

HEFTED FLOCKS ON THE LAKE DISTRICT COMMONS AND FELLS

Mervyn Edwards MBE
Report revised 14 August 2018

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Aim of the project

The aim was to strengthen the knowledge of sheep grazing practices on the Lake District fells.

The report is complementary to a series of maps which indicate the approximate location of all the hefted flocks grazing the fells during the summer of 2016. The information was obtained by interviewing a sample of graziers in order to illustrate the practice of hefting, not necessarily to produce a strictly accurate record.

Background

The basis for grazing sheep on unenclosed mountain and moorland in the British Isles is the practice of hefting. This uses the homing and herding instincts of mountain sheep making it possible for individual flocks of sheep owned by different farmers to graze 'open' fells with no physical barriers between these flocks. Shepherds have used this as custom and practice for centuries.

Hefted sheep, or heafed sheep as known in the Lake District, have a tendency to stay together in the same group and on the same local area of land (the heft or heaf) throughout their lives. These traits are passed down from the ewe to her lambs when grazing the fells – in essence the ewes show their lambs where to graze. Hefted flocks are self-maintained flocks. The female lambs are kept to replace older ewes, avoiding the need to buy in female sheep from other flocks. The sheep are acclimatised to a particular terrain, weather conditions and diseases that prevail in the area. They are familiar with the ways to find shelter and, at gathering times, the way to the farmstead and back to their grazing ground.

More than 60% of the Lake District fell is common land, often the remaining areas of land that were not enclosed for agricultural improvement or private use by individual landowners at the time of the Enclosures. Common land/commons normally belong to the Lord of the Manor or their legal descendents but over time a sizeable proportion of the common land in the Lake District has been bequeathed to organisations such as The National Trust and the National Park Authority. The graziers, known as commoners, are normally local farmers whose land is adjacent or near to the common. Their legal right to graze a particular common in the Lake District is inscribed in the commons registers kept by Cumbria County Council. In effect, most commons are shared grazing areas

where farmers have one or more flocks related to their registered rights of common. The legal rights do not normally apply to the position of hefts within commons which have been largely developed by custom and practice.

Alongside common land, the Lake District has privately owned (freehold) fells. Some are enclosed by fences or walls, particularly the smaller ones, and some are 'open' to adjoining properties or common land where there are no physical boundaries between them. They are normally occupied by single flocks although the larger ones are often divided into different groups (stocks) of sheep and managed separately. The practice of hefting is essential on these unenclosed fells as it is on common land. Keeping hefted flocks is less necessary on the enclosed fells but self-maintained flocks are also acclimatised to the conditions of their fell grazing area. Therefore, for the purpose of this project they were also deemed to be hefted.

The practice and value of hefting has been recognised in the delivery of government agri-environment schemes and in the nomination of the Lake District as a World Heritage Site cultural landscape. In recent times the general public has become more aware of hefting and hill farming through tourist information, publications, books and exhibitions. Locally, we can refer to books and articles written by James Rebanks¹, the work of Ian Lawson² (photographer) and the Land Keepers project³.

Method

The project identified and recorded the location of hefted flocks grazing on common land and freehold fells in the Lake District National Park during the summer of 2016 (representing a 'snapshot in time'). The project also recorded the breeds of sheep kept in the flocks and changes that have occurred over the last 25 years or so (since 1990).

First, using the four OS Explorer maps covering the Park, the boundaries of the commons were identified using Natural England's Magic Map Application. Then the approximate location of each flock was added, identified by farm name and, where appropriate, coupled with additional information where more than one flock belonging to the same farmer was grazing the common. At the same time, the maps were used to show the boundaries of freehold fells and record the ownership of flocks grazing these fells by farm names.

¹ See <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/270728/the-shepherd-s-life/>

² <http://www.ianlawson.com/books/herdwick/>

³ <http://landkeepers.co.uk/>

The Lakeland Shepherd's Guide 2005 was used to check the existence of flocks grazing both common land and freehold fells.

It was considered impractical to contact every grazier to obtain the information; instead key informants, prominent graziers (present or past) of their common (and possibly familiar with adjacent commons) were consulted. And, in the case of freehold fells, the information was provided by graziers who had an in-depth knowledge of farms in particular areas (e.g. covering particular dales).

The project was undertaken by Mervyn Edwards, a retired government farming adviser who has gifted the maps and supporting information to the Federation of Cumbria Commoners.

Results - Commons

The summaries of data together with comment are shown below:

Table 1 – Number of commons recorded in the sample

Number of commons recorded	73
Number of commons used as intakes (enclosures for keeping fell sheep at particular times of the year)	6
Number of commons grazed by sheep from adjacent freehold fells	2
Number of commons not grazed by sheep	3

The total number of commons shown above is a slight underestimation because a very small number of satellite commons have been excluded, those related to and on the margins of larger commons which are occupied by the same graziers.

The number of commons used as intakes refer to a cluster of small units in the Duddon Valley occupied by individual graziers. Two other small commons (The Barf and Watering Beck) are grazed by flocks based on adjacent freehold fells. Three commons are not grazed at all, two (Buttermere Dubs and Little Calva) because of agri-environment agreements and one (Lowick) has been abandoned.

Table 2 – Number of graziers and flocks in the sample

Total number of graziers	271
Number of graziers removed since 1990	71
Number of new graziers	8
Net reduction in total number of graziers	63 (18.9%)
Total number of fell flocks defined as separate stocks	309
Number of fell flocks/stocks removed	75
Number of new flocks/stocks since 1990	8
Net reduction in number of fell flocks/stocks	67 (17.8%)

The numbers of graziers and fell flocks have declined by just under 20% over the last 25 years or so. A small number (at least 5) of new flocks were established because of the attraction of agri-environment schemes.

Most of the reductions in numbers of graziers and flocks seem to be as a result of retirement with no succession, although a small number of these flocks have been acquired by the remaining graziers. The numbers removed as a result of the Foot & Mouth epidemic of 2001 was significant and mostly related to Caldbeck Common where most of the flocks were completely slaughtered. Perhaps the epidemic hastened the decision to remove some fell flocks and focus on other farming/non-farming options. A small number of flocks were removed to accommodate agri-environment agreements requiring a substantial reduction in sheep numbers. Some graziers have combined different flocks to simplify their management in the development of their farm businesses.

Table 3 – Breeds of sheep and numbers of flocks in the sample

Breeds	Number of flocks	%
Swaledale	126	40.8
Herdwick	91	29.4
Swaledale & Herdwick and their crosses	41	13.3
Cheviot and their crosses	19	6.1
Swaledale & Cheviot and their crosses	12	3.9
Rough Fell	7	2.3
Others ⁴	13	4.2
Total	309	100.0

The total numbers of sheep against each breed were not recorded as this would have meant contacting each grazier and greatly extended the time needed to complete this work.

Swaledale and Herdwick were the predominant sheep kept. The majority of Swaledales were located in the 'kinder' fells of the north and east of the Lake District, whilst the majority of Herdwicks were located on the 'harder' fells of the centre and west. Flocks consisting of one or more of these two breeds amount to about 85% of total flocks. The first named breed shown against mixed flocks does not necessarily mean the dominance of that breed.

⁴
Other breeds include Scottish Blackface (3), Cheviot & Woodland White Face(1), Swaledale, Cheviot & Texel crosses (1), Cheviot & Welsh Mountain (1), Hebridean (2), Swaledale, Herdwick & Cheviot (1), Cheviot & Rough Fell (1), Cheviot & Herdwick (1), Herdwick & Rough Fell (1) and Lleyn (1).

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in keeping Cheviots, partly following the Foot & Mouth epidemic (when there was limited availability of Swaledales) and partly because of perceived benefits of the breed. The numbers of common land graziers completely changing breeds during the last 25 years were small– one flock replacing Rough Fell with Herdwick, three flocks replacing Swaledale with Cheviot and one flock replacing Cheviot with Herdwick and Swaledale.

Considerations:

1. The number of changes recorded including numbers of graziers, flocks and breeds over the last 25 years or so was likely to be an underestimate (although marginal in relation to total numbers) because, on reflection, some of the contacts used to obtain the information were not sufficiently briefed or given much time to consider before asking the questions.
2. Whilst every effort was made to accurately show the approximate location of each flock on the maps, there is a possibility that the actual position does not show the dominant or full extent of area of grazing (i.e. the heft) because of hefting boundaries have changed, or are changing in many areas (reputably) following reduction in sheep numbers related to agri-environment schemes. The recording has attempted to avoid duplication between commons – a number of flocks graze across more than one common (perhaps, in the past, some of the flocks were defined as separate stocks but they have now combined). The 'overlap' of grazing for these flocks was recorded and shown on the maps but only one entry for each of these flock were recorded to avoid duplication of data (and only one flock shown on the maps).

Results – Freehold Fells

The summaries of data together with comment are shown below:

Table – 4 – Number of graziers keeping self-maintained fell flocks on freehold fells in the sample

Number of graziers	83
Number of freehold fells not grazed	3
Number of different flocks	112

The number of graziers can be roughly equated with number of freehold fell grazing units which may compose of one or more parcels of land (including supporting intakes in some places). The number of self-maintained flocks kept on the smaller fell enclosures is likely to be marginally under recorded because of their relatively small size.

There have been very few apparent reductions in the number of graziers occupying the larger freehold units. Sheep have been completely removed from Skiddaw Forest (which includes Little Calva Common) and a large part of Shap Fells (re Shap Abbey Farm) following agri-environment agreements. Sheep have also been removed from Gale Fell (Ennerdale) but is subject to encroachment by sheep from neighbouring fells. Kentmere Hall Farm has been amalgamated with Hartrigg with the removal of a grazier to form a much larger unit.

Table 5 – Breeds of sheep and numbers of flocks in the sample

Breeds	Number of flocks	%
Swaledale	51	45.5
Herdwick	27	24.1
Swaledale & Herdwick and their crosses	17	15.1
Cheviot and their crosses	7	6.3
Swaledale & Cheviot and their crosses	1	0.9
Rough Fell	2	1.8
Others	7	6.3
Total	112	100.0

Other breeds include: Herdwick & Cheviot (3), Herdwick, Cheviot & Swaledale (1), Scottish Blackface (1), Swaledale & Lleyn (1) and Welsh Mountain & Cheviot (1).

As with commons, the breeds are dominated by Swaledale and Herdwick and there have been very few changes over the last 25 years or so – one flock Herdwick to Swaledale, one flock Swaledale to Cheviot, one flock Swaledale to Herdwick & Cheviot and one where Swaledale ewes were removed to leave only Herdwick following the need to reduce number to comply with an agri-environment agreement.

Emerging issues

The farm visits to meet contacts and other graziers raised two main issues:

1. Apparent lack of succession; a number of graziers were concerned that there seemed to be few young people qualified and available to manage fell flocks, especially on the 'harder' sectors of the Lake District fells. In their opinion, qualification largely related to young people brought up on these farms.
2. Many believed that the traditional system of hefting flocks is breaking down largely due to the substantial reductions in flock size to meet agri-environment agreements. In many places this has resulted in flocks grazing wider areas of the fell and more sheep inclined to stray further away making gathering and the collection of strays more demanding. The successful practice of hefting on areas of 'open' fell relies on a threshold numbers of sheep grazing particular areas to maintain traditional boundaries.

Limitations of using the information

Every effort was made to produce an accurate record but, inevitably, some mistakes were probably made in transposing verbal information onto the OS maps. They can be corrected during the passage of time with a possibility of adding more information. Therefore, the project is regarded as on-going, with information subject to change. The maps are not meant to be definitive for commercial and statutory use; otherwise, they must be verified with each grazier.

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