

Neil Richardson

Neil has spent over thirty years farming at Big Fernyford Farm, Reapsmoor between Longnor and Warslow. From 1968, Big Fernyford was farmed by Sylvia and Michael Woolley, who also contributed to this project. Neil is a former champion sheep shearer and with his partner Dorota and youngest son is now a specialist sheep breeder. Neil spoke with Sheila Hines in May 2017 about his farming activities and the environmental work that he does on the farm, which is jointly owned by Natural England and the Peak District National Park.

Part One. Farm and family

SH: Neil would you like to tell me about your background?

NR: Well, I've been in farming now a long time it seems, not from a family start, 'cos my family were living in Sheffield. Then we moved to the outskirts of a village, Hathersage, and I used to go and annoy the farmer up there with his sheep and help him and he eventually, after a couple of years working for nothing, he let me have 2 sheep with his 1500 and that was it, I was hooked on sheep. I should have stuck to football, but I was hooked on sheep.

SH: How old were you then?

NR: I started working for the farmer when I was nine and I got a couple of sheep when I was 11 and then carried on working for him 'till I was fifteen. Then went self-employed and I had about thirty sheep of my own and helping one or two farmers. When I was eighteen, I started catching sheep and wrapping wool for a couple of shearers and thought that it looked easier shearing than catching and wrapping, so they said you should go to New Zealand and learn to shear, so I did. When I was nineteen, I went to New Zealand and spent six months there learning to shear sheep. Then I represented England for about seven years shearing sheep and travelled all over Norway and New Zealand and all over the competitions round Britain.

SH: So, did you win stuff?

NR: Yeah, I won quite a few; I was fifth in Britain two years running. And, as I say I represented England in the top three for about seven years and then I took early retirement from shearing about twenty years ago 'cause I wanted to concentrate on maintenance and straightening the farm out.

SH: So, how did you get to come here?

NR: Well, I applied for about ten or twelve different farms with North West Water, National Trust, Sheffield Corporation, Haddon Estates, all sorts of farms, any farm that came up we applied for, but they all said you've not got enough money or experience and then this one came up, so we came to look, didn't like the look of it, so went away and someone else got it for twelve months and couldn't stand it, so we came back and had another look and I think out of seventy applicants we were fortunate enough or unfortunate enough to get the tenancy.

SH: And how long ago was that?

NR: That was in 1988 and we've been trying to straighten it out and maintain it ever since.

SH: And who are the owners?

NR: It's owned 50% Natural England and 50% Peak National Park. So, I think we've done a really good job for them.

SH: It certainly looks immaculate.

NR: It was derelict when we came.

SH: Yes, it looks superb.

NR: It's cost us a lot of time and a lot of money, and a lot of effort really and there's still plenty to do.

SH: Yeah, it's a tough spot isn't it.

NR: So, twenty-one years ago we got into Swaledales, because I used to spend a lot of time shearing sheep in the Yorkshire Dales and I'd got a lot of friends up in Yorkshire Dales and they all kept Swaledales and I said they were nothing but a goat at the start, but then we got into the actual breeding of them and we've done quite well ever since, really. Not just me, my son now is well known in the Swaledale world.

SH: How old is he?

NR: He's eleven, and he got champion at Hawes last year, which is a something that some of those Yorkshire boys have been trying to do for all their life and never have, so he's had a good start with that and hopefully he'll carry-on, he's dedicated to Swaledale sheep. Hopefully he'll carry on and breed some more champions. He certainly knows what's a good Swaledale and what's a bad one. He's got more enthusiasm than I have at the moment. One thing and another, old age, aches and pains and paperwork and some of the rubbish that national parks and Natural England come out with, it just puts you off a little bit. Put's you off your stride sometimes.

SH: What are you actually breeding for in Swales now, because I know breeding goes through fashions doesn't it?

NR: It does.

SH: And there seems to be a lot of sheep about with less wool on nowadays.

NR: Yeah, we've been breeding for a few years what they call snod wooled, which is shorter wool, because the Swale goes on to produce the mule and the mule breeders are wanting shorter tighter wool to get their lambs looking tighter and more meaty than shaggy wooled, so we've not had a shaggy wooled Swale tup, I don't think we've ever had one; so, we've always bred for tighter wool.

SH: Does that take hardiness from them do you think?

NR: I don't think it makes a lot of difference, they've got them big woolly coats like Scotch Blackface, some of the Swales up in the hills, I don't think any of the top breeders that are breeding pure Swaledales are keeping woolly ones, they're all going for the snodder wool and we've had success with quite a few rams that we've sold. Like twelve, fifteen, twenty thousand. I don't think we'd get them sort of prices for shaggy wooled ones. Now we're hooked on breeding rams, we've got to try and keep to the type we've always looked at and the type we want and the type which sells well.

SH: Not only that, you've to supply what your customer wants, haven't you?

NR: Yeah, we've got to try and buy what we want and breed what we can sell. And the same with the females. Our females that we sell every year, the ones that we don't think are good enough to go pure. Some do go on to breed pure with other people but

most of them go on to cross for the mule and they want a tighter coated, longer necked and bit more bone in the legs.

SH: Why longer necked?

NR: Well, I'm thinking because the mule's a long-necked thing, the Leicester; the sellers of mule lambs want the lambs to come into the ring with its head up and look bonny when it comes into the ring. We want them with longer necks so they look proud of themselves and stand up, we don't want their heads sulking in the bracken.

SH: No, no but that is like more of a cosmetic thing.

NR: The Swales all cosmetic. I mean, before Swales used to have black knees and now they don't want black knees, they want them fully white down the front and fully black down the back of the legs; same with the white on the eye. They want a nice big silver eye, before it used to be just a stripe above the eye and black below it.

SH: But that's cosmetic, isn't it?

NR: You would have thought so, yes.

SH: So, they look pretty rather than for the use.

NR: We've got to breed a type that will sell. It's no good breeding something too old fashioned. If you breed, you've always got the chance with some good bred sheep of getting one make twenty, thirty, fifty thousand, but with the old fashioned one you're never going to get above two or three thousand quid, so I can't see much interest in that and I wouldn't want to just breed commercial fat lambs. I'd find it a bit too boring really, you know, you want something with a bit of interest, so that's the way we're going.

SH: You know like sheep are known to soon die, aren't they? so when you've got these very valuable ones, I suppose they die as easy as the others?

NR: Well, yes there's a lot to look after them, but touch wood we've not had a dead sheep or hogg or anything since last October. We've had a really good lambing time and we've had four of five dead lambs through lambing, but other than that we've lost no sheep, we've had no prolapses, no twin lamb, no staggers, no nothing so far, touch wood. I shouldn't really say it, but last year we had one or two. We lost a couple of rams, expensive rams; one was lightening and one got hung in a fence and these are the things they can do. We had a lamb a couple of days ago that had got into an unbelievable position between two gate posts, with its front legs stuck between a wooden post and a stake. Just no idea how it had got in there, and it's okay, it's not walking properly yet, but that's just one of them things. And lambs getting stuck with their heads in the fence, that's another nuisance.

SH: So, how many do you keep in your flock here?

NR: We've about two hundred pure Swaledale ewes and then we've got 150 Swale hogs from last year out of those ewes, 'cause we have a fairly high lambing percentage for Swales. Last year we were over 200% on lambing with the Swales; this year we're about 195% I think, which helps, but we'd still like to get it a lot lower. We would prefer 100%. We would prefer honestly to have two hundred singles than have all these twins and triplets, it's a nuisance really. We'd like two hundred fit, healthy singles, half as much work, because singles don't take much looking after. They've all had enough colostrum and they've had enough anti-bodies, so they don't get the problems.

SH: Why do you think they're so prolific then, is it because you haven't got too many, so they're well fed?

NR: Even if we try and keep them tight in the autumn, we always seem to have our best grazing in the autumn. Spring we're always a bit tight, summers a bit tight normally, but then we wean fairly early and we put the ewes inside on straw for a week or rushes or something and dry them up. Then we give the best stuff to the lambs and then we still have good grass growing weather in the back end on this farm somehow, before it gets too late in the autumn, when it gets too wet. So, we tried keeping all the ewes in one field last year through tugging time up until, well in the month before tugging to try and keep them tight to try and cut the lambing percentage down a little bit, but it only worked a little bit.

SH: Do you find you have to use a lot of wormers and stuff and have you got a lot of fluke?

NR: Yeah, this farm is bad for fluke. We do have a high vet and med bill, because we try and feed everything fairly well. We've got a feeder wagon that we mix all the sheep feed in and we do use Ensovax, Toxivax, Footvax. Maybe a bit over the top really. Fluke wormers and mineral boluses and copper boluses.

SH: In a way that's opposite to the New Zealand style where if it doesn't perform it dies.

NR: Like you said, when you've got sheep worth two or three thousand you've got to try and keep them in the best condition that you can. We've just sold three or four Swiss Valais ewes at three thousand each and they're hardy weather wise, but they're soon susceptible to worms and fluke and foot rot in this wet land.

SH: It's a bit different than the mountains where they come from, isn't it? How long have you had them?

NR: Nearly three years, I think.

SH: And what made you dabble with them?

NR: We just fancied them because they were total opposite to Swaledales. Swaledale want white knees, they've got black knees. A Swaledale wants white hocks, they've got black hocks. A Swaledale wants a white nose, they've got a black nose. And they're called the Swiss Valais Blacknose because of that. They've got long necks, which is what we're trying to do with the Swaledales. They've got big heads and they looked quite interesting sheep and we've got quite well known with them these last three years, we've had some good sales.

SH: Are they good sheep apart from being pretty?

NR: They're good mothers, they're easy lambing, the lamb's grow fast. We've got one this year, first time, a Swaledale gimmer hogg jumped over the wall and got tupped by a Blacknose. So, we've got a young hogg there with a Blacknose tup lamb on it and it's already growing faster than the Swale lambs. We called it a mule, because it looks a bit muley, but no they're good growing big sheep, they're big heavy sheep are Blacknoses. I think Helga, that big ewe's nearly a hundred kilos.

SH: What else do you do on the farm?

NR: We started, partly because of a request from Natural England, to go onto a traditional breed so we could graze the moorlands. The farm had a real tight restriction

on grazing through most of the year with continental cattle and no sheep on a lot of it and they said if we had traditional cattle, we could graze all year round and graze the moorlands as well, so we went into Belted Galloways, 2004 something like that, and got rid of most of the continentals straight away and dwindled the others out for a couple of years. And, we've never looked back really. Obviously, they're not a high-priced animal in the market, but we've built our own meat processing room and we do one Belted Galloway bullock or badly striped heifer about once every six weeks. Between eight and twelve a year we do for beef, which we sell to all the neighbours and friends and people we deal with and anybody else that wants any and it's been quite a good venture really.

SH: Do you just keep the belties now then?

NR: Yeah, we've only got pure belted cattle now.

SH: And do you run them as pedigrees?

NR: Yeah, they're all pedigree. We've sold quite a few. We've sold a few bulls off at two or three thousand each. And we've sold a lot of heifers off last year 'cause we've got more than we needed. They were about twelve to fifteen hundred each. We've done alright.

SH: So, you must have a good strain then, because the run of the mill ones, there isn't the price is there?

NR: We've one or two that are not so good, because obviously most of the people that come to buy have wanted the better ones. And so, we've ended up keeping one or two not quite as good and don't want to give them away. A poor striped cow can have a really good striped calf and the blood lines still there. So obviously, it's like Swales, they don't all come good.

SH: So, with your pedigree sales and your beef sales you're making the most of them?

NR: We're doing the best we possibly can. The way we feel, we've worked a bit too hard lately, this last two or three years and if we do come to slow down with the meat side I think we'll have a shock how little they will make in places such as Bakewell or Leek market. I don't know if that's an option or not, cut down on the numbers a bit maybe or increase the meat side.

SH: I wonder if you could find a butcher or somebody, so you'd still get your value, but they'd also be doing part of the job?

NR: Most of the butchers that I know are driving round in Mercedes, because they make more for having a beast for a week than make for having the cow for two years in calf and then rearing it up for beef, so I don't think that's an avenue to go down. We had a butcher call in a few years ago to look at some bullocks and I think they were averaging about £1200 at the time for us, cut up into the end product, all cut up and ready packed and he was offering us like five or six hundred quid. So, he was going to make five, six, seven hundred quid in a few days killing it, cutting it up and you know he's going to double it, isn't he?

SH: When you sell them yourselves some people say that they're often stuck with a certain amount of stuff that you can't shift. Do you have that problem?

NR: We don't find that problem at all, because we've got people that want all different things. We've got a lot of people like your man Graham Turnock, he only wants shoulder or brisket. And then we've got other people that only want top side and silver

side and sirloins. No, we haven't got that problem anymore. And then some of the offal we put into dog food, we've got people buy dog food as well.

SH: You're saying you'd like to cut back on the meat job, is it very hard work then?

NR: No, it's not actually hard work. It's just the time and looking after everything else. Your stocks the most important thing and the pedigree stock. The breeding animals are the most important, so anything that goes for meat is like a..., I know it's another good bow to the business but it's a by-product really, 'cause the breeding animals are the main goal.

SH: Does TB affect you here?

NR: Only the stress of TB testing once a year. Because the Galloways, they are often left out in the winter, spread out over different parts of the farm. It means getting them all in and they're friendly enough when you go near them, but not when you're trying to get them in the crush. I think most farmers will find that with their cattle, they're not just thrilled to go through a crush once a year. It's the only time they go through the crush, our cows.

SH: Galloway's are noted for being shall we say lively.

NR: Yeah, and we've been twenty-nine years annual TB testing, we've never had a reactor yet and I think we should go onto two yearly or something instead of annually, it's just too much hassle.

SH: Do you get many problems with the cows with stressing them. You always get some abortions and sometimes you get injuries, never mind human injuries?

NR: No, we've not had any major problems. We had one cow abort this year not long after TB testing, but that could be anything. We didn't have anything; we've not really had anything for a year or two, problems with it, no.

SH: And you've got a good handling set-up?

NR: We haven't got a good handling system, but we've got something that works.

SH: You don't get injured?

NR: None of us have been injured yet, no.

SH: How many children have you got?

NR: I've got a son who's 21. He works away at Glossop at his mother's farm. And then I've got a young son who's 11, who's dedicated to Swaledale sheep, who lives and works here. And a daughter who's 14 that's into rugby and horse riding. And then my partner, Dorota, she works here full time. She's got the holiday cottage business and her son's 14. He's going to be an engineer he thinks, in cars or computers or something.

SH: Is there any potential of those youngsters lessening your work load?

NR: Yeah, they're starting to help a lot more now.

SH: 'Cause you've got a business that works for you here with your various strings.

NR: Yeah, hopefully the youngest boy if he can convince the teachers, he'd be better off at home. He'll be coming home soon. He's only 11 but he's desperate to come home and take over. He comes home every night and tells me what I should have done and what he's going to do, and let's get on with this. I'm tired when he gets home

from school and then he says “come on, let’s get all these jobs done.” He was up early this morning, as he is most mornings, he’s up and fed quite a few of the sheep before I got up this morning, so he’s got some good ideas and I say with having his ram make a lot of money last year he thinks he’s God’s gift to Swaledale sheep, but he’s realistic about it. He knows it’s a one off maybe, he might never do it again, but he still wants to try. I think when I was his age, I wanted to rule the world. And I thought that until about probably 10 years ago I was going to rule the world and eventually with all this bureaucracy and Peak Park and Natural England knocking you down all the time, you realise you’re knocking your head against a brick wall somehow.

SH: Have you got anything positive to finish up with?

NR: It can be an absolutely lovely job working on the farm every day. And the farm, it’s a beautiful location and we’re not really living in the real world, because we’re sheltered down a long driveway. If you don’t go up it, you don’t see what the real worlds like, so you could enjoy yourself working here. I enjoyed it for long enough. It’s only the fact that I’m too old to work my bollocks off every day now, so it’s making me think, why am I doing this and why am I doing that and why am I listening to a lot of this crap that they keep telling me, when I could be doing something really useful and I could be doing a lot of environmental work if they weren’t so restrictive on everything else, because the nature’s fantastic. The birds are fantastic, the black grouse were amazing, the lapwings were fantastic after that, but there’s just too many people riding round telling you what to do. Natural England have come here and they think that Fernyford looks like this because of nature and because of their meetings, and they’re not here 365 days a year knapsack spraying and fencing and walling and creosoting and looking after everything and keeping an eye on things, so.

SH: Well, all I can say is Neil that the farm actually looks..., it’s a credit to you and your family’s hard work, so well done.

NR: Thank you.