than a pygmy you call them a pygmy cross and they still go mad for them, but once they're a bit bigger than a pygmy cross they don't go mad for them. But for instance, if we picked up a goat for say 50 quid and then it had a couple of little kids, its then two hundred and fifty quid. So yeah, Roy likes his goats, but you're dealing with people that aren't experienced with stock so you do have to be very responsible what you're selling them and the advice you give them, so you do add a bit extra on, because of the phone ringing at 10 o'clock at night.

SH: So, you had the guanaco; how many did you build up to eventually?

KB: We got as nearly 50 of them, yeah.

SH: And what was the idea?

KB: Well, it's a fibre business and we've sheared them and I've sold fibre, I had some shawls made up and I have managed to sell shawls as far afield as Japan, America, Edinburgh, London. So, I did have some modest success and I think when a small hill farm sends something to Japan, and they order again and you send again, you know you've got something special. But again, it's all down to marketing and if you're not that good at it.....

SH: But what about the practicalities, because it wasn't easy to shear them, was it?

KB: We've had a crush built now, it's all rotary and everything so yes, we could shear them very easily. They walk in and it rotates them, holds their heads, lifts one side up, you rope the legs off, shear, shear, rotate them round, shear, shear, but our summers are gone, we don't want to shear them in the winter, because it's too cold and I don't know where the summer goes to.

SH: So, were they suited to this land?

KB: They don't like the rain, but they love the hillsides and they don't mind that the grass is rough or anything like that. They love the hillside and actually they're not suited to lush grass. Alpacas have a lot of problems with lush grass, all the camelids do, because they're not used to it. When you think about where they come from, remote hillsides, they're not lush pasture lands are they?

SH: And how often did you shear them?

KB: They should be sheared about every 2 years, but we haven't sheared for quite a while.

SH: And how many have you got left?

KB: We're down to about 26.

SH: Oh, you've still got quite a few.

KB: Yeah, yeah but Roy's decided that we've got to cut the numbers right down now and really it's because we're not that great at marketing and this is where somebody retiring from London starts up a little enterprise, I mean Selina Scott, the news woman, set up a little farm and she charges thirty quid is it for a pair of her Alpaca socks. So, if you're good at marketing and you've got a bit of savvy behind you, you're gonna do better at these niche businesses than actual farmers in a lot of cases.

SH: Perhaps so, but I think some of it's because we're physically doing the work, we just get tired don't we?

KB: Who wants to sit down at midnight when you've been out in the rain and everything all night doing all that. It's getting easier now with the rise of the internet, but when we launched that, I don't think the internet was that great and we were actually on dial up here, so you couldn't do anything like that.

SH: So, what's your internet like now?

KB: Well, it's passable. We can operate. On the other side of the valley, they're still on dial up, so they're having to use satellite to get their internet.

SH: So, would you find that you're doing quite a bit of business on it now?

KB: All, all the business. I think if we end up taking anything to a market, you're losing money on it. So, if you manage to sell it over the internet direct then you stand to make a profit, but then again, the old way of thinking with Roy, Roy's mentality, it's too much of a big shift to him. He understands now the internet and selling over the internet, but things like cattle and your ordinary stock you know, stuff that goes into the food chain, that hasn't made the leap to the internet yet. You're still forced down the market route unless you've got your own private buyers.

SH: So, what about donkey's?

KB: Ahhh, well donkey's are really pets. However, they've earned their keep for the rest of their lives. Roy was having a run of bad luck. That seems to be every year, and his mum and dad swore by donkey's changed their luck, so he says we need a

donkey. So, he cast around and at the time we were doing some business with zoo's buying guanaco's and a zoo phoned us up and said, "Do you want these donkeys?" So, we bought them sight unseen. They could have been anything, it didn't matter, didn't matter how old they were, they were donkey's and they were coming for luck and they turned out to be Mediterranean miniatures. One of them must have been one of the first imports into this country from America. Two of them were pregnant and one was a jack. We could have turned them into profit straight away, because they were very sought after at the time, but we kept them and now we've got about 10 donkeys on the farm at the moment. We've just had a little one born a couple of weeks ago, and we're waiting on one, but they make you wait, don't they?

SH: So, donkeys are a success?

KB: Yeah, oh yeah, we've a little jack could trade for a thousand, one and half thousand. If we had a little girl, could be two and half to three thousand pounds. Now you weigh that up against cattle. The donkey's, they are pets first and foremost.

SH: You said they're from the Mediterranean, the genetics, how do they cope with this bad weather, this wet?

KB: Donkey's don't like the wet, do they? So, where we've got them at the moment, we've got them where they can run inside the shed. So actually, the donkeys are the most pampered on the farm.

SH: But they're doing okay?

KB: Yeah, cos they get looked after and it's one thing that Roy doesn't mind spending money on with the vets. Cos you know when you look at sheep, you think ooh, should I get the vet to it or should I get the gun to it, but you'd never treat the donkey's like that, it's always you better call the vet 'cos I'm not sure.

SH: Mind you, the value of them as well.

KB: It's not just the value, he's got this thing about donkeys are good luck, you never do donkeys a bad turn. It's his upbringing, but they do say a donkey's good luck on a farm.

SH: So, what about your ginger beer?

KB: Oh, my ginger beer plants. I'm still doing them.

SH: Yes, how long have you been doing those?

KB: I started when I moved into the caravan, so we've been doing that about 10 years now, the ginger beer plants.

SH: And what do you sell?

KB: When we were kids, we used to make us own ginger beer and you used to have this yeast concoction in a jar, a culture, and you used to feed it, and everybody did it, it was a 70's thing I think when you were kids, because of course you didn't have coke and stuff then, id they? So, if you wanted pop, you either had that expensive bar stuff

or you made your own ginger beer. And, when Roy likes his pop and I says "I'll make you ginger beer", and he says "you can't make ginger beer". I says "I can", so I started it and he says "it was that good that you could probably sell it". Well, then he was talking about it in the pub and everybody else wanted one of these ginger beer plants. So, I started making them for folk in the pub and then I stuck them on Ebay. Again, this is where the internet comes in isn't it, it opens up your world, doesn't it? So, I send ginger beer plants all over the world actually. Daft as it sounds.

SH: And you're still busy on that?

KB: I've stopped it for the time being on Ebay, just because I've got that many other things on. You spread yourself too thin, nothing gets done, does it?

SH: So, is your ginger beer job a nice little earner?

KB: Yeah, it is, but again, there's work and time involved. But yeah, it used to bring in enough to pay the mortgage on the land over there every month. But as with anything, if anybody spots that you've got a little niche and you're a bit popular, people will copy you and undercut you price wise. And that's happened and I know the people, because I've sent them ginger beer plants in the past and they're now selling them. So, it's eroded my market a bit, but again, I'm still ticking over.

SH: You have to hope that you've got some solid customers don't you, you know, faithful.

KB: Well, once you've got one, you can share it round so you don't need to buy another one. It should last you a lifetime if you look after it. But no it was a bit of fun.

SH: So obviously it's been a tough few years. What do you think about generally farming in this area of the South West Peak? What about the land?

KB: The land has to be farmed, this is the thing. I know Natural England and farmers up here really are butting heads. We've had to come out of the Natural England scheme, we were in it, but we had nothing but trouble.

SH: What were you trying to protect?

KB: Well, we've got SSSI ground up on the tops, so that obviously drew Natural England in, this SSSI ground. It's supposed to be SSSI because it attracts all these lapwings and peewits. We have a wealth of bird life on there. They come to our ground, but actually they don't go to the field next door, the field the other side of it, and they don't go that side.

SH: Why?

KB: They like to come to our strip. Well, don't you think Natural England should be looking at what Roy's doing to attract those birds instead of telling Roy how to farm it. If he's been there thirty years farming that ground, they should be saying Roy, what are you doing that nobody else is doing? Well, that's not how it works out. So what they did was they came at us and said you must do this, you must do that, you must do this, and it restricted the way we could farm anything and you couldn't make a living



and then your ground is deteriorating over the course of the 10 years so that, well the bales that we were getting were going down every year and the money we were getting wasn't covering the short fall and then with all the aggro we were getting off them; imagined problems, that they imagined and wanted to do this, that and the other to us, it wasn't worth it, so we've had to come out the scheme.

KB: We drove up earlier on in the year and there must have been a hundred lapwings set off from the ground when we went past.

SH: On your ground,

KB: Not on the neighbours, on ours.

SH: Why do you think they like yours and not your neighbours?

KB: I think it's because we farm it more, daft as it sounds. Natural England want us to put 2 cows up there. It aint going to happen, because that land needs to be worked. So, typically there could be 20 to 30 cows up there when conditions allow, when it's not that wet or anything like that, so maybe that's it.

SH: So, they're on top of, shall we say, the grazing? There's room for the birds?

KB: Yes, Natural England would claim that it was over grazed, but actually we know that they're there. They like the clumps, but they like the rest to be really short. I don't know why that is, but they like that ground, they like the way Roy farms it.

KB: We knew after this thing with the SSSI that we weren't ever going to be writing into another scheme again. When our scheme ended that was it. So, we've got a shortfall in income then and the farm has deteriorated, the bales, the livestock that we can keep on it, the numbers have decreased so we've got to come up with something else, so we came up with Bog Commander then. Which with the rise of the mud runs and obstacle course races, well one thing we have got is terrain for that, we've got mud in abundance. So, we looked at that and thought yeah, we'll go for it. Course we had been drinking at the time, but we went for it. So, the first year we only managed to attract about a hundred people, again this is down to marketing. We might have the ideas, we've got the knowhow, we've got the terrain, we haven't got the marketing and actually when I've been looking at how they market their races, where we're going wrong is, we don't tell lies, we're too honest. Whereas other people are claiming they're this, that and the other, they're not, and when people get there, they're disappointed. So, we're quite honest in our marketing, when people get here, they're blown away, because there's a lot more here than they're led to believe, does that make sense? So, we are actually getting a very good reputation, which I think is good for the long term and our numbers are increasing.

SH: Now, obviously you've had a bad experience and you don't intend to go in any environmental scheme again. Do you think you can make this farm pay without environmental payments?

KB: We are struggling, I'll not say we aren't. There's a big gap in the income of the farm that we've got to find elsewhere, it's a big gap. But we're going to have to carry

on, there's no way we can ever enter into a contract with an organisation like Natural England in its current form. I think it's rife with politics and personal petty opinions. They don't back it up with any scientific evidence.

SH: Obviously, as I say, you've had a big problem with environmental schemes. Do you think generally the South West Peak area needs that environmental funding putting in for it to survive? How do we keep it?

KB: We can't keep it viable just by farming, can we? It's difficult, really tricky. I said to Roy, if we farm people, but we don't want them here all the time, and we can come up with activities for the day, they get to enjoy the countryside, appreciate the beauty of the area and bring much needed funds in that support our farming activities for the rest of the year.

SH: Because like your Bog Commander, you're in control of it. I mean, there's getting a lot of these running events, cycling events and stuff which people organise, but the money, they're making the money, the money is not coming into the community, is it?

KB: For instance, there's been a cyclo-cross event in Bakewell, organised by a company in London. There's no money staying in the local economy for that. Tough Mudder for instance at Cholmondley Estate, yeh Cholmondley Estate might get some of the money for use of the ground, but most of that money's going to America and it's not even being taxed in this country probably. So yeah, can big companies come in and exploit our countryside and take the profits away? That is what's happening. If we are all living in this community, we see all these cycle races going on every weekend, very few of them are organised by local people actually. Even though we're the ones that have to put up with the downside of living up here, i.e. the restrictions, with what you can and can't do, the building and business. But we don't seem to see the benefits with the tourism.

SH: So, what other threats do you see in farming around here?

KB: It's a tricky one isn't it. A lot of the money that's taken off farmers, I don't know what's going to happen with Brexit and if people really valued the countryside whether they're going to be putting money back into keeping the countryside how it looks, how people expect it to look.

SH: What about youngsters?

KB: I don't know what they're going to do, look at the house prices.

SH: What's going to happen to this place?

KB: Well, we haven't got kids. Can youngsters make it survive? Do they want to? How many kids want to go into farming. When they're 16 and 17, and now with internet, they're opened up to a much bigger world through television and through internet they see all the possibilities. More and more of them want to go and sample that. I think that they feel a little bit cut off, whereas in the past they would have gone to school, come back, done with the harvest, taken over a farm and they wouldn't have thought anything of it, but perhaps now they're thinking there's a lot more out there. Our

nephews doing a farming apprenticeship with DART so maybe he will, but how's he going to make it pay. How's a youngster who doesn't inherit farming land ever going to afford to get into it? They've got to be a bit more savvy I think, but with them being the internet generation, it should be easier for them to market their goods and I think that is the key, is marketing your goods, because there's a whole world out there that would love to buy sheep that have grazed here, wouldn't they?

SH: But the other thing is, is keeping this land working, 'cos the physical work it takes just to keep it going, who's going to do that?

KB: Well, you see people moving in, buying these little small holdings, they've got great ideas, they're good at the marketing, good at the niche activities, but they've no idea about how to actually farm the land. What they should be doing to keep it how it should be. You've got to have some of the old folk and you've got to spend a lifetime on a piece of ground to understand it and know what it needs. You can't do that with a chemical analysis.

SH: So, you've got to this point now, would you change anything? Would you say I wished I'd never done it or....

KB: There's no point looking back is there, you've done it haven't you? You've thrown your lot in and yes, it's not easy, we'll never have any money, we're always skint and you always worry about the bills and we manage to get them paid eventually, but yeah, you always worry don't you. But I'm here now, that's it int it. I guess it's in your blood isn't it after a while.

SH: I suppose so.

KB: It's certainly under your finger nails!