

The Yorkshire Shepherdess

How I left city life behind to raise
a family – and a flock

AMANDA OWEN

SIDGWICK & JACKSON



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Introduction

‘Will you take the trailer and fetch a tup from a mate of mine? He’s a right good Swaledale breeder, and he lends me a tup every year.’

It was a normal enough request from the farmer I was working for. A tup is a ram, and he needed to put one in with his sheep, for obvious reasons. He helped me hitch an old trailer on to the back of his pickup, and off I went, with only minimal directions, and worried about whether the pickup and trailer would make it.

It was October 1996, chilly and dark as I drove along the road from Kirkby Stephen, heading across the border of Cumbria and Yorkshire into Swaledale, peering through the murk to spot a sign to the farm where his friend lived. I was used to farm signs that are nothing more than a piece of wood someone has scrawled the name on, so as the road unwound and switchbacked through the dark hills, I began to think I must have missed it. But I hadn’t passed any turnings: this was as remote as you could get.

Then there it was, a good clear road sign picked up in the truck headlights, RAVENSEAT ONLY, 1¼ MILES. I turned up the narrow road, the rickety wooden trailer bouncing behind,

the headlights occasionally picking up sheep staring fixedly towards me. *Better not run over one of his sheep before I get there*, I thought.

At last, after what seemed like an age, I came to a dead stop. With no warning, I had reached a ford. I wasn't risking driving the low-slung pickup with its rusty doors through the stream, but a quick paddle in my wellies showed the water was only up to my ankles. The pickup plunged through the ford and up into a muddy farmyard, with a farmhouse to my right and some ancient stone barns ahead of me. In the dim light over a stable door I could see a cow chewing her cud, and within a second of me arriving a barking sheepdog emerged from the darkness. Experience has taught me to be wary of territorial farm dogs, so I was relieved when a pool of light spilled from the front door and the farmer came out.

'Ga an' lie down.'

I assumed the command was not for me and, sure enough, the dog slunk away back into the shadows.

'Away in, mi lass, and I'll get t'kettle on.'

There was no great feeling that I'd met my destiny; no instant romantic attraction. I was just relieved to have made it, in need of a cup of tea, and anxious to get on with the hair-raising return journey.

But looking back, with a marriage and seven children to our credit, I can see that this was the defining moment in my life. This was when I met two of the things I love most: Clive Owen, my husband, and Ravenseat Farm, the most beautiful place on earth.

I really mean it when I say it is beautiful. Yes, it's bleak, it's remote, the wind howls round it, driving rain into the very fabric of the building. The snow piles up in winter and when the electricity and the water are off we live like those farmers who built the place, all those centuries ago, carrying water from the river

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and cooking over an open fire. But it's the best place in the world to rear children and animals, and I wouldn't swap it for anything. Even now, after years of living here, there are moments when I catch my breath at the splendour of the place.

But life here is no idyll. We work hard to keep our animals and our children safe and healthy in this challenging environment.

For most hill farmers, it's a traditional way of life, one they were born into. But me? I'm a townie. An 'offcumden', or incomer. When I talked to the careers teachers at the large comprehensive in Huddersfield where I went to school, 'shepherdess' and 'farmer' were not options that came up.

So how did I find my way here, to the highest, most remote farm in Swaledale, the most northerly of the Yorkshire dales?

This is the story of me, my family and, in a starring role, Ravenseat itself.

A Normal Childhood

If I had to choose one word to describe my childhood, it would be 'normal'. I was born in Huddersfield, in September 1974, the first child of Joyce and Maurice Livingstone. Huddersfield grew big around the wool-weaving mills that sprang up during the industrial revolution. A small woollen industry survives but, like so many northern towns, the main focus has gone. Still, it is a thriving, busy place.

They were happy days. Our semi-detached house had been built at the turn of the century. It had a substantial garage, a front and back garden and a steep driveway leading down onto a busy road. One of my earliest memories is of pedalling up and down the drive on my three-wheeler bike, which became unstable when cornering at speed. I crashed into one of the big stone pillars at the gateway and knocked four front teeth out. Luckily, they were my first teeth, so no lasting damage. On several occasions I was precipitated into the laurel bushes, and once I remember being skewered by the thorns of a vicious rose. I also had a succession of roller skates, go-karts and scooters, but the downside of living at the top of quite a steep hill meant that outings would often end in tumbles and tears. To a small child there seemed to be lots of places to play, although, of course,

when I've been back it all seems much smaller than it is in my memories.

My first school was Stile Common Infants, an old Victorian building a short walk from home. It was a multiracial school, and I grew up with Asian, black and white friends. At seven I transferred into the more modern Stile Common Juniors, but kept my same circle of friends.

When I was six my sister Katie was born, an event I can only vaguely remember. I do recall my secret trick to pacify her when she was fractious. I would reach through the bars of the cot and pluck Katie's dummy from her, then nip downstairs to the kitchen. By standing on a lidded yellow bucket in which her nappies were soaking, I could reach a jar of honey and dip the dummy into it, scooping up a big sticky blob. Then I'd pop the honeyed dummy back into Katie's mouth. Mother thought that I had some kind of magic touch. But it was only a matter of time before I was found out: the lid of the bucket caved in one day, the contents sloshed across the kitchen floor and the smell of bleach pervaded the house.

Father was an engineer, working at the famous David Brown factory which made tractors and tanks. He spent as much of his spare time as he could in our garage at home, repairing motorbikes, which was his passion. However, he had the ability and knowhow to be able to fix anything, whether it was a sausage machine from a factory or a refrigeration unit at a local supermarket.

Father's family had all had motorbikes when they were young, and he had won many trophies for road racing and trialling. He had a number of bikes, some entire, others in pieces. His pride and joy was his blue metallic Honda, but his Norton road bike with its wide square seat was my favourite, not least because I felt more secure when riding pillion. I would cling on to him,

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my arms wrapped round his greasy Belstaff coat while he drove rather cautiously – I suspect on instruction from my mother, who was understandably worried for my safety. Sooner or later it was bound to happen: I was eight or nine when I took a backwards tumble off a trials bike at Post Hill, near Leeds, an area of rough land with woods, stream and quarries where bikers try their skills. Trials bikes are not designed for two and while negotiating a steep, rocky incline my father perhaps forgot I was there, perched up on the rear mudguard. It was only when he cleared the section that he looked back and saw a small figure wearing an oversized crash helmet, waving frantically from below. My dignity was more hurt than my body.

If you wanted to find my father then you just had to look to the garage. He would have lived in there if he had a choice, and Mother had an intercom from the house installed so she could summon him. Me and Katie would earn pocket money sweeping up metal turnings from under the lathes and reborers. He was *the* man to see if you needed precision work doing; he had incredible patience and would help anyone who had any kind of mechanical problem. Sometimes you'd open the front door in the morning and find an exhaust or a big greasy crankshaft lying on the doorstep and shortly afterwards you'd see Mother scrubbing the step for all she was worth to clean off the oil stains. I soon learned to distinguish my con rods from my carburettors and my pistons from my crankshafts.

He had a colourful clientele for his services as a bike mechanic: we had a procession of leather-clad Hell's Angels who would roar up on their Harleys for help customizing and tweaking their machines. I particularly remember a striking, pink-haired young biker girl called Toyah. Mother wasn't as fond of her as Father was. It was Toyah who gave me a black ripped T-shirt with the slogan THE PISTON BROKE CLUB that I wore with pride until

Mother realized what it said. It was swiftly consigned to the pile of oily rags for the garage. The only problem Father had was that he was far too kind-hearted for his own good: some people paid him, others were less forthcoming. He would often take on jobs that others had turned down, just for the challenge.

Mother, in contrast to all this, was very elegant. She met Father when she worked in the typing pool at David Brown, but she also had a part-time career as a model and beauty queen, winning prizes and titles at beauty pageants before she married and had children. It was the age of Twiggy then, and Mother was tall and willowy with the gamine looks that were so fashionable. She had wonderful clothes, some of which were gathering dust in the attic while others were offloaded into a dressing-up box full of ponchos, flares and a glamorous velvet cape, all worn by Katie and me during our games. I remember a pair of thigh-high silver boots that she had for a photo shoot: these were a particular favourite and Katie and I would fight over who was to wear them. I wish Mother had kept more of her clothes. Many of them would be valuable now and, apart from that, it would be fun to see them.

Both my parents were tall: Father was six foot nine inches and Mother is six foot, so it's no wonder that Katie and I are both tall. I'm six foot two inches, and was always the tallest and, unfortunately, also the biggest-footed girl in the class from infants' school onwards.

All four grandparents lived nearby, within half a mile. Father's parents, Grandma and Granddad, were huge fans of James Herriot, the vet who wrote *All Creatures Great and Small*. I watched all the TV programmes as a small child, and they had a shelf full of all the books, which eventually I read. (In so many ways, things come full circle. Now at Ravenseat we host visits from the James Herriot fans who travel from America, Canada and

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Japan to see the places featured in the books and to visit a working farm that is much as it was in the days that James Herriot was writing about, the 1940s and 1950s.)

Father's parents were a bit more well-heeled than Mother's, who were known more informally as Nana and Ganda. Both granddads had practical jobs: Mother's father worked for a coach-building firm and later drove lorries while my other grandfather had a good job with Philips, the electrical company.

When I was eleven I went to Newsome High, a large comprehensive with more than a thousand pupils, including a special disabled and deaf unit. It was a very mixed school racially and in terms of social background. I remember the police coming into the school and arresting a boy during an art lesson: apparently he had spent his dinner time stealing car radios. I wasn't one of the really cool girls, out there rocking it; I didn't have the most fashionable clothes and shoes. Money was tight and was not going to stretch to buying me the latest trainers. I wasn't bullied, but tried to make myself as unobtrusive as possible. I didn't want to be noticed, for good reasons or bad. I had plenty of friends, and we shared passions for A-Ha and Madonna; also, though I'm ashamed to admit it now, I was a Brosette, a fan of the spooky-looking Goss twins whose band was Bros. There were certain fashion statements that didn't cost much: net tops, the sort worn by Madonna, which we called 'teabag tops', could be bought cheaply from the market, and many a happy hour was spent rifling through a skip at the back of the Fountain pub looking for Grolsch beer-bottle tops to attach to our lace-up shoes. If we weren't at the forefront of fashion, then we weren't too far behind. As for schoolwork, I wasn't a slacker by any means, but I didn't feel massively inspired by school and coasted along, keeping myself to myself.

As soon as I was old enough to go out on my own, I took our West Highland terrier, a sappy little dog with the unlikely name of Fiona, for long walks. The alternative, hanging out in bus shelters with other kids, didn't appeal and, anyway, Fiona was not the right 'status' dog for this. Newsome, the area where we lived, sits poised in perfect equilibrium: if you walk thirty minutes in one direction you are in the middle of the town, and thirty minutes in the other direction has you up on the moors, away from the buildings and traffic. That's the way I always chose. Some find the moors desolate and foreboding, but I loved the openness of the skies, the imposing shapes of the hills and the granite outcrops.

When I was about eleven or twelve I got a mountain bike which was great, and served me well for many years to come, right through school and way beyond. It was massively too big for me when I first got it, but I quickly grew into it and it gave me the freedom to cycle out on my own. I'd often say I was going collecting bilberries, which I did, but not because I had a particular addiction to the little purple berries: I simply wanted an excuse to cycle up onto the moors. I can't explain it, I just felt happy when I was up there. I didn't inherit my love of the outdoors from Mother and Father because, although they didn't hate the countryside, they weren't country people, and they certainly weren't farming folk. Nobody in my family had ever skinned a rabbit or ploughed a field – at least, not for generations.

Once, when I was around thirteen, I cycled up to Meltham and then out onto Saddleworth Moor to find the place swarming with police, road blocks, and helicopters whirring overhead. It was like all hell had been let loose, and I had to turn back. I later heard that this was one of the days when either Ian Brady or Myra Hindley was taken up there by the police to try to find the missing grave of the last of their victims.

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Apart from Fiona, my contact with animals was limited until I started riding lessons. To pay for them, I had to get a weekend job, and I couldn't do that until I was legally old enough, at fourteen. For some odd reason there was a riding stables on a council estate very close to where I lived, in amongst all the pebble-dash houses. I use the word 'stables' very loosely, as it consisted of a disparate collection of tin sheds and leans-tos, an 'arena' made from recycled motorway crash barriers and a string of the world's most ramshackle horses. Lessons cost £10 an hour, and I paid for Katie to have a lesson too, so I could only afford it every two weeks.

To earn the money, I worked in Barratts shoe shop in the centre of town each Saturday. It was bad enough having to dress smart in a pencil skirt and a white blouse, but I was also expected to wear a pair of Barratts court shoes, the opposite of cool. For the first time ever, having big feet helped me out: it was difficult to find a suitable pair that fitted me, so I had to wear a pair of my own. I would watch through the shop window and duck into the stockroom if any of my classmates came in – or, should I say, were forced in by their mothers. No savvy teen would ever have come in willingly.

Because of my height, when we went riding I always got a large horse – usually Drake, a one-eyed cobby type, heavily feathered with huge hooves, a brush-like mane that stood on end, a black coat with a propensity of scurf, and an unwillingness to go anywhere faster than an ambling gait. I loved the feeling of being on the back of a horse. We didn't go anywhere particularly interesting, just onto a scabby stretch of waste ground at the back of some industrial units, where everyone else could canter while I brought up the rear at an uncomfortably quick trot, and we also patrolled the maze of streets on the estate. These horses were bombproof, nothing fazed them. Abandoned bicycles,

loose dogs, police sirens and shop alarms: they had seen it, heard it and were oblivious to it all. I think that I was too. For a little while I was in a world of my own. It was always the most fantastic hour, and there was a feeling of disappointment when it was over, knowing I wouldn't be back for another fortnight.

As a teenager I was very tall and skinny. I remember clearly a comment made to my mother by another mother sitting behind us on the bus with her own pudgy daughter:

'Your daughter can't wear jeans, she's got nothing to put in them.'

But that was the physique you needed to be a model, and Mother had plans for me to be the next Jerry Hall. When I was about fourteen or fifteen she saw an advert in the local paper that said 'Models Wanted' so she got on the phone and arranged an appointment to have some pictures taken at the photographer's studio. I was reluctant, but then I was reluctant about most things in those days. It was a kind of automatic reluctance: Mother likes it, so I don't.

She came with me on the bus, me dressed up to the nines and feeling quite uncomfortable about the amount of turquoise eyeshadow and frosted pink lipstick that had been applied. We should have been alerted by the grotty place we went to, on the outskirts of Huddersfield, but the chap seemed OK, and behind the doors of the shabby-looking lock-up there was a studio, set up with various backdrops and lights. I suppose that I had a rose-tinted view of how modelling worked and thought that it would be *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan* but the 'work' he showed us was knitting patterns and catalogues. Still, I figured, everyone starts somewhere, and he said I definitely had potential . . .

He told me to go into the changing room and put on the clothes that were in there, a truly awful 1980s dress in lemon

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complete with shoulder pads, teamed with a particularly dated matching cardigan. I reasoned that it would have been more worrying if he'd wanted me in a bikini or underwear, so I was lulled into a false sense of security. All I had to do was sit on one of those huge wicker peacock chairs that you found in conservatories in those days, and pretend to be on the telephone.

He took pictures to see 'if the camera loved me', then said he would put together a portfolio and that he'd be back in touch.

We didn't hear anything until a few weeks later when his picture was in the local newspaper. Apparently it was all an elaborate con: he had a camera hidden in the changing room and he was filming girls as they got undressed. I discovered that lots of girls from my school had been to have their pictures taken to see if they too had model potential . . . That was the beginning and end of my modelling career, and thankfully Mother never mentioned it again.

I've always loved books. From early on, I consumed books avidly, much preferring factual ones to fiction. I had a bookcase in my bedroom, and I'd spend my pocket money on second-hand books from the dusty old shops in the town, where pennies could buy battered, well-thumbed tomes. I loved anything about vets, farming or animals. I'd been glued to the television every Saturday evening watching *All Creatures Great and Small*, and this had somehow fired my imagination, although watching them on the television screen was as near as I ever got to sheep and cows. I found a roll of old Anaglypta wallpaper, and drew a picture of a cow, a sheep and a horse, using an out-of-date copy of *Black's Veterinary Dictionary* to label them with all their possible ailments. My Madonna, Bros and A-Ha posters came off the bedroom wall to make room for them. I dreamed of being a vet. Not one of the clean, sterile variety that I would meet when Fiona had

something wrong with her; I had no wish to be gelding cats all day. What I wanted was to be a farm vet just like James Herriot.

When I was sixteen and about to take my GCSEs I had the standard interview with the careers teacher at school. What was I planning to do with my life? One of my friends was already pregnant, another had a job lined up in a factory making bed headboards. Mother was keen that I should go to work at Marks and Spencer, but at that age wearing a striped blouse and selling clothes all day didn't appeal.

I didn't even dare to mention the vet dream: it all seemed such a far cry from Newsome High. I was handed a careers guidance booklet which told you what grades you needed to follow your chosen career path and I was very intimidated by it. I would have to put in some serious academic work to become the new James Herriot. But I did well enough in my exams to qualify for a place at college to do my A levels, which bought me a bit more time to decide the direction my life was going. I always had to work hard to pass exams, and I wasn't sure I could dedicate so many years to struggling with an enormous amount of studying at veterinary college.

In the end I opted to do A levels at Greenhead College, taking English Language, Biology, Geography and General Studies. Again, like at school, I was coasting, not putting in 100 per cent effort, with no clear idea where it was leading. The college staff were keen that as many of us as possible should go to university, and I vaguely considered doing a business degree, but not with any enthusiasm.

It was at college that I met my first proper boyfriend, Jason. He was doing a computer course. We really had nothing in common other than our dress sense and our shared love of black eyeliner. We were both Goths, although maybe not as committed as some were: I didn't dye my hair black, and neither did he.

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We *did* wear black from head to foot and sported sunglasses at all times, whatever the weather. We would trawl record shops looking for anything by The Mission, me wearing paratrooper boots, ripped tights, net petticoats and a blanket with knots in it, Jason in the same leather trousers and ripped T-shirt he always wore. I suppose it was a form of rebellion, and Mother was not very happy about it, but she got nowhere telling me what she thought. In fairness to her, she wasn't heavy about it, but when I look back I can see it must have been a blow for this elegant woman to have a daughter wandering around looking like that!

Whatever we thought at the time, Jason and I weren't really that alternative: we got engaged! How conventional is that? He bought me a ring with a microscopic diamond from H. Samuel which cost him £90. I was very impressed, it was such a lot of money to me at that time. I flashed it around college, thinking it was wonderful. It seems funny now but I can't even remember why we split up. However, I do remember that I threw the ring back at him. We were never really that serious, and never for one moment did I think, even then, that we would get married. I've no idea what happened to Jason. I never saw him again after we left college. In a big town you can stay quite anonymous and keep yourself to yourself even though you are in a crowd. Lots of people like to keep in touch with friends from their past, but I never have, mainly because I've moved on and away.

As part of my Biology course I could opt to do different modules, and there was one in Dairy Microbiology, which was run by the University of Liverpool. The majority of the work was written and done in college, but a site visit to a working dairy got me thinking about farms and cows and the possibilities of working with them. I realized there were other ways of working with farm animals which didn't involve qualifying as a vet, and that perhaps my dream was not over . . .

I started thinking that maybe I could work in farming.

So I got on my bike, literally – it was the same mountain bike I'd had since I was about twelve – and I cycled round the farms near the edge of the town, offering my services free to anyone who could use me. Now, there's nothing a farmer likes more than free labour, especially from someone who is prepared to work their guts out and doesn't mind getting stuck in and mucky. I think one or two were a bit cynical about me when I showed up, as they were definitely more used to lads than lasses. But I showed willing, worked hard and, most important, I was free.

After A levels (I didn't do great . . .) I still didn't see how I was ever going to get the kind of job I wanted. I was used basically for shovelling the proverbial; there was never any talk of payment or even a job. I needed to find a way in, so I headed for the technical college in Huddersfield and enrolled on an NVQ course in veterinary nursing. It felt like a backwards step going from A levels to an NVQ, but I figured it could help me get work on farms if I had some basic practical qualifications.

It was at this time I discovered a book that played such an important role in my life. I was always in and out of Huddersfield Library, borrowing books about animals and farming, when on one visit I found *Hill Shepherd*, by John and Eliza Forder. You can usually tell pretty quickly whether a book is going to 'grab you' and this one certainly did. Even at first glance, flicking through the pages, it captivated me: beautiful, evocative photographs of shepherds and their flocks, and a narrative that told of the seasons of their lives. I borrowed it three times in succession, then received a letter from the library informing me that I couldn't keep renewing it any longer, and I would be fined if I didn't return it. I couldn't afford to buy it back then, so reluctantly I took it back. I loved every detail of it: the photo of a farmer skinning a dead lamb; the flock of sheep being walked

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on the road, closely followed by a couple of sheepdogs; a shepherd gathering the sheep down from the fells of the Lake District, the sheep trickling down through the bracken, making for home. (Another example of how my life comes full circle: recently I bought a second-hand copy of this wonderful book, and in one of the photographs, of a sheep sale at Hawes auction, there is Clive, who is now my husband. Little did I know . . .)

As part of my college work experience I landed a fortnight's lambing work on a farm. It was a baptism of fire. If I hadn't have been as enthusiastic as I was, then this job would almost certainly have sent me scurrying to Marks and Spencer for an application form. It was just me and another girl, who was a vet student, and an awfully large modern shed packed to the rafters with heavily expectant yows. Although we were both full of theory, we had no practical experience whatsoever. We made it up as we went along. It was an incredibly steep learning curve.

This was a commercial flock and all the lambing was inside, not, as I had imagined, out in the fields. It was very hard work, and we were left to get on with it. My companion was a good workmate, and we pulled together well. The farmer, however, was foul-tempered and incredibly miserly. He did not have any of the equipment required at lambing time, no dried colostrum, the vital fluid that new mothers produce before their milk comes in, and which babies of all species need. We did the best we could, pinching a bit here and there from sheep who had plenty for the ones who didn't. But his attitude was that small lambs should simply be put down. Worse, he didn't put them down humanely. He hit them over the head and concussed them, then flung them into a big, blue forty-five-gallon drum. I felt sick when he whacked them, and even more sick when I looked over the top and saw some of them still moving. Nowadays I like to

think that I would hit *him* over the head but back then I was very young and less sure of myself.

It was bad farming. One thing I learned, very early on, is that there are good farmers and bad farmers; just, I suppose, like every other walk of life. Working for bad farmers may not have been a great experience, but it shaped me, taught me how things should not be done, and gave me a clearer idea of the sort of farming I wanted to do. I certainly didn't have any romantic notions about the job. After my fortnight the farmer was supposed to pay me £20 and, true to form, he didn't turn up that day.

I did more casual work in a livery yard which involved lots of grooming and mucking out. Much as I loved the horses, I knew I didn't want to spend the rest of my life working exclusively with them. Another job taught me how to run a small milking parlour, and there was an enjoyable spell on a small farm which had cows, sheep, horses and pigs. By the time my NVQ course was over I had sorted it out in my head: shepherding was what I wanted to do.

I got a lucky break. My course was in veterinary nursing, but there was an agricultural element, learning how to assist vets who worked with farm animals. One of my tutors had some farming contacts, and he happened to know someone who was looking for a farmhand – or, possibly, just a mug . . .