

The craft of hefting - Cynefino

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Author

Two decades ago, hill farmers were paid to cut grips or drains into their moors to remove the surplus water and improve the grazing. Now they are being paid to fill them in again. The same could happen to hill sheep, but to

reverse the process and re-stock the hills, is far more complicated than the simple mechanical operation of filling in drains.

This is especially so with hefted sheep. These have been accustomed to their grazings for decades or even centuries and to remove them upsets the whole balance of the hill. The Welsh for hefting is 'Cynefin' and it is likely this practice goes back even further in Wales than elsewhere.

We know that the Scottish systems of hefting originated after the clearances and the displacement of the human population, by vast numbers of sheep. The new graziers split their extensive ranges into hefts, with the sheep on each trained to stay there. The result, a high number of very competent full time

shepherds who "looked" at their sheep when they took their flocks to the heights each evening and brought them back downhill during daylight hours. Their shepherding meant that grazing was even over the whole area; there was no over-grazing, no concentrated pockets of worm eggs and no stretches of rank, undergrazed vegetation. On the Welsh mountains, the emphasis well before the eighteenth century has always been the family farm.

Former Lammermuirs sheep farmer, Sir John Scott when writing the foreword to my book "Hefting Practice," said about upland stocking rates:

"Those early flockmasters were men of immense wisdom and sensitivity. Having first improved their grazings, they realised that the regrowth of delicate hill herbage could only be preserved by very careful stocking... The clean 'white' hills of bent grass and manicured carpets of heather are created by hefting, or in the case of heather hills, by a partnership between sheep farming and grouse moor management."

He concluded:

"We are in danger of losing a very significant part of our national heritage. New Labour may have a Utopian view of Rural Britain but no conservation body can ever replicate the landscape that has been created by the management of hefted sheep."

Few people outside the hills understand hefting. Trouble often arises when interested bodies do not bother to find out and impose from afar regulations which change fundamentally these well-tried and tested upland farming practices.

Hefting is a system of livestock husbandry based on territorial instincts rather than on fencing. The hill ewe passes on the knowledge of her grazing boundaries to her ewe lambs, and so it continues down the generations. Some Welsh hills have stocks of their hardy native sheep which have been using the same ground for hundreds of years.

The system is reinforced by regular visits from the shepherd and his dogs. They remind the sheep about which side of the stream or ridge is theirs. Fencing such lightly stocked land is often uneconomic. Environmental, amenity and recreational bodies dislike fences and solid boundaries have their own dangers if stock pile up against them in a storm.

Although there is a need for courses on hill shepherding, they are pointless without keen shepherds and accommodation for them. Local schemes need to be provided to ensure continuity of skills on the uplands, just as the hill ewe passes on her knowledge to the next generation.

More money must be made to flow on to the hills, whether for heather fed or hill fed mutton, or as grants to encourage more people to earn their living in the uplands. As towns become ever more crowded and crime-ridden, hill populations remain a tithe to those from a century ago. This national nonsense needs redressing.

Clustnodau

The hefting instinct of a mountain flock can add as much as £8 per head + 10% of the animal's market value, to the price of each sheep in a hefted flock, when a farm and its stock are sold. Not surprisingly, it is therefore in the interests of a farmer to know which sheep belong to his farm. Although flocks of hefted sheep instinctively use specific areas of the open mountain, they can on occasions stray from their cynefin or mix with other flocks when being moved or collected.

It is for this reason, that the simple but highly effective system of "clustnodau" (cut marks in the ear) was developed and has since been part of the

traditions of upland farmers for generations. This unique signature enables every individual sheep to be identified or more correctly, to locate which farm they come from.

In many mountain areas of Wales, this traditional still survives and so each upland area has its own directory of ear marks, enabling sheep and upland farms to be easily linked. As the movement of sheep becomes more controlled, a national tagging system has been introduced and so sheep can have two signatures, their traditional ear cut marks and a coded ear tag.

Information from
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Dolgellau

RHESTR O'R GWAHANOL DORIADAU

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|-----|-----|--|--|
| 1. | 2. | 1. TORRI BLAEN Y GLUST | 2. TORRI BLAEN Y GLUST A'I HOLLTI |
| 3. | 4. | 3. TORRI BLAEN Y GLUST A'I HOLLTYN DAIR | 4. TORRYR GLUST YN EI HANNER |
| 5. | 6. | 5. CANWAIR / CNYWAD / WIENNOL | 6. CANWAIR A'I HOLLTI |
| 7. | 8. | 7. HOLLTYR GLUST | 8. HOLLTYR GLUST YN DAIR |
| 9. | 10. | 9. CARAI DAU DORIAD / CARAI STEP ODDITAN | 10. CARAI DAU DORIAD / CARAI STEP ODDIAR |
| 11. | 12. | 11. CARAI LIPA | 12. CARAI UN TORIAD / CARAI SLENT |
| 13. | 14. | 13. CARAI DAU DORIAD A HOLLTYR SON | |

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Mountain facts

Julius Caesar had a stud for Welsh Mountain ponies near Llyn Tegid, Bala Lake, Meirionnydd.

Edward Hart: Hefting in Practice: The Ancient Craft of Grazing the Open Hills. £6.00 post paid. Signed copies available from Edward Hart, Ground Floor Flat, Caynam House, Ludlow. SY8 4JZ. Tel: 01584 873491