



# MEET THE ACCIDENTAL HERO

Sheep farming in the Lake District is hard, cold, often thankless work. It's not a career that tends to lead to fame and influence. Yet James Rebanks – fell farmer and unlikely bestselling author – has become a powerful voice for a traditional way of life that's under threat. Susan Low spends a day with 'the sturdy shepherd' on his farm in Cumbria

PHOTOGRAPHS JOAN RANSLEY

CHALLENGING LIFE  
Come rain or shine,  
James is on call  
to look after his  
700-strong flock of  
Herdwick sheep

Winter is a trying season in the Lake District fells. Wind lashes, rain drives, snow occasionally drifts. Shafts of reluctant sunshine illuminate a grey-green landscape crisscrossed by dry-stone walls, etched against a backdrop of snow-flecked mountains. The day I spent at James Rebanks' Racy Ghyll Farm in the village of Matteredale was typically windswept – and James himself is something of a whirlwind.

As well as looking after some 700 Herdwick sheep, James has written an autobiography called *The Shepherd's Life: A Tale of the Lake District* (Allen Lane), which was a Sunday Times No 1 bestseller five weeks in a row, featured as BBC Radio 4's Book of the Week in April 2015 and has been translated into numerous languages. James famously failed his GCSEs yet went on to gain a double first in history at Magdalen College, Oxford. He's been interviewed for just about every national paper and countless magazines and has more than 88,000 followers on Twitter.

He should by rights be a bit scary, but his forthright honesty and lack of pretension – a rare commodity in literary types – instantly put me at ease. Strongly built and quick to laugh, he jokingly refers to himself as "the sturdy shepherd". It's obvious he enjoys the recognition he's earned – and he's always game for a well-reasoned debate.

## LOCAL ROOTS

James's family have farmed in this area for more than 600 years, and today James's son, Isaac, is learning the ropes, picking up on the cues James uses to command sheepdogs Floss and Tan. Knowledge passes from father to son, forging another link in the chain that reaches back through the generations.

The Herdwick breed that James favours has been in Britain since the 12th century, but its roots lie in Scandinavia. "Local myth has it that they came with the Vikings on their boats, and the science now →



**A RARE BREED**  
Four-year-old Isaac looks set to continue the family's sheep farming tradition into the next generation – with the help of dad James and the trusty border collies, of course

suggests this is true," James writes. In 2013, Lakeland Herdwicks gained Protected Designation of Origin status from the European Commission. Herdwicks look like a child's drawing of a sheep: wide-eyed, inquisitive faces, thick fleeces, and legs that look as though they're clad in baggy stockings. Their cuteness belies their toughness.

"Herdwick sheep are genius for this landscape," James explains. "The Lake District in winter is murderous for sheep – cold and wet – but Herdwicks have learned how to survive that. And their meat is some of the best you can eat." The breed also has a quality that makes them peculiarly suited to the area: they're hefted, which means the lambs are taught by their mothers where 'home' is – so there's no need to build fences to hold them in.

### MAN AND NATURE

The Lakeland landscape is the product of a symbiosis between man, beast and nature. James describes it as "a unique man-made place, a landscape divided and defined by fields, walls, hedges, dykes, roads,

becks, drains, barns, quarries and lanes". The sheep, although tough, rely on their human caretakers, and there'd be no point in humans living here without the sheep. Nature isn't always kind. Over the past two decades the region has had to cope with the devastating effects of foot and mouth disease,

***"I believe in people more than I used to... Anything looks impossible until you start fighting for it"***

which in 2001 came within a whisker of wiping out the local Herdwick breed. If the last flocks had succumbed, the breed's innate homing instinct would have been lost for good, spelling the end of this kind of fell sheep-farming; sheep brought in from elsewhere wouldn't know where home was.

In December 2015, storm Desmond brought calamitous floods, causing an estimated £500m

worth of damage, washing away bridges and walls, and killing livestock. In 2014 and 2016, cruel spring snows threatened the lives of newborn lambs. Farmers in the fells aren't what you'd call rich, either. The average wage for a Lakeland fell farmer is just £8,500 a year.

The National Farmers' Union believes that Britain may lose 20 per cent of its hill farmers in the next 20 years. Adding to the chorus of doom, Rory Stewart, Conservative MP for Penrith and The Border, has depressingly predicted that, "in 30-40 years' time we will not have farmers living on our fells".

And if the environment doesn't present enough challenges, there are always the environmentalists. Activist George Monbiot infamously described the Lake District as 'sheep-wrecked', writing, 'you'll see more wildlife in Birmingham' than in the Lakes. Monbiot argues that supporting sheep farmers and defending the ecosystem of the Lakes are at odds. The 'white plague' of sheep, he says, should be banished from the fells to allow the landscape to return to its natural state.

Yet James is suitably defiant. To the Monbiots of the world he responds, "If you look at the roots of the argument, it's about intensifying agriculture even more to spare up some land at the margins, then we could have that back as a theme park for people to return to at weekends from the city. I don't buy that. I'm not against having more wildlife on farmland; I think that's a good idea. The argument also hides the fact that there's been massive progress in this landscape. The fells you're looking at have about half the number of sheep on them as they did in 2000 and there's slow but steady ecological restoration being done on the land."

### PEOPLE POWER

And to the politicians he says: "If we keep going with this screwed-up food system, there will be hardly any farmers left in any marginal areas, just a handful of large ones – so ranching, basically. But I don't think that's going to happen. I used to, but I believe in people more now."

As well as being an advocate of fell farming, James is an articulate

critic of the food system in which ever lower food prices are the main motivating factor. "The general thinking is that lamb is too expensive," he says. "It isn't – it's just relatively expensive compared to chicken, which is ridiculously cheap. In real terms, lamb is now a quarter of what it cost when I was a kid. And chicken is about 15 times cheaper than it was when I was a kid. Cheap, watery chicken has become the benchmark. It's wrong, so why should I aim to compete with it?"

James is also a firm believer in people power, which gives consumers the ability to choose the kind of food – and food system – they want. By making informed decisions about what we buy (and don't buy), we can shape the agricultural landscape.

James admits it takes a "huge leap of faith" to think that things can improve. "But I actually do. People can change things. People used to drink-drive when I was a kid. Smoking: gone. Seat belts: everyone wears one. Free-range hens: we've got the highest proportion of any

### THE KNOWLEDGE: HERDWICK LAMB AND MUTTON

Herdwick sheep graze and forage at heights of up to 900m. Their diet, and the fact that they're slow-grown, gives the meat a distinctive gamey flavour. Lamb is available from January to July; hogget and mutton year-round. Lamb is stocked by Booth's supermarket in season and at good butchers. Buy online from [heritagemeat.co.uk](http://heritagemeat.co.uk), who farm on land formerly owned by author Beatrix Potter, who was a vocal advocate for the Herdwick breed. Find other suppliers at [herdwick-sheep.com](http://herdwick-sheep.com).

country. Why? Because a bunch of journalists made the general public really mind about battery hens back in the 1980s and suddenly the supermarkets changed things. Anything looks impossible until you've done it."

If anyone has the energy, tenacity, knowledge and wit to fight the Lakelands' corner – and encourage food lovers to take up the good fight – it's this sturdy farmer. If he has his way, young Isaac won't be the last in the father-to-son chain that has kept the fell-farming tradition alive for generations to come. And that's something worth fighting for. **👍**

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