

College VALLEY

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PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTOPHER WARD

THROUGH ADVERSITY TO THE STARS

Neil Braidwood speaks to Tim Willbond, the man behind the airmen's memorial in the College Valley

THE Cheviot Hills can be treacherous, especially when the weather closes in, and the clouds shroud the peaks, it is not just walkers who have to be careful. During the Second World War, 19 aircraft crashed on the mountain tops, often with fatal consequences.

Primitive navigation systems, pilot error and inexperience all played their part in why so many aircraft came to grief. Those tragedies went unmarked until 1968 when a group of choir boys (known as The Reivers), from Alnwick built a cairn on Cheviot (the highest summit), to mark the crash site of a US B17 Flying Fortress bomber. On that occasion, although two airmen died, local shepherds John Dagg, along with his collie Sheila, and Frank Moscrop, rescued four from death by exposure.

The other three had exited at the front of the aircraft and made their way to Mounthooly farm. Both shepherds were awarded the British Empire Medal and Sheila became the first civilian dog to

be awarded the Dickin Medal for Gallantry. In 1994, the then Lord Lieutenant Matthew Ridley contacted Station Commander Tim Willbond at nearby RAF Boulmer to consult on whether he should agree to restore the cairn on Cheviot.

"I suggested that a larger memorial might be more appropriate, recognising not only the B17 crash, but the other incidents that had taken place during the war", Tim recalls. The idea was agreed on, and a substantial slate memorial was erected in the College Valley by airmen from RAF Boulmer and a dedication ceremony took place in May 1995. It was attended by the Duke of Gloucester as well as three survivors from the crashes and their families; two of whom were from the B17 crash.

Tim then moved away, returning to Northumberland in 2014. On visiting the memorial in the College Valley, he was

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WELCOME TO COLLEGE VALLEY

MAYBE IT is just the consequence of advancing age, but in my opinion the College Valley grows in beauty. The stark Sitka blocks of the 1960s and 1970s continue to be harvested and replaced with softer woods, more diverse in species and easier on the landscape. The 'wilderness' areas above Mounthooly established 20 years ago, mature into wonderful landscape features. Many parts of the estate continue to recover from intense, year-round grazing pressure of the past. Stephen continues to maintain and improve infrastructure such as tracks, buildings and fences, and even the old pele tower at Hethpool was repaired last year. This should prove very handy should any Scotsmen arrive to threaten any of Bill's sheep or to steal his womenfolk.

While the College Valley remains a beautiful and revitalising place to be, much of the trading environment has never seemed so uncertain. The livestock enterprises of our farmers are completely dependent on trading terms (tariffs and exchange rates) and no one has much idea how these will shape in the near term. On the other hand, most of us are getting our minds around the fact that future government payments are likely to be made only for the supply of 'public goods' (conservation, public access and flood prevention, for example), although we are a long way from learning

whether these will be sufficient to sustain the rural economy of today. Dominic Naylor, the very experienced general manager of the neighbouring Lilburn estate, discusses some of these issues in this newsletter.

Whether you agree or disagree with him, Secretary of State Michael Gove has been remarkably clear and consistent in his objectives for the English countryside. Such traits are not always seen further down in his organisation: like many farming businesses, the estate is owed many thousands of pounds of Stewardship payments for conservation work which has been completed as contracted. On another issue, the Government's attitude to the burning of heather seems to

change with the seasons and is causing considerable trouble on the ground as discussed in Colin Matheson's article.

More positively, tight supply and demand combined with a slightly weaker pound has boosted timber profits to some of their highest in living memory. Furthermore, the College Valley board strongly believes that our philosophy is well aligned with developing government policy. Without being in any way complacent, we think we are well-placed to survive to continue to look after the Valley so that we can continue with our conservation work and to welcome walkers and riders, and of course, our holiday cottage and bunk house guests. ●

**John Baker-Cresswell, Director,
College Valley Estates**

THE FUTURE

Dominic Naylor finds reason to be optimistic for hill farmers in the UK

"... support those farmers, for example upland sheep farmers, whose profit margins are more likely to be small but whose contribution to rural life and the maintenance of iconic landscapes is immense."

So said the Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Gove, in a speech at the Oxford farming conference in 2017, and while the hill farmer in me jumped for joy at this belated official recognition of the importance of our uplands and also the sheep which have fashioned them, the speech had an air of the museum curator about it. Indeed, that's how the US Ambassador Woody Johnson recently described our British farming methods: "a museum of agriculture." What the uplands must never become is a Beamish-type museum to upland farming. To have any future, upland sheep farming and the communities it has created must be alive, vibrant and most of all, relevant.

The Brexit decision and Defra's current opinion that all things to do with the Common Agriculture Policy are bad, has placed UK agriculture at a crossroads. Yet not any old crossroads but a spaghetti junction. The fragile nature of hill farming means that our next turning could have ramifications which will be felt in the uplands for centuries to come, and could in fact sound the death knell of sheep farming in the hills and cause the demise of the aesthetic upland landscape it has created.

Currently, however, the hills are alive, but not, sadly, with the sound of music or lambs bleating for that matter, but with various stakeholders claiming authority of this green and pleasant land. It is for some of them however, far too green and not very pleasant.

LIVELIHOOD

For centuries sheep in the uplands have provided food, clothing and a livelihood for those communities involved. The landscape on which they live has yielded fuel in the form of peat and wood and timber for building homesteads. Indeed, the wealth of the nation was once so intertwined with sheep farming that Edward 3rd ordered the Lord Chancellor to sit on a woolsack while



OF SHEEP IN THE UPLANDS



in council, a tradition which continues to this day. In recent decades the uplands have also provided a location for recreation such as walking, shooting and mountain biking. These are just some of the tangible benefits of the upland landscape. For centuries the hills have had an immense intangible value in the psychological wellbeing of the nation. William Blake's *Jerusalem* recognised only too well the spiritual importance of England's mountains green while we struggle Among these dark Satanic Mills.

However, while the uplands may in large be privately owned, a fact that is often forgotten by the National Parks and the rewilding lobby, there is a sense of

communal ownership to them, as society's lung if nothing else. This newly recognised role as a cache for the nation's natural capital, whether it be carbon sequestration or the retention of water to prevent lowland flooding, all needs managing and has been unwittingly managed for centuries by sustainable numbers of sheep grazing the land. This sense of communal 'ownership' has been validated, one might argue, by the enormous sums of financial subsidy, paid by the taxpayer to British agriculture since the 1950s. The rights and wrongs of the CAP are not for detailed discussion here, but let us be in no doubt as to the socio/economic benefits they have provided: food deflation for the past seven decades.

DIET

This 'cheap food' policy has lowered our household expenditure on food from 30 per cent down to 8 per cent in 70 years and we all say 'amen' to that. We have become much wealthier than our grandparents and the purchase of a 50" television, two cars and one foreign holiday a year are seen as a benchmark of success. However, there have also been some unintended consequences. We rarely die from infectious diseases in the 21st century. Instead we are now more likely to die from gluttony in the form of diabetes or cardiovascular disease. What the vegan lobby are currently blaming on our levels of meat eating has in fact been caused by excessive consumption of carbohydrate and sugar. Our relationship with food has also changed under this vote-winning policy. We've stopped asking questions about how, when and where. The opiate of cheap food has muddled our thinking on welfare standards and production methods, and the profiteering of the supermarkets has seen a race to the bottom. Liam Fox's cosying up to the American food lobby and its questionable production methods, isn't the Government facing up to the thorny question of a sustainable supply and demand of the nation's food but is actually exporting the problem. If we can't physically see the chlorine being sprayed on to the chicken or the growth hormones being injected into the cattle then who cares?

A predicted global population increase of two billion to nine billion souls by

2050 should make any prospecting farmer jump for joy. Yet the ether is awash with discussions on what we eat and how we produce it. The oxymoron which is the meat-free burger is fast becoming mainstream. So much so, in fact, that some of the world's largest meat processors have bought substantial stakes in these plant-based businesses. However, like the debate over the measurement of carbon dioxide and methane emissions from ruminants and the flawed science which underpins it, the lid of the petri dish which grows these Frankenstein burgers has been lifted to reveal an unsustainable energy cost to their creation. What better source of naturally produced protein than nature's true 'up-cyclers', sheep or cows. No other animal will graze the rank tussocky grasses of the uplands. Neither will anything else grow up there, believe us we've tried it and since human cecums no longer perform that function what better way to harvest our dietary protein and protect the environment at the same time.

Hill farmers have, by their nature, been reticent in joining the debate over the future of the land which generations of their families have cared for. We are in danger of not being heard or speaking out and our authority on the management of the uplands not being respected. Whatever the machinations of our political elite and their media luvvy environmental friends, the creation of our uplands, cherished in their current form by most taxpayers outside the metropolis, has been carried out by generations of upland farmers tending their sheep flocks. This fragile balance has indeed been damaged by ill-thought political decisions but we must be very careful that we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

If we can adhere to evidence-based science in relation to the nation's food supply and natural capital, and recognise that the lynchpin to our dwindling upland communities are the sheep which are integral to this food supply and environment, then the future of sheep in the uplands will be secure. ●

Dominic Naylor
General Manager at Lilburn Estates
Farming Partnership

*Right: Tim Willbond with his wife Catherine at last year's ceremony.
Below: the bronze plaque showing the crash sites and roll of honour: Citizens from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Poland and the USA all perished on the hills.*



PHOTOGRAPH: TIM WILLBOND



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTOPHER WARD

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disappointed that the slate had not worn well, and the harsh weather had eroded some of the inscription.

By now, Tim was Vice-Chairman (Air) of the Reserve Forces and Cadets' Association, and part of his remit was to inspire initiatives on a regional level. It struck him that with commemorative events being organised all around the UK to mark the 100th anniversary of the RAF in 2018, the memorial in the College Valley could be restored or replaced. After consulting with the current Lord Lieutenant, Jane Percy, it was decided that the memorial should be replaced with something much more substantial as part of the 100th anniversary celebrations, and that it be re-dedicated.

Tim and his team raised more than £30,000 to create a new memorial plinth, this time made from polished granite and bronze. Expected to last for at least 50 years, it is inscribed with the RAF motto, *Per Ardua ad Astra* (through adversity to the stars), and the sites are identified on a bronze plaque, along with a roll of honour.

In the time since the first memorial was erected, four more crash sites had been discovered, and, in addition, it was decided to mark the two German crashes that occurred (only allied crashes had been recorded before). The shepherds and their dogs, who had been so crucial in the rescue of the B17 crew and other crashes, have also been remembered as part of the memorial.

A re-dedication service took place on 6 September 2018 as part of the wider RAF centennial commemorations, in attendance were air attaches from most of the allied countries that lost airmen – Canada, New Zealand and the United States – and Germany, who also sent a representative. In all, 58 airmen lost their lives, but an incredible 16 survived. The Duke of Gloucester unveiled the new memorial.

Walkers can visit the crash sites, thanks to a smartphone application ViewRanger that has been developed in conjunction with the Northumberland National Park. The application outlines four of the 19 crash sites, and more will be added soon. ●

FAREWELL TO PROF OLIVER JAMES

AT THE end of December Professor Oliver James retired from the College Valley Estates Ltd (CVE) board after 35 years' service. He has been a familiar figure in the Valley over this period of great change since 1983.

What people might not know is that Oliver simultaneously pursued a very successful medical career as a clinician. As a liver specialist, he was responsible for treating thousands of north east patients and for setting up the transplant unit in the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle. He wrote almost 300 scientific papers, and was head of the School of Clinical Medical Sciences at Newcastle University from 1995 to 2005.

Subsequent to this, he was Medical Adviser to the Penrose Inquiry.

While a CVE board member, Oliver was simultaneously a member of the main board of Samares Investments which

owns College Valley, and he has chaired this parent organisation for the last 15 years. His steadfast support in this role meant that whatever challenges were faced by College Valley over the last three decades, a difficult owner was never among them. He was instrumental in establishing the Sir James Knott Trust in Newcastle in 1991, since when it has disbursed nearly £28m to 8,530 north east charities. Under his management the endowment grew from under £4m to over £50m, so that he leaves the organisation in a position to spend well over £1m a year on good causes.

As a senior doctor, Oliver might seem an unlikely director for an upland estate, but his contributions and support have been invaluable. Oliver 'got' the fact that



College Valley Estates could make a material difference through managing the Valley for conservation, public access and through education.

Aside from his support, one of Oliver's biggest legacies to the board and College Valley has been to encourage an atmosphere

of good humour combined with total rigour. No meeting with Oliver proceeds long without roars of laughter from the direction of his seat, accompanied by some observation of the ridiculous. And no nonsense escapes his eye. As he retires to spend more time with his wife Rosanna and his hair stylist, the board and all those who love the Valley owe Oliver a considerable debt.

John Baker-Cresswell

THE GOOD LIFE...

Recently retired CVE Director, Christopher Ward made a snap decision 50 years ago, and hasn't regretted a day since

IN MAY 1967, I took a phone call that would change my life. A friend tipped me off that a cottage in the College Valley was coming up for rent. There were two minor snags: the deadline for applications was 5pm that day. I was in London – and hadn't seen the house.

There are few big decisions in one's life that require no deliberation, and this was one. I immediately telephoned the Valley's land agent, Mr Campbell, and next morning drove 368 miles to his office in Glendale Road, Wooler, to sign the lease and collect the key for Whitehall Bungalow.

Whitehall Bungalow? I thought I knew the Valley well, having walked there many times, but couldn't recall the little clapperboard house in the middle of a field at Whitehall. Now, standing inside it for the first time, with its sweeping view of Cheviot and the burn running below, I thought I was in heaven.

It took about an hour before some practical considerations interrupted the dream. Could I afford it? The rent then was £153 a year, slightly more than my monthly salary as a young reporter in Fleet Street and I was already struggling to make ends meet. It hadn't occurred to me that the house was unfurnished – I had nothing to put in it. And how would I juggle two such diverse lives: by week, a Fleet Street journalist in Swinging Sixties London; at weekends, transported to the unfamiliar environment of a hill-farming wilderness.

A day and £30 later, the bungalow was up and running after a visit to a retired shepherd in Chatton who had a warehouse containing a treasure trove of household items that others had discarded: all of it having seen better days but serviceable, much of it still in use more than 50 years later.

Soon, my other concerns were laid to rest. I had a pay rise which took care of the extortionate rent. And my weekends in the valley proved to be the perfect antidote to my 'other life', informing me on what was happening in the real world as opposed to the goldfish bowl I inhabited in London.

But most important of all, 'the hairy bugger' as I was known, was warmly welcomed by the Valley community, despite my long hair and orange beach buggy. The size of the population then was much the same as now, but its composition very different. Shepherds and their families inhabited the farmhouses at Goldsclench, Dunsdale, Southern Knowe, Fleehope, Mounthooley and Trowburn with foresters occupying two of the cottages at Hethpool.

I soon got to know everyone, thanks to the sociability of the farm manager, Gilbert Elliot, father of Bill who followed in his father's footsteps and still lives in the family home at Hethpool. Gilbert taught me about sheep and drinking whisky, while Bill and his sister Joan introduced me to the secrets of the College Burn and wild swimming in the lin.



Before I came to the Valley the only red coat that I had seen was in Carnaby Street but I learned about fox-hunting from Martin and Eildon Letts – or, at least, I now know that it is very Non-U to ask a foxhunter at the end of the day, 'Did you catch many?' the correct question being, 'Did you have a good day?'

In June 1969 I took a month off work to write a book in the Valley, thinking there would be no distractions. But the sun shone every day and I didn't write a word. Instead, I cycled every morning for a dip in the lin and volunteered as an extra pair of hands rounding up goats and being given a crash course in dipping and clipping by Gilbert or one of the shepherds. In the clipping sheds at Goldsclench, 'the hairy bugger' was given a long overdue shearing by Jean Gillie, to raucous laughter all round. My hairdresser nearly had a heart attack when I returned to London.

After a long apprenticeship, Gilbert Elliot appointed me his 'lambling assistant' for a week in April during lambing, an unbroken date in the calendar for seven years until his untimely death. Gilbert's knees were knackered, and he needed someone to do the kneeling for him, someone with legs fast enough to catch a bolting lamb or ewe. I just about qualified.

We would meet at the bridge at Whitehall at 5.30am sharp every morning. It was an education as well as the hardest and longest week's work of the year. I once handed him a stillborn lamb that I had delivered and asked what I should do with it. Gilbert took a pack of Embassy out of his pocket, lit a cigarette and blew nicotine fumes into the lamb's face. The lamb coughed twice, stood up and bleated for its mother. 'Life after death', said Gilbert.

Not being so nimble myself these days, I hitched a lift in Steve Crees's 4x4 last autumn and we drove over the tors that I had climbed so often in my youth. What struck me most was, despite so many changes, how little has changed over the past 50 years. How lucky I have been to have known the place. ●

Christopher Ward



A BURNING QUESTION

CVE Director Colin Matheson explains the need for heather burning in the hills above the valley

HEATHER moorland is an internationally important habitat. The moorlands of Great Britain and Ireland make up the largest area of heather-dominated dwarf shrub in the world stretching to some 4.4 million acres across the country. We have a small proportion of this in College Valley and it is our responsibility to maintain it and the ecological and environmental benefits that it supports.

The catastrophic wildfires in UK during 2018 culminated in some seven square miles of moorland in the Greater Manchester area being affected much of it unmanaged or lightly managed. What cannot be denied in the rewilding debate is that if the fuel load on the ground increases through a regime of no cutting, no burning and no grazing, then the risk to wildfire and ensuing damage to the environment increases significantly.

Washington Forest Protection Association in America advises “fire is a natural and beneficial part of a healthy ecosystem. Catastrophic wildfires on the other hand can endanger wildlife species, compromise air quality and endanger communities. Controlled burning can be the most effective method to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire”. Latest scientific research (Professor Rob Marrs and others 2018) challenges widely held perceptions that a ban on prescribed burning of heather moorland is essential for peat growth and shows that managed burning can both mitigate wildfire risk in a warmer world and produce relatively fast peat growth and sustained carbon sequestration.

Here, in the College Valley, we manage our moorland to a plan agreed with Natural England and the National Park Authority that allows ‘intervention’ cutting or burning of vegetation to produce



ecological outcomes. Potential blanket bog may be suppressed by dense old rank heather. Burning off the heather canopy in managed small cool burns allows the mosses, cotton grasses and other key species to recover. At the same time sheep grips (drainage channels) cut for farming interest during the last two centuries are blocked to help the re-wetting process and the formation of sphagnum, an important sponge for water retention. On areas of dry heath, the managed burning of small plots produces a mosaic of different aged heather and bilberry which supports greater botanical and wildlife diversity. To measure the outcomes objectively, plots are mapped and monitored and form part of a wider long-term monitoring exercise over the estate.

Natural England announced in February that it will reject any new request to burn upland blanket bog (peat depth of

more than 40cm) although it might allow moorland owners to carry out one-off burns under “exceptional circumstances” for the purpose of restoration. Existing management plans are unaffected. The lack of addressing wild fire concerns in the announcement is an astonishing omission.

Alongside this plan, we have created a wildfire risk plan shared with neighbouring estates and the fire and rescue service.

To help mitigate the risk of wildfire and to assist in its control should wildfire occur, the plan shows:

- where firebreaks have been cut, and, importantly, maintained in strategic positions
- tracks and routes across the moorland to enable firefighters and equipment to reach a fire safely
- “pinch points” where a fire might be contained
- fences and gates through which stock might be moved off the hill
- footpaths where walkers or riders can be intercepted and guided out of harms way.

The plan includes an inventory of 4x4s, ATVs, firefighting equipment, water points, contact numbers of manpower, communication details, maps and risk

points. The plan is recorded with the fire and rescue service and exercises are carried out with them on the ground in conjunction with the training of our own men.

Our experience has shown that the greatest tool to slow and stop a wildfire is the prescribed burning over our moorland that breaks up a wildfire and makes it possible to control and contain it.

In 1982, a wildfire started on Scald Hill and travelled some four miles across the neighbouring hill farms only stopping when it reached Skirly Bridge on the Langleeford to Wooler road. At the time little of the moorland was managed by prescribed burning. Hopefully, with enlightened thinking we can prevent a tragedy happening. ●

Colin Matheson
Director

PHOTOGRAPH: ZANDER WILSON



Clockwise from left: Ellie and Mike Robson had a red and white-themed wedding; Cuddystone Hall doubling as a disco; the refurbished Coldburn Cottage.

Cuddystone weddings are very popular, while some of the holiday cottages are getting a revamp, writes Hall Manager Catherine Crees

IN GOOD HEALTH

THE WEATHER was glorious for the majority of 2018 and appreciated by lots of brides and grooms at Cuddystone. Cocktails, gin and real pizzas seem like the current trend for weddings. One couple brought their own pizza oven where guests prepared and cooked their own pizzas which went down a treat.

Up at Mounthooly, Charlene has been working hard to keep the place spick and span and has had some wonderful comments from visitors. People revisiting the area will notice the wood just past the bunkhouse has been felled recently, which means you can now see amazing views up and down the valley. Mounthooly bunkhouse now has a Facebook page, we would love you to like the page and post pics if you have stayed.

At the end of last year, we said goodbye to Jane Matheson in her role as holiday cottage manager. Jane managed the cottages for 18 years and all the cottages were thoughtfully renovated by Jane to make them the beautiful, comfortable home from homes that we have today. However, Jane won't be a stranger to the valley as she has lots of friends here and

a husband who's a Director! For those of you who visit Coldburn, this property has had a little facelift recently. We have put in a new bathroom and new flooring throughout most of the ground floor. A couple who visit Coldburn several times a year said that the shower is fantastic and powerful. ●



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THE SIR JAMES KNOTT TRUST

The College Valley was bought with funds originally provided by the Trustees of the late Sir James Knott, a north-east industrialist, MP and philanthropist. He died in 1934, but his spirit lives on through the Sir James Knott Trust. The Trust's website can be found at www.knott-trust.co.uk