

FIELD WORK

What Land Does to People and
What People Do to Land

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	I
1 Fallen Stock	21
2 Rise	47
3 Succession	53
4 Hedge Funds	69
5 Cleavers	85
6 Movement Restrictions	103
7 Consumption	111
8 Remote Control	135
9 Cropped	151
10 Title Deeds	175
11 Breeders	179
12 Futures	197
<i>Epilogue</i>	213
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	223

Introduction

The first time I saw Bert he was walking up the lane back to the farm. His head was bent and his shoulders were round and a rough foam of hair had blown loose round the back of his collar. He was wearing wellies and an old Barbour, its pockets sagged and one of its shoulders come away at the seams. His centre of gravity was low to the ground and he walked with a steady concentrated roll, swaying solidly up the lane like a boat at a mooring. When he heard the sound of my car he altered course until he was on a diagonal trajectory to the verge. He looked up as I passed, a clear assessing squint: good or bad, friend or foe. There was something in his presence which reminded me of a badger: grounded, stubborn, utterly British.

I was coming to see about renting the farm cottage, so it was his wife Alison whom I met first. We sat in the kitchen with biscuits between us talking about roadworks. The cottage had only just gone up on Rightmove, but they'd already had eight different applicants come to view: people with dogs, people who couldn't drive, people with two-hour commutes. The dogs were a deal-breaker for a start, she said. It didn't matter how well-trained the owners claimed they were (and owners always said their dogs were practically vegan): the Howells had lost stock before. An Alsatian staying in one of the holiday cottages over the hill had once got loose in the field and ripped the throat out of two ewes. The couple had paid up without protest and flitted the following night, but no one was going to take the chance again. Between the chatter Alison was making

Field Work

it clear that we were engaged in an interview for the position of tenant, and that the story was a test. Whose side would I take – owner, farmer, or dog?

Bert arrived half an hour later, taking his accustomed place in the armchair by the table. There followed some hard questions (what kind of gardener was I? Had I experience of living on a farm? What did I know about sheep?) followed by more overt bargaining: rent, deposit, furnishings. I left knowing both that I had liked them and that they had liked me. Sure enough, a day later Alison rang me and said if I wanted it, I'd got the tenancy.

Rise Farm is a 180-acre hill farm in Wales. From the valley below the land lifts upwards so gently that you barely notice the climb until the view turns and you find yourself looking down on a river several hundred feet below. These are the foothills of the Black Mountains, and this is the crossing point for two different weather systems: sun in the east, rain in the west. The land is south-facing and fertile, but at 800 metres above sea level it's too steep for growing arable crops.

The farm has been in Bert's family for four generations, providing a rough but steady living for over a century. Bert's dad Gerwyn took over the farm from his father in the 1930s. Bert was the only boy out of five children and, though his sisters were as essential to the running of the farm as he was, no one ever doubted who would succeed. At the village school his teachers always understood that Edward the Confessor and the Past Imperfect were locked in a losing fight with silaging for the attention of their students. At harvest time half the school would vanish into the fields and, during lambing, most would turn up an hour or so late in the morning owlish from lack of sleep.

By 2013 Bert and Alison were farming 300 sheep, participating in the Rural Stewardship Scheme and taking the Single

Introduction

Farm Payment. Except for occasional help from visiting vet students, they dealt with everything themselves. David, their son, was in Spain, and their daughter Sarah had recently married and moved over to Somerset. That year the Howells' income was £72,000 and their outgoings were £76,000. They had the rent from the only farm cottage and had recently allocated a couple of fields on which to grow three hay crops a year for a neighbour's anaerobic digester.

Once I moved, things settled into a rhythm. A couple of times a week Bert would come down the lane on the quad, hunched over the handlebars like a cyclist taking a tricky finish. At that stage they had two dogs, Bryn and a collie who for a year or so I genuinely believed to be called Come Here You Useless Bugger. Whatever the weather and however apparently informal, Bert's weekly check-ups always had an air of the state visit about them. Back in the 1970s he had done most of the building work to the house, walling, insulating and extending what had originally been a two-room labourer's cottage, slating the roof and adding a proper kitchen. Knowing every stone of it, he now took more than a merely financial interest in its welfare. He would open the gate and walk along the path with his hands clasped behind his back, stopping every few yards to note the position of the wheelie bins and checking the fritillaries for insubordination. Though his visits were regular he'd always arrive with a pretext: he'd come to enquire about the cistern, he'd come to look at the guttering, he'd come to consider the electrics in the shed.

'Hello, stranger!' he'd say, leaning one hand against the wall to pull his boots off. 'Where was you this time?' Or, in summer, nodding at the lawn, 'What I going to say, you could do with a mower on that.'

There was an etiquette to this. He never stayed longer than an hour, never took more than one cup of tea, always sat in

Field Work

the same chair. Outside the buzzards mewed and the planes passed over while the dogs made their own tour of inspection, glaring at the chickens and peeing importantly on the septic tank. When I showed him something I'd made – a table, a box – he would turn it over, running his thumb along the grain. If he didn't like it he'd ask what it was for. If he did, he'd say nothing at all.

He'd tell me stories about the farm or the news from that week's market. Back in the early twentieth century the Howells were tenants on the land, paying an annual rent of £143. When Rise Farm was put up for sale in 1920 Bert's granddad had taken out a mortgage and bought the place. The price had included a well-founded stone farmhouse, stabling for five horses, a chaff house, 'a cowshed for six with range and calves' cot, two barns, an engine house, two granaries, sheds for the wagons and carts, water from a spring, and 180 acres of land'.

There had been a farm here for a very long time. Nobody really knew how old this place was, but there was good evidence that parts of it dated back to the fifteenth century. Like many farms it had started out small, but over the years it had wandered off westwards and was by now so often overwritten it had become an impacted scribble of alleyways, improvised partitions and odd-shaped sheds. In the milking parlour there was a staircase which went nowhere except the ceiling. The old piggery had become a parking area, and the granary where for decades the old horse had walked in circles round the millwheel was now a storage shed. As on many farms, the rise and fall and rise of its fortunes was inscribed in each succeeding building material: stone, brick, oak, concrete, breeze-block, steel, asbestos, glass, UPVC, solar panels, tin.

This area has always been mostly agricultural – no coal and not much industry – which meant that anyone who couldn't

Introduction

work on their family farms got out, seeding themselves all over the world: London, Canada, Idaho, New Zealand, Argentina, Newfoundland. Those who remained made the best of what the land gave them, including the materials. Outbuildings on many farms round here have so often been altered and rebuilt that they have taken on the asymmetry of man-made geology: the waney seam of a long-gone chimney breast, the wrinkles of a vast oak lintel slumped beneath the weight of its years. Bits of old sheds have been buttressed with scaffolding and others with stone, arrow-slit vents bricked up then unpicked, rafters now jowled with cobwebs and haynets, retaining walls drifting towards the brooks or subsiding into the hill. Over the centuries a line that once seemed rock solid might gradually find its rationality meandering off into something a little more natural. Everything got used and reused; buildings rose and fell, recycled infinitely from the same stone and slate, patched in, hand-set, chipped, dressed and redressed, everything staying exactly the same but changing all the time. Every few decades the farm would expand or inhale according to the particular winds of change: a war, a recession, a shift in political direction.

During the First World War the government requisitioned all wheat and hay stocks to feed men and horses at the Front, paying a standard £20 per ton. When the money stopped in 1920, the whole country suffered. In 1939 the local War Ag Committee had required the Howells to turn their land over to potatoes and sugar beet, though by 1950 the farm had reverted to its old mixture: around 220 ewes and lambs, 12 pigs, 50 chickens and 18 cattle, 5 of whom provided milk for the family and beyond. Around 18 acres of the flattest land was planted with mixed corn and barley, half an acre was still down to potatoes and 9 were growing mangolds or swedes for use as winter fodder. Until Bert's granddad had bought the first tractor in the

Field Work

1940s, all carting, hauling, harrowing, ploughing and harvesting was done by the two horses, Betsy and Prince. They could be temperamental – Prince had a habit of wandering off if left too long in the shafts – but they were often better-natured than the machinery which could roll out of control on the high banks down near the brook. As in many steeper areas of the country, horses continued to be used around here until well into the 1960s.

Then as now the land was always considered to be best suited to sheep. Shearing was done by hand and the fleeces were sold on to local spinners. Tails were docked at six weeks, and a ferocious mixture of Stockholm Tar, sheep dip and Mintic powder was used to kill or cure most ills. TB testing for the cattle was made compulsory in the 1960s, and Bert and his sisters grew quick and clever at milking before school every morning. Until recently, 180 acres had been a respectable size for a farm, allowing not only self-sufficiency for the household but also an adaptable surplus which could be turned from sheep to beet to cows to wheat. Everything that the land offered was used: pigeons, rabbits, damsons, sloes, apples, bracken. The stones cleared from the fields became the walls around those fields, the trees felled by gales were raised to second lives as gate posts or purlins.

This place, this land, wasn't a job or a business: it was everything – past and future, identity and rhythm, daily bread and Sunday rest. But places like these were struggling now. Too small for the future and too poor in the past, their version of agriculture seemed good for nothing except a museum. Now, the drive was all for volume or intensity: a few crops on a lot of land, or lots of crops in a digital field. The margins were too small for places like this. The market for lamb was declining and upland like this wasn't worth the inputs. Best thing for it was to rewild or try glamping.

Introduction

Sometimes I'd meet Bert out in the lane, and once he'd brought me up to date on any recent news he'd stand for a second looking out. Below us the land stretched out, terraced by hedgerows and velveteed with distant woodland. The ravens clanked.

'See there?' Bert indicated a flattish field on the flank of the opposite ridge. 'Long Field – see where he's bare in the right corner?'

I look over at a green rectangle half a mile away, edged off with quickthorn but to my eyes just like all its neighbours.

'There. Si Davis's field. In't ever been right. Don't matter what Si does, he's always bald in that part. Been years when it been drought and when the grass goes dry you see there's something there.'

Like what?

'This whole part, this was fighting ground. There's things beneath – forts, castles.'

So there's a ruin under there. And there – he pointed again over the western edge of the bank. Back in the 1950s that small steep patch was the subject of a forty-year dispute between brother and sister, which ended in both their downfalls. Now half the bank belonged to a big local farmer (1,800 sheep, 150 beef sucklers) who, when he had found his nice clean Beltexes infected with scab by his neighbour's flock, had sent one of the neighbour's ewes down the bank to him with the letters **F U** sheared neatly into its fleece.

Bert points out a faint line, almost erased, crossing the field below the farmhouse from west to east. It was once a path which led eastwards towards the English border. During the agricultural depression of the 1920s unemployment had forced many farm labourers to walk down off the hills to the poor-house in the next village. Old maps still showed the path, though it had fallen under the plough again during the Second

Field Work

World War. Someone from the local parish council had recently come to talk to Bert about reopening it as a public path. The meeting had been brief but clear. ‘Never heard anything so stupid in all my days. I told him to get from here and don’t come back, look.’

And there, over near the little copse on the eastern side. On the reverse of the hill there’s a patch of steep wood which had once been the site of the Great Vanishing Horse Scandal. At some point in the 1770s, horses started disappearing from fields and stables all over the county. At that time a good farm horse would have had the same value as a good farm tractor now, but, no matter what protections owners put in place, the thefts continued. For a long time no one could find any trace of the missing horses, and it was only years later when a chance tip-off led owners to a small wood on a hill that the solution was discovered: a disused iron-ore mine well curtained with ivy where, down the old tunnels and into the hill, a complete underground network of stables had been constructed. One of the local farmers had been taking the horses, keeping them for a while, altering their appearance and then selling them on.

Bert would point out the house half a mile off and tell me every dip and spike of that family’s fortunes over the past five decades – the depressive father, the barrister daughter, the half-million they’d borrowed for goats, the peculiar venture into pasturage or IT. Or he’d talk about the field beside us: how the grass was behaving in this first week of March compared to last year, what it meant pound for pound to the sheep, whether they’d be able to get anything out of the low field after a week of frosts or a month of fogs. He knew it because he’d walked it, ploughed it and watched a thousand days of rain chase over it. He’d cut its thistles, lifted its stones, trimmed its footings, and seen droughts lay bare its bones. He’d dug the drains for it, provided a water supply, made sure there was shade in summer

Introduction

or cover in winter. He knew the weeks when the grass did best for cattle (longer strands that they could get their tongues around), and when it best fattened sheep (shorter grass, better for ripping). He knew the birds which nested in the same places year after year, the spot where the deer always got in, the butterflies that had come and the moths which had gone. He knew the years when rabbits or crows had picked off half the crop, the seasons which had come good and the years gone wrong. He knew the burr in the ash by the hedge that the tups liked to scratch and the hidden places without reeds where the water still sprang. He knew where the earth was at its best and the patch where only docks would grow. He knew which week the blackthorn whitened at the base of the hill and the knuckle of concrete where the trailer always tripped. He knew the high-tide mark for the brook in flood and the years when it had overtopped it. He knew the middens, tips and dumps where the old shed asbestos was buried and exactly what had happened to the missing batch of Cymag and dynamite. He knew how this earth behaved in every season, and he talked about the taste and sweetness of the grass as though he drank it. Too much rain and the grass would be thin and empty, washed of nourishment. Too little, and it would be low and sour. When the fields flooded the ewes' feet would rot and the water would drip into their wool, acting on them as it would on a human standing in a downpour in three wet jerseys. Too cold, and the new lambs might perish. Too hot, and they could dehydrate. If the sheep didn't put on weight then they had to be brought in and fattened up on the hay cut last summer. If they still didn't put on weight then they wouldn't fetch a decent price when sold, but if they were overweight they weren't worth what had been spent on them.

Bert also knew the ewes who would make good mothers and the feckless types who would shrug off their own lambs. He knew the tricks to lure one ewe into taking another mother's

Field Work

orphans and the patience required to sit up all night alone in a frozen shed with a pen full of complications. He watched the thieves – the ewes who would steal another lamb to practise on and then reject their newly stolen goods once they'd had their own, the dominant characters and the quiet ones. He'd been pulling lambs out of ewes every spring for sixty years, and he knew all there was to know about birth, death and all the money in between. He'd never been to London or Swansea. He'd been to Cardiff once for the rugby, but he didn't miss it. He thought nothing of his own knowledge. The world didn't rate his skills, so how should he?

In the public mind, farming had become like the police. Once the sort of profession which the middle classes respected without really understanding, now it had become the sort of profession which everyone disrespected without really understanding either. Now if you told someone you were a farmer they'd come back at you with something about chemicals or welfare. Farmers were murderers. Or poisoners. Or soil-plundering asset-strippers. Or they were benefit cheats, tax-dodgers, system-milking criminals. Farmers never stopped complaining. It was never right. Always it seemed to be too wet, too dry, too cold, too hot, too windy, too soft, too hard. There they were, on the radio or the TV, wanting something, having a go. No one seemed to pinpoint exactly what farmers had done that was so bad, but everyone knew they had. They were taking the taxpayer for a ride. They were ripping us off, pilfering the best of our good nature. And no one understood the time it took, the hope it used up, the unrelenting gamble in pulling a life out of earth.

Everyone who saw the view from Rise Farm marvelled at its perfect representation of perfect British countryside, at the

Introduction

absence of car noise and the presence of so many birds. Over in one corner electricity pylons strode across the land, in another there was the low green roof line of a new chicken shed. In winter, car headlights plunged out of the lanes like the lights of divers, brightness flaring for a second against the unpolluted dark.

But it didn't take long to realise that everyone also saw that same view in their own way. Blow-ins like me saw this place lengthwise – a great wide spread of fields and hedges, a well-worked sliver of Britain. We took in the view and saw everything together all the way from the hill to the river, a single indiscriminate image of stability. One field was like the next field, one wood looked much the same as another, and this view was probably just a comparison to a different countryside somewhere else. Here in this part of Wales there were hedges, but if you drove north, the fields would be divided by walls. Here the old buildings were stone, but 50 miles to the east, they would be brick. Here there were hills, but if you went west there would be mountains. All the people who came to Rise from elsewhere saw it in relation to London or Manchester, a soft dull opposite to the hard, exciting lines of a city. This was the Britain you would see if you flew above – a reworked land, every liveable stitch of it pulled and sworn and worked and worked again until in some places the colour had all rubbed off and all you could see was just a dunnish smudge of human energy.

Agricultural bureaucrats looked at that view and saw a classification. According to the EU and DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the government department responsible for agriculture in the UK), Rise was an upland grazing livestock farm on a Less Favoured Area. This itself was a classification further split into Disadvantaged and Severely Disadvantaged, and was considered to encompass

Field Work

areas of rough hillside, heath and semi-improved grassland. Sometimes Less Favoured Areas were themselves also in Areas Facing Natural Constraints or participants in a Higher-Level Rural Stewardship Scheme. They could also be holdings on Sites of Special Scientific Interest or in National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Special Protection Areas, Ramsar Wetlands or any one of several other acronyms denoting ‘significant agricultural, landscape, archaeological, recreational, cultural and natural resource value’, and thus subject to their own turbulent regulatory microclimates. Maps showed the curves of the land flattened into acronyms (NIAs including Near-Miss NIAs, NNRs, SSSIs, SPAs, SACs, PHIs, WFDMCs), the blur of reality coded into manageable departments.

Campaigners saw this as a desolation. Yes, there were trees, but the ash was living on borrowed time, the oak was under threat and every living thing was flayed by grazing at one end and felling at the other. True, there were hedges, but they were always razored down to a clinical finish, giving the fledglings no time to fly. Above us there were cameras, below us there were poisons and what looked like good wild health was just a last gasp. The fields were full of white ovine maggots, the songbirds were killed by cars and cats, there was slurry in the rivers and when it rained the soil bounded in fat red rivers down the roads and out of the county. Energy crops like maize were raping the earth’s fertility, the grasslands were down to no more than three species and the cows were just high-yield genetic slaves. This place was an unhappy illusion, a mere green death mask.

Lettings agents saw this place as a commodity – 25 per cent extra on a weekend rental for the privilege of a piece of green like that. Convert the mill, add an en-suite to the cart shed, and you could work that strip of sky until it made more than the animals you had on it. In many areas of Britain the more beautiful the land, the harder it is to farm. The Yorkshire

Introduction

Dales, the Lake District, the Scottish Highlands, Snowdonia – all ravishing, all for sale at roughly half the price per acre of prime arable land. It's not an equation which always works: most of Cornwall, the Cotswolds and Perthshire manage both looks and money – but anyone coming for a weekend break wants to see something which conforms to their notion of what this country is: green, more green, maybe some hills, a beach. A sliver of river can double the value of a property, a harbour increase it by more than 80 per cent. If anything, the actual farming was a disadvantage: smelly, noisy, and incompatible with quiet rural lie-ins.

And all of us had an opinion, and all expected to be listened to. We all ate food and lived in some sort of an environment, whether it was urban or challenging or oxygen-deprived, so therefore we all had an opinion on the countryside. We wanted it to look and sound a certain way, conform to certain laws, remain worked but not working. Our demands from the land increased while the number of people who tended it decreased. Farmers now suddenly found themselves summoned by WhatsApp to the village hall to account for their use of glyphosates or be taken to task on their hedge-trimming schedule.

But that same countryside looked very different when you saw it as a business. Both the farmhouse and the farm cottage at Rise have no south-facing windows. No windows, in other words, to face the thing outsiders most savour. 'That was work,' Bert said. 'Why'd you want to come in the house at night and be looking at what you been doing all day?'

When he was describing it, the detail Bert could pull out of a single sliver of field was as rich as lace. But his precision was mostly invisible. If the bureaucrats and the incomers saw this place horizontally then Bert saw it vertically. Down through the soil and deep through the generations. He saw the boundaries between his land and the next with the same us-and-them

Field Work

finality a Londoner might see the hidden borders of gang territories. This field here, this tree, this beast, was as intimate to him as family, but that field there belonging to his neighbour, that was foreign land, as far from him as the Arctic. This was home, that was away. The fields in the distance had their own history and traditions. The individuals around them belonged to that land just as Bert belonged to this, and it was more than a life's full work to learn one farm completely. For him, Rise wasn't an income or a classification or a family or a business or a job. It was everything.

And yet each of us – the farmer, the bureaucrat, the tourist, the campaigner, the tenant, the estate agent, the agronomist – saw the same physical facts cropped to fit our own focus. All of us saw it through our own frames of purpose or imagination, and all of us required this land to be a part of what it was not. Maybe it was a dreary rustic cliché full of old white folk and boring walks. Or it was outstanding raptor habitat – prime nesting sites, good small mammal predation prospects. Maybe it was the potential of next year's harvest or the challenge of better grass. Maybe it was the future, a proof of a life meaningfully spent and a future well prepared. All of us wanted something from it, even if that thing was only a dream. None of us would ever just let it be.

I'm not a farmer, and I didn't grow up on a farm. I'm an Anglo-Scot, the product of a father from Gloucestershire and a mother from Lanarkshire, and I've spent much of my life flitting between city and countryside, going from the centre of nowhere to the middle of everything. I spent twenty years living and working in London and Scotland, playing games with the seasons, accelerating or reversing, spinning back two weeks or leaping forwards by four. In the journeys up and down between