Neil Heseltine and Leigh Weston
Hill Top Farm, Malhamdale

Set above the village of Malham, with walled fields rising to the top land beyond, the stone-built house at Hill Top Farm has been here since 1617. We meet Neil and Leigh outside in light summer drizzle, and head into the kitchen. We’re watched through the window by an old dog. ‘She’s been a good working dog,’ Neil tells us, ‘but she’s in retirement now. I have four dogs in total, only one of which is of half use.’

Neil grew up at Hill Top Farm, which was tenanted by his father and mother from the 1950s. They bought it in the 1980s and Neil now runs the farm, while Leigh runs the bunk barn and holiday cottage.

Both Neil and Leigh use social media on a regular basis to share snapshots of life on their farm.

‘We’ve had people come to the cottage as a result of Instagram,’ says Neil. ‘When they come, they post pictures, so they’re helping us, but also they’re already more in tune with what we’re doing on the farm. They’re already interested.’

This is a reflection of the way social media has shifted public awareness and engagement with farming, and also plays a part in connecting farmers. ‘Farms are quite isolated,’ says Leigh. ‘Social media has been a big thing, and you’re no longer isolated, and as an industry you can talk to each other.’

Along with quad bikes the arrival of the internet is probably the most significant change in farming, in general terms, over the last 50 years. On each individual farm, however, changes are driven by many factors, not least the personal goals of the farmers. For Neil, the main motivation has been a desire for sustainability.
What we’re probably looking at more than anything is environmental and economic sustainability. And to do that from a farming perspective it means the cattle have to be suited to the hills. Around the 1950s, when dairy farming was more prevalent, dairy cattle would be sent to Malham from Skipton, Settle and surrounding areas, and would be grazed on the limestone pastures through the summer months. They’d be walked to the pastures, where they would do well because it was dry but also on top of a hill they would be less prone to fly strike or their udders getting mastitis. As dairy farming changed the whole process changed, and there was less cattle grazing the hill, with more cattle inside.

Neil introduced native breed cattle to the farm in 2003, as part of the Limestone Countryside Project, and has since increased numbers. He chose Belted Galloway heifers, and is pleased with the way they are doing. ‘They live outside on the hills all year round. We don’t want to be driving wagons of feed to them, we don’t want to be making a lot of hay, to be honest with you, cos that all costs money and it’s burning fuel. We’re probably in a position now where sustainability is achievable, both environmentally and economically. We believe we are creating a much better balance.’

Before 2003, numbers of sheep were much higher. Neil had an aspiration to breed mules (Swaledale sheep crossed with Bluefaced Leicester). ‘This enterprise was my dream really, to achieve things with show lambs and tups’. About 2012 we had a much closer look at the business. The business was making money, but when we looked at it more closely, we realised that the environmental payments and the single farm payment were contributing far more to income and profit than we realised. The cattle that we thought were only there for conservation grazing purposes were actually making money. And this enterprise that was my baby was losing money. We’re now down from about 800 lambing sheep to about 200 and they will decrease further.’

Neil is drawing on his experience with the Galloways as he alters the way he works with his sheep. He is now choosing to lamb them later, and reducing the need for feed and intensive practice: working with the weather and the land, rather than being led by productivity goals. The meat from the cattle and the sheep is now being sold with the PFLA (pasture-fed livestock association) certification, and the recent use of QR coding means that someone buying meat can track the life of the animal. Much of it is available for sale in the local Town End farm shop. It’s all part of a sustainable outlook, which Leigh is equally keen to prioritise:

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'I think conventionally farmers would look at our farm and think we’re not maximising what we could get out of it – like there’s too many thistles! It’s a bit scruffy, you know everybody’s on thistle control, dock control, nettle control, wanting to get more grass.’ Leigh continues: ‘We’ve gone the other way. I think some people would find our methods a little bit challenging. But people are starting to ask, do these native breeds actually perform well, compared to continental breeds that need a lot of input? The native breeds fell out of fashion after the war when people were looking for high productivity and high yields. The mainstream press ran an article a couple of weeks ago about native breed cattle. And you think, once they’re talking about it, farmers start to listen. They’re reading it on their kitchen tables every month and they’re thinking, maybe there’s something in that.’ In many ways, Neil says, his farming is becoming less and less intensive and he’s going back to farming practices that were popular in the mid twentieth century. Although there’s a focus on the Belted Galloways, the sheep are still a key part of the farm and many of the practices and terms used have changed little in the last fifty years. ‘Within farming there’s a lot more to it than anyone thinks really. The one that always gets me is when you’re ruddling tups and everybody wonders what the hell you’re doing. You know it’s: Well, we put yellow on at this time, so that we know when the sheep are going to lamb, what tup they’re going to lamb to, what week they’ve been tupped and therefore when they’re gonna lamb, and if they get rudded again, the second time, you know they’re not in lamb, so you know your tup’s not working. Then it’s just this blank expression. A simpler way to say it would be, well, it’s just been tupped basically. There’s just far more to it than what you’d think: the breeding, the genetics, everything about it, grass growth, grass preservation, and then there’s boundaries to maintain.’ Boundaries are a major issue for all Yorkshire Dales farmers. Neil has many kilometres of dry stone walls; he employs two people to help with maintenance for two to three days a week. In relation to the built structures linked with the farm, Neil says he has changed very little. ‘Although we have fenced off a few river banks, and we’ve put a fence in here or there, mainly we’ve reinstated walls that had completely gone down. There’s one field that was running as one but originally would’ve been four fields, and is now back to being four fields. All the barns are in use in some way. They’re in working order, all the rooves are sound. We use one for handling sheep in and we store hay in that as well. There’s two others in a croft so when we put stock in the croft they can run in and out of the barn, for shelter.’ Although it’s likely that, given their current plans, sheep numbers will continue to fall, Neil is still keen to breed strong mules and is proud of his Black Wensleydales; and Leigh has a soft spot for Bluefaced Leicesters (their wool is being used by a local weaver ‘Laura’s Loom’ in Sedbergh, who is championing the use of Bluefaced Leicester wool sourced from the Yorkshire Dales). The sheep are graze in the lower ‘inbye’ land and on the more exposed ‘top land’, from where the spectacular spread of Malham Cove can be seen.
Some of the sheep marking techniques have changed:

‘Everybody used to horn burn. We did, but we don’t any more. Everybody used to do lug marks, take a nip out of the lugs [ears], which we used to do and don’t any more. We used to mark the sheep one colour and the lambs a different colour. There would have been a reason for that at some point and I don’t fully know why they did it. We mark red over loin and the lambs were a black pop on each u BEN, which is like the back end. We use an electronic tag and then the mark on the sheep, that’s all. We do the sheep and the lambs the same colour now.’

We ask about their views of the future. Neil is confident: ‘I firmly believe there is a future in farming in the Dales. I think you’ve got to accept that things will change, and you’ve got to be able to change with it. To bury your head in the sand and say, this is what we do, this is what we’ve always done, and this is what we’re going to carry on doing, I think you’ll come a cropper at some point. You’ve got to be flexible in your approach. We’re realising that grazing with cattle, and grazing it in certain ways, you can create a balance between wildlife and biodiversity and still be able to produce food. And I actually think it’s a more profitable way of farming as well. The whole reason to be sustainable is that it will still be happening 50, 100 years, a thousand years’ time. You’ve got to move with the times. And as long as we do, I think there’ll be somebody here.’

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Leigh adds to this: ‘I suppose the true meaning of sustainability is leaving it in a state where it has value; not only financial value for a business, but natural value as well. You leave the soil in a good state, you leave the flora and fauna, the insect life, you leave everything in a good state – the water quality – everything about it, where it sustains itself and it has value.’

In the current climate, however, things are a little uncertain. ‘Going forward environmental payments are looking slightly questionable,’ says Neil. ‘The Brexit situation hasn’t helped. So I’m really trying to look at opportunities, about how we can take the business forward. Probably if I was redesigning a payment scheme going forward, I would make it entirely environmental so if there is a benefit to public good as a result of what you’re doing, then I think that’s worthy of being rewarded for. So it would be an environmental perspective for me, rather than saying everybody gets a big chunk of money for effectively doing what they’ve always done.’
Neil seems to be easing this way, and is even considering devoting a small portion of his land to trees, and exploring options such as a permaculture model. We talk for well over an hour, and finish with a question that inevitably comes up: if this farm is reducing its sheep numbers, and Neil has let his dream of breeding the perfect mule take a back seat, what is it that puts a spring in Neil’s step now, what really makes him smile?

‘Talking about indicators of environmental success,’ he says, his eyes lighting up, ‘if that’s the right word, it’s this: we’ve got barn owls nesting in one of the barns, and we’ve ringed chicks over the last three or four years, which has been really interesting and an immense amount of pride for me. And you know when I go to the field each spring where the bird’s eye primroses are, to see what there is there, you can see that you’re making a difference. This gives me pleasure in equal measure, I’d say, to the pleasure I get from tending and raising my livestock. It’s all part of what farming is for me.’

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i The Limestone Countryside Project was aimed at starting to change biodiversity in the hills. It was commissioned by Natural England and run by Askham Bryan College (ref http://www.ccri.ac.uk/limestone/).
ii Tup is the commonly used term for a ram.
iii A croft is a small field.