

Bleak Bank – A sustainable family farm – written by John Dawson



“Bleak Bank” sounds like it could be the title from a Dickensian novel but it is, in fact, a family farm nestled on the sunny (and sometimes snowy) slopes of Ingleborough in the Yorkshire dales national park (YDNP) It is farmed by myself, my wife Judith and son William. The Dawson family have farmed here since 1921, my great grandfather arrived as a tenant in 1921 and managed to buy the farm in 1927, in those days it was 75 acres and cost the princely sum of £2700

The farm itself is best described as upland, in the farmyard we are at 850ft above sea level but our sheep graze to the top of Ingleborough which is the second highest peak in Yorkshire, rising to a majestic 2372ft.

The sheep we keep are a hill breed called Dalesbred, like me they are hardy sorts and very happy living in the harsh environment of Bleak Bank and Ingleborough fell. Our flock has been established on the farm since the enclosure acts of the 1750s and they are “hefted” on Ingleborough. Hefted means that on a common fell each flock of sheep (there are twelve on Ingleborough) live on their own unfenced part and rarely stray onto their neighbours, they do this by each generation teaching the next one where they live, in the same way that children might go to the same school that their parents did. Historically when a Bleak Bank tenant retired or moved on the flock would be valued and the incoming tenant bought them, they were, and still are, part of the fabric of the farm.

We are a slightly unusual farm in that we have a dairy herd of seventy or so Friesian/Holstein cows which is very small by today's standards. The herd is made up of individual cow families and it is not unusual for us to have grandmother, mother and daughter in the herd at any one time, it is their home and, like me, they belong here. To give the dairy herd some context, Bleak Bank is situated on the four mile stretch of road between Ingleton and Clapham, in living memory there were ten family farms on that stretch of road and all had a small dairy herd, the families supported the local shops, schools, pubs, churches and chapels. Nowadays there are just four farms on that same stretch of road and only Bleak Bank has a dairy herd.

Farming in the national park is a privilege not to be taken lightly, for instance we appreciate that the head of land management from YDNP joins us for at least one of our fell gathers each year in order to have a better understanding of the challenges a farm such as ours faces.

The family farm is part of our country's heritage and yet there is so much more to it, the effort that goes in to keeping the farm on any kind of even keel is enormous, forty hours a week has come and gone by Wednesday morning, I say that not looking for sympathy but just a little understanding. I believe that the work farmers do is not fully appreciated by society, “so what?” I hear you cry “who is?” but (and it's a big but) it does not get any more important than feeding the nation and providing a home for mother nature.

The country is about 60% self sufficient in food and we must ask ourselves is that okay? Where do we want the other 40% to come from? Are we happy for it to come from America? Europe? Africa? Australia? Surely not. The Guardian newspaper recently reported that in 2010 up to 60 hectares of



“best and most versatile farmland” was lost to housing and industry but last year the figure was up to 6000 hectares, that is enough ground to grow 250,000 tonnes of fruit and vegetables every year.

The National Farmers Union has made the pledge to go carbon neutral by 2030 which I think is an enormous ask bearing in mind how reliant farms are on fossil fuel. The airline industry makes noises about carbon offsetting - not cutting, this means the pollution

continues. Remember that no one ever got on a plane because they needed to. Motor racing makes no attempt to reduce their pollution, and yet, It wouldn't matter if that didn't exist. Nor do those who sell bottled water who, incidentally, only produce plastic bottles.

Our carbon footprint is, rightly, monitored by our dairy company but they only monitor the carbon we buy such as fuel. the carbon we sequester is not monitored. Permanent pasture (grass) is a more resilient sequester of carbon than woodland because it is stored underground, woodland stores it above ground in leaves and biomass, it is always released when the tree dies or is harvested.

Arable ground is typically up to 5% carbon compared to the extensive grassland farms such as Bleak Bank which have been measured up to 18%. Grassland captures carbon, provides a home for nature AND produces food. It is the livestock that brings the countryside to life, for instance, each cow that leaves our farm has mucked (its okay to use that word) and urinated its way round the farm for several years, this provides a home for worms, beetles and birds. In due course what is left works into the soil providing a long list of nutrients. Remember this, each cow leaves more than she takes, remarkable.

I am not talking about intensive/industrial farms, they are not part of the solution but like supermarkets they are what we have made them due to our pursuit of cheap food.

My point is, why is the voice of the family farm not heard? I know that you can trust me to produce good quality food and be a good custodian of the land and yet I cannot be heard. Are we happy



listening to those who shout loudest? do we take pride in what we eat or feed our children? As a farmer in the YDNP I would like the British consumer to say “I will only eat food that is produced in this country or produced to the same high standard.” Be assured of one thing, I will not lower my standards to compete.

My intention in writing this piece is to promote discussion and raise awareness of the

challenges of the smaller farms, not to offend, I hope I have done one and not tother.....