

Adventures of the Yorkshire Shepherdess

The
new book
from TV's
favourite
shepherdess

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The Sunday Times Top Ten Bestseller

Introduction

When gathering the sheep from the moors I have often looked down onto Ravenseat, sitting as it does in its little hollow, and been ‘tekken’ with the aura of contentment that envelops the farm that I have called home for two decades. It isn’t the neatest or most orderly of places, but it exudes a warmth that is both heartening and welcoming.

The first time I came here, what struck me was the sense of quiet. It’s so peaceful, but the place is rich in history, having seen so much life during its near thousand-year existence. The labours of people from times past were plain to see when I looked across the partly cobbled yard towards the timeworn buildings all surrounded by a chaotic framework of crumbling drystone walls. In its heyday, a hundred and fifty years ago when manpower and horsepower ruled, nearly a hundred people lived at the top of Swaledale – now it’s thirty, and that includes my brood. In the eighteenth century, Ravenseat was a small hamlet with eleven families in residence. For weary travellers passing through, refreshment for both body and soul were available at the public

house (which is now our farmhouse) and at the Inghamite chapel (which is now our woodshed). For the residents of far-flung settlements like Ravenseat work was either to be found in the coal and lead mines or on the many small farms, but the decline of the mining industry in the late nineteenth century led to a mass exodus with two thirds of the population of Swaledale leaving to find employment elsewhere. Farming suffered too, the smaller farms becoming less viable. Some were completely abandoned, and the land amalgamated to form bigger enterprises. Slowly but surely the lifeblood of the dale trickled away, leaving behind only isolated farmsteads and derelict mine workings, the relics of bygone times.

I first visited Ravenseat on a dark October night in 1996. I was a contract shepherdess in my early twenties and had been asked to collect a tup (ram) from a farmer called Clive Owen. Clive was single, in his early forties, and like me had a passion for farming and the great outdoors but was not so bothered about home decor. It's fair to say the farmhouse was a wreck, with damp carpets, black mould and wallpaper peeling from the walls. It was less than inviting and, with nothing in the way of heating other than a small coal fire in the living room and a temperamental range cooker in the kitchen, the house felt dank. Clive, though, was funny and easy-going and we became friends and then something more.

I moved in and gradually – very gradually, I should say – over time, the furnishings and fittings have been upgraded but there's still plenty of room for improvement. I was mindful that a working farmhouse must be, in the first

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instance, practical. I couldn't guess the number of times I've had lambs warming beside the hearth, or being bathed in the kitchen sink, or had to step over a recumbent calf on the fireside rug. For me, this is the essence of a farmhouse, not a highly polished Aga or a Cath Kidston apron. Ravenseat is sparse where it needs to be, with bare flagged floors that can be scrubbed, but also decidedly cluttered places where items often needed in a hurry are stacked and ready to hand. For example, on the overmantel in the kitchen there are a couple of bottles of calcium and mixed minerals ready for use when we are presented with an emergency case of ovine grass staggers, a commonplace metabolic disorder that occurs when there are low levels of magnesium in a sheep's blood. The medicines are more effective and work quicker if warmed to blood temperature, so although they're not the perfect visual adornment for the overmantel, it is the ideal storage place. A couple of pot dogs might look more decorative but are not as useful.

After Clive and I had been a couple for four years, I finally proposed.

'Does ta think we should get married?' I asked him.

'Mebbe.'

'Does that mean yes?'

'I suppose so.'

Granted, it wasn't the most romantic of proposals.

We married at St Mary's Church in Muker in July 2000. Today Ravenseat is home to Clive, myself and our nine children, plus terriers Chalky, Pippen and young pup Sprout, a whole host of sheepdogs, an amorous peacock, too many hens to count, three horses and an aged pony, a small herd

of cows and about 1,000 sheep. Throughout the summer months we have guests staying in our shepherd's hut and if that doesn't keep us busy enough, we have a stream of customers wanting to enjoy the al fresco afternoon teas that we provide during the walking season. Most of our visitors are travelling from the west to the east on the arduous 192-mile Coast to Coast walk which will take them two weeks to complete. They will have walked for a week by the time they reach us, and although Ravenseat lies on one of the shorter stretches of the journey – it's just twelve miles from Kirkby Stephen to Keld – the terrain is challenging. The climb out from Hartley takes them up to the Nine Standards Rigg, standing at 2,172 feet above sea level, where nine sizeable ancient stone cairns command the summit. The view east is over the bleak moors of Swaledale, and to the west you can see the green plains of the Eden Valley. From here on it is a precarious path down Whitsundale, through knee-high wiry ling (heather), scrub and peat hagg, with walkers needing to sidestep the bog moss or find their feet sinking into treacherous ground.

'T'as me beat why thoo would wanna live at such a godforsaken spot,' was the comment I got from a farmer out for a drive one abysmal wet November afternoon, but I love this place and the challenges it brings. I never want to live anywhere other than Ravenseat but the simple fact is that we are tenant farmers. Ravenseat is part of an estate and has been for centuries; it doesn't belong to us. That insecurity and the question of what the future would hold for our family kept me awake at night, wondering, worrying.

'Life's too short to worry about the what ifs, yer not

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supposed to know what's in't future,' Clive would say.

'Aye,' I'd agree, 'but unfortunately the fact that I'm considerably younger than you means I'm gonna be the one left with the worries.'

He'd scowl – nobody likes to think about their mortality and Clive was no exception. Then he'd turn the conversation to his advantage: 'An' this mi dear is why yer need to look after mi, cater for mi every need, an' whilst we're on that subject I'd like a cup o' tea, I'm parched.'

Gradually the idea of buying our own place in our beloved Swaledale took root – a permanent home for our family, somewhere that we could call our own. The story of our search starts in 2013, at which point we had six of our nine children. Raven, our eldest child, was born in 2001. As the oldest she takes on much responsibility for her younger siblings and is a great help to me. She has a wise head on young shoulders; she's practical and down to earth but also academic, and is now in sixth form, studying Chemistry, Biology and Maths for A level. She says she wants to be a doctor, but sometimes it's a vet, other times a research scientist, so who knows? I tell all the children that they can be whatever they want to be, it's down to them.

In 2003 Reuben came along. He is our resident engineer and is most likely to be found in a shed tinkering with something mechanical. He's a tall, handsome lad but always streaked with oil. Deft with a socket set and accomplished with a welder, he's at his happiest when confronted with a seized engine or malfunctioning machine. The price of metal has fallen so low that the scrap man doesn't come up to Ravenseat very often, so everything I put onto the scrap

heap somehow migrates back into the farmyard to be used for another of his restoration projects. He's now got four vintage tractors, which he is always fiddling with, and is first to show up with a spanner if anything needs fixing around the house or farm. He's dyslexic and, much to his chagrin, has to have 'assisted learning' at school but he's excellent at concentrating if it's something he's interested in. Give him a book about tractors and engines and he'll read that happily enough. He put a whole new engine into our skid-steer loader and it worked all winter, although I do know that the success of the project all hinged on a piece of wood, carefully crafted to the right size, holding a rubber hose in place. He's also extremely good at talking to people and has many friends, both young and old, the common denominator being a passion for machinery. It is not unusual for Reuben to introduce us to one of his friends who are perhaps themselves 'vintage' in terms of age but who are willing to impart vital knowledge and knowhow relating to tractors and stationary engines.

Miles, who was born in 2006, is like Reuben in that he doesn't like school, but unlike his older brother he's discovered a new interest, girls; he's a real ladies' man. With his wide brown eyes peeping out from under his foppish fringe, he is bound to charm. He loves animals, nature programmes and the countryside. Every year we replenish our ageing flock of hens with end-of-lay hens destined for processing. Miles takes them under his wing, caring for them in the barn until they become acclimatized to the weather at Ravenseat and can become free-range.

He also has his own flock of sheep, a dozen Texdales

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(Texel/Swaledale crosses). He lambs his little flock himself; everything is timed very carefully to make sure that his sheep's due dates coincide with the Easter school holidays. He gets to see it all, and he was heartbroken when one day he went outside to feed his sheep and found one had escaped and got into the feed store, overindulged, become bloated and died. It's entirely his flock and he makes the decisions about who he keeps and who he sells with just a hint of guidance from Clive. He is quiet, sensitive and knowledgeable and lives for the day when he can farm full-time.

Edith came along two years after Miles and she too is enthusiastic about farming. Like Raven she is studious, more so than the boys, and is doing very well at school. But she's happiest outside in her boiler suit and wellies and loves to come with me to the moor to shepherd the sheep. When Clive was preparing his beloved tups for Tan Hill Show in the spring, it was Edith who spent hours tongsing them – plucking out stray white hairs – when the rest of the children would give up, losing patience and interest, after about half an hour.

She's also fascinated by the birds that we have up here. She watches over the nests during the breeding season, and knows exactly who's who. Her familiarity with the resident birds is quite astounding, but not really surprising given the amount of time she spends out in the fields. I suppose it is simply about knowing your patch, knowing the lie of the land, and watching the mannerisms of the birds. You soon get to identify and understand what is right there in front of you. My RSPB observer was astounded by her photograph album which consisted of lots of selfies with lapwing,

moorhen, oyster catcher and curlew nests. She even kept a note of how many chicks hatched.

Violet was born in 2010, and she is a real tomboy, always nursing some war wound. A scrape down one leg, a huge blood blister. She and Clive are locked in competition about their injuries: whatever happens to Violet, Clive has always had it worse (or better, from their point of view). Clive's blood blister covered the whole of the palm of his hand, so he won that one. Violet is always pushing the boundaries of what is possible, climbing higher up a tree than anyone else dare or jumping into the river from a loftier ledge. One summer's day she dragged the plastic slide across to the river bank, climbed up it and aquaplaned across the water like a skimming stone whilst everyone else looked on. She's completely fearless and thinks nothing of being Reuben's human guinea pig for whatever contraption he has crafted – latterly this was a home-made snowboard that was impressive in its speed but not so much in its manoeuvrability.

She has an arty side and spends many a happy hour making clay pots and figures. She discovered her own little claypit on the moor amidst the peat hags and heather, and can often be found there digging up muddy clay, squeezing it and kneading it, nails blackened and hands grey. She busies herself making models of ladybirds and hedgehogs, as well as bowls and cups. Some of her handiwork she brings home to 'fire' in the black range oven and then decorate, but she leaves a lot of them there, in situ, to dry out in the sunshine. I have on occasion been quizzed by a coast-to-coast walker who has chanced upon this little home-made shrine of pot animals amongst the heather.

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Sidney arrived in 2011. With a cheeky smile, dancing eyes and freckles he is a live wire with an enquiring mind and is an excellent source of real-time commentary on daily events at Ravenseat. He is wise beyond his years owing to spending so much of his time in Reuben's company. Both are mechanically minded but Sidney's enthusiasm, coupled with his idolization of his eldest brother, has led to him being somewhat taken advantage of, as he tends to be used as a gofer. 'Sid, gofer this; Sid, gofer that.' And he does so, willingly, proud to be helping out. Wherever Reuben is, you'll find Sidney is not so far away.

I hope you enjoy reading about what happens next at Ravenseat, as our youngest three children arrive, along with a stoical plumber, a travelling monk, an auctioneer and a very lucky calf. Chalky behaves badly, Little Joe the Shetland pony defends his honour, and we face some of our toughest battles yet in the worst summer and winter we've ever encountered.