

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a red dress, a grey jacket, red socks, and black boots, stands on a grassy hill. She is looking towards the right. A black and white dog is sitting on the ground in front of her, looking up at her. The background is a soft-focus landscape with green hills and a blue sky.

Alison O'Neill

"You fall to it and that's it," says Alison O'Neill, whose earliest memory is at her family's farm – being sat in a cardboard box in front of the fireplace, with a lamb on her lap. She left home to travel as a teenager, but was eventually drawn back to a way of life she felt was almost lost in time.

By the time she returned, her family had sold the farm and she had to start from scratch.

"I started again

on a small farm called Shacklabank," explains Alison. "I remember moving in – I had 60 quid in my pocket and a rucksack, and I was heavily pregnant with my daughter Scarlet. It wasn't ideal, but that was it. I decided this was me."

The captivating landscape she lives in now lies between the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. "It's bleak but beautiful," says Alison. "It goes on forever, and it's still very wild. There are a few houses dotted around, with quite hardened old shepherds – and me!"

People are always shocked when they meet her, she says, as they're expecting to find a grumpy old man with bushy eyebrows. Instead, they find a glamorous woman with red lipstick and a bright tweed skirt.

Tweed is a passion for Alison, and she likes to match the colour of her kilts to the colours of the season. She might wear a lilac number, for instance, amid a sea of bluebells in spring. She's so taken by the wool-spun fabric that she's currently launching her own tweed clothing line – called Shepherdess.

When Alison first arrived on the farm, locals weren't quite sure what to make of her.

"In general, it's a place where men do the outdoors work and women bake cakes," she explains.

Things are different now though. "I've shown (the other farmers) very quickly that I can wear lipstick and nail polish, but I'm still a hard worker."

Alison, also known as the

Barefoot Shepherdess for her barefoot mountain guiding around Cumbria, has 250 sheep of her own but is also on emergency call-out during lambing season – due to her slender wrists, she is much in demand.

"As a woman, I think you have to work twice as hard to prove yourself. But then, I'm incredibly proud because I've shown my daughter that it's possible," she told us.

Their lifestyle is in many ways very idyllic, with most of the food they consume being

"They're expecting to find a grumpy old man with bushy eyebrows. Instead, they find a glamorous woman with red lipstick and a bright tweed skirt."

sourced from the farm, from the meat right down to the herbs they use for seasoning. Alison especially enjoys putting all her fresh, organic produce to good use by holding dinner parties.

The single mum believes every woman has an inner shepherdess; it lies in an ability to nurture.

Alison's caring side often works in her favour, getting her more work during lambing season, for instance. But there are times when she has to cut herself off emotionally. She once had a sheep named Rosy, she explains, a troublesome old ewe that eventually broke her heart when she had to send her to the slaughter. Since then she hasn't been able to name them.

Still, she loves her animals dearly and still sometimes lets lambs sit with her on the sofa.

"I'm just a romantic," concludes Alison, "and I'm happiest when I'm with the sheep."
shepherdess.co.uk *