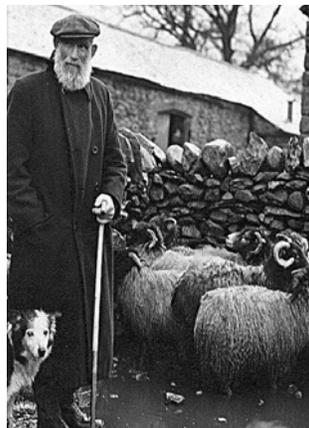


CHAPTER 2

Farmers, Shepherds, Locals and Tourist's

*As long as there are sheep on the fells, there'll be a Mardale Meet.
I'm good for a few more yet...*

Isaac Cookson, on his 61st attendance (1952)



Isaac Cookson,

Old Mardale reeked of sheep, herdwick sheep, big boned, thin of flesh, coarse of wool, but perfect for the crags and ridges of Mardale. The Herdwick is a relatively small sheep with a frosty grey-white face. A body deep and round with a coat dark in the young but becoming greyer with age when it has a soft, creamy-white undercoat.

In Lakeland, the system of sheep farming even to this day is to have a specified number of sheep as the property of the landlord, a number that remains at the farm through changes of tenancy. A Mardale shepherd / farmer was only vaguely aware of the number of sheep he owned apart from when he conducted a count at the annual summer clipping and autumn dipping. The sheep were counted and strays returned to their rightful owners. What probably began as an informal group of neighbours and friends evolved into the Mardale Shepherds Meet.

The code of honour in the fells called for strays brought down to the Meet to be identified by reference to their ears and markings on their wool. (Lug marks, wool stripes and pops!).

Sheep marking is at best confusing to the layman. Punching, cropping, key-biting, fold-biting, ritting, upper and under halving and forking are some of the more common method of lug (ear) marking, which may be on one or both ears. A veteran farmer at the 1952 Meet told a local journalist " *T combinations are like*

t' perms in t' football pools". The wool markings are renewed annually after clipping and are usually strokes of red, blue or black. They may take the initials of the owner. Horn markings are a further aid to identity



Picking out the strays

Occasionally sheep would stray onto the precipitous crags of the dale in search of better grass, some would become stuck or crag fast. The shepherd's would climb down or be lowered down on ropes in an attempt to rescue them, there was however an old belief that if you left the sheep for a while it would loose so much weight that it could jump off and float down to the ground.

In the farmhouses of old Mardale, on winter's nights, when friends called for a craic (gossip), it was almost entirely sheep related, if there was any other topic, it was hunting, although if you were sitting with them around the smoking fire, the room lit by candles as electricity never came to Mardale. You might have difficulty understanding the dialect in which they spoke, kept alive today by a few dedicated dialect societies, but in the main forgotten by the bulk of the population of Lakeland.

That foxhunting played a major part in the life of the dale maybe seen from the following newspaper report of December 1897.

THE ULLSWATER FOXHOUNDS-While hunting in Longsleddale last week six of these hounds got away after a fox which the killed in the Vale of Mardale after a rattling chase over the Sleddale, Kentmere and Mardale hills. The residents joined in the hunt at the finish. The Misses Dixon and Little secured head and brush.

Mardale's obsession with sheep can be better understood by a report in *The Cumberland and Westmorland Herald* in the 1880's. The account is of the boon clip when friends and neighbours gathered at a farm, in this case that of H. P. Holme, to clip the fleeces of those sheep destined for the fell and then to enjoy themselves with feasting and song.

"The morning opened beautifully fine. As early as three o'clock a large number of Mr. Holmes friends assembled at Mardale. An early start was made in the collection and clipping of some 700 sheep. The animals were in grand condition and the clipping progressed expeditiously, refreshments consisting of bread, cheese and nut-brown ale, being served without stint.



Sheep clipping



Sheep Dipping

The clipping was completed about three o'clock in the afternoon and the workers adjourned to arrange their toilets. Later about 120 sat down to an excellent dinner, Mr Holme occupying the chair and Mr W. R. Mounsey the vice-chair.

Dinner over, the company adjourned to a field overlooking Haweswater, where a series of sports took place. Amongst the prizes were two fleeces of wool offered by Mr. Holme for wrestling. Later an adjournment was made to the dining room where in toast and song a very enjoyable evening was spent.

Isaac Hinchcliffe, in a Backwater of Lakeland, quotes from an "old account" written about 1825 of the dale before that date.

"The chimneys of the houses were formerly of the most capacious extent and served not only as larders, wherein joints of meat were suspended to dry for winter use, but also as the favourite gathering place for the inmates of the dwellings.

Under the smoky dome sat the women knitting, or spinning wool and flax, the men carding the wool and the schoolboys conning the barbarous Latinity of Lilly, while the grandsire of the house amused the party with tales of Border strife and superstitious legends."

Hinchcliffe also refers to the wooden chest, which served as "the common depository or strong room of the house." Wool from the backs of the native sheep was homespun and woven into clothing. The furniture of the house consisted of a long oaken table, with a bench on either side, where the whole family including servants ate together. Chairs of heavy wainscot work with high arms were in use, but the usual movable seats were three-foot stools.

"On winter evenings, lighting was provided by candles made of peeled rushes, dipped in the hot fat of fried bacon. The candlestick was a light upright pole, fixed in a log of wood, and furnished with pincers for holding the rushes."

Hinchcliffe records that the usual food consisted of leavened bread (made from a kind of black oats) boiled animal food. Produced in the dairy, and a limited supply of vegetables.

In 1864 a Mrs. E. Linton walked from Ullswater to Haweswater and High Street, and found Mardale "all very primitive and rough", she mentions the narrowness of the approach road and the diplomacy required if two carriages met, as one would need to be backed into a gateway. Mardale Church was *"by no means a rustic cathedral"* and the Dun Bull *"a wretched wayside public house where you can get eggs and bacon and nothing else-except the company of a tipsy parson lying in bed with his gin bottle by his side."*

Not long before the flooding the community of Mardale had shrunk to nine inhabited houses with around forty residents. A farming community, the four main farms were Chapel Hill, Goosemire, Grove Brae and Flake How, occupied by the Hudson's, Greenhows, Watson's and Edmondson's respectively. The Kitching's were associated with Chapel Hill and Measand; later on the Daffurn's of the Dun Bull at the head of the dale combined farming with inn keeping.



Goosemire Farm in winter

A typical farmhouse, of seventeen-century date, was made of local stone with a slate roof; it had a substantial porch with a pitched roof. The front of the building was lime washed. Many miles of dry stone walling bordered the meadows and pasture and extended up into the fell side to take in some of the rough grazing.

A typical family had a few acres of meadowland for making hay, which was harvested by horse and basic machinery. Oates were grown for porridge or to feed the poultry. The grain was taken to a local mill (there were mills at Bampton and Widewath) to be ground.

Much of the work in the fields was performed by hand, using rakes and forks, there was little machinery and horses pulling sleds were a common sight. They were also used on the lower slopes of the fells in autumn when bracken was gathered as bedding for stock in the winter months, the tracks they used were known as "sled roads."

Compared to today, the hygiene requirements of the inhabitants of the valley were pretty basic, at Whelter a farm at one time, latterly used as a house by a Dr. Connell, a surgeon at the Cumberland Infirmary in Carlisle there was no bathroom and so periodically the doctor stood under a local waterfall.

Shepherds took pride in their appearance as the following story shows Isaac Cookson who rarely left his farm was seen one Friday evening by Albert Graham of Rosgill having a wash. The washbasin was supported on a form of the type used at sheep sheering time. Isaac explained *"I'm thinking o' going to Penrith on Tuesday"*. (Isaac Cookson attended the Shepherds meet for over 60 years.)



Isaac Cookson

There was quite a considerable colony at one time at the Mardale Banks end of Guerness Wood near to the old copper mine. The last house left on the edge of Guerness Ghyll was used as a beer house and was pulled down within living memory (Hinchcliffe wrote in 1923) on account of Sunday debauchery.

Another story goes, that on a certain Monday, a dozen or so hardy hunters coming from Bampton and Askham called for an early morning drink. As the hostess had almost been drunk dry the previous day there was little left, but she started a new brew saying it would be ready for their return. She brewed three strengths, "ram tam, middle-mow and pinkie," and asked which one they

would prefer?. They decided on middle-mow as being neither too strong nor too weak. On their return, tired and thirsty, the new brew sweet and still warm was ready, and they set to work on it, and a few hours later as the old lady watched them go reeling and staggering through Guerness Wood she said, "*Lor bless me, if they'd gitten as much ram tam, what wud hev become o' them.*"

There is another Mardale story about a colporteur that once called at a farmer's house in the dale and tried to sell a bible to the farmer's wife. She repeatedly refused and finally he gave up, remarking that he was afraid she was a weak woman. "*What,*" she said, "*me a weak woman, hed thirteen bairns an' sniggin wood out o' Guerness twice a week. Me a weak woman!*"

TO BE CONTINUED