

FLOCKING TO THE FELS

If you ever fancied following in the footsteps of the Barefoot Shepherdess, you can with a new series of remote walking holidays

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Anyone harbouring romantic notions about running a hill farm in the wilds of northern England didn't see shepherdess Alison O'Neill working her way through a 20ft snowdrift when the Beast from the East arrived.

However, if you'd like just a brief taste of what life is like for the hardy folk who toil in our most remote regions, then Alison may have the answer.

With no tractor or quad bike, the shepherdess tends her flock on foot every day whatever the weather – and sometimes in bare feet. But, as we know, a church mouse would struggle to exist on the financial rewards you get from small scale sheep farming.

It is fortunate, then, that this impressive woman who recently celebrated 20 years working in the fells, not only loves every minute of her life on Shacklabank, her farm near Sedburgh, but has developed a series of bright ideas to diversify.

Alison and her life in the fells has become what marketing people would call 'a brand'. Not in a cynical way – Alison's love of the place she lives is deep-rooted and sincere – but in a way that has enabled her to earn a living and remain doing the job she loves.

Her parents were sheep farmers but she knew from an early stage that she had to diversify to survive and she has done that with considerable success.

The latest project is to offer visitors the chance to sample her

world for a week with walking tours across the region's sheep farms. Happily, for those paying guests there is a good dinner and a soft bed in a luxury hotel at the end of the day.

Alison's escorted walks will be split into three areas – her 'home patch' in the Howgills, the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. Wool is the thread that binds these walks – she uses 'Wool is My Bread' as her motto – and while Alison is the star of the show, there is a strong supporting cast in the form of the sheep breeds she farms, Herdwicks, Rough Fells and Swaledales.

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'The guided walks mean that I am able to talk about the things I love,' says Alison. 'It's all about how sheep are connected to our landscape, how farming has influenced the way the countryside looks and how it all feeds into the local communities. There will be farm visits so people who come on our trips get to meet other shepherds.'

Alison has been hosting day-long walks for some years and extending them to a week-long 'wool experience' was a natural progression. 'Most of my guests have been ladies looking for a different kind of holiday,' she

says. 'I'm hoping there will be opportunities for barefoot walking and wild swimming and I'm looking at extending the walks to other parts of the country, possibly Lancashire.'

Alison also launched her own tweed recently and used her early ambitions as a designer to create a range of clothes and accessories. It was greeted with enthusiasm on the catwalk at the Great Yorkshire Show and there is a small studio on the farm showcasing her work.

As a popular public speaker, Alison keeps extremely busy. But the fact she is divorced and her daughter is now at Edge Hill University near Ormskirk means she is alone on the fells.

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With a spectacular picture book of Alison's life about to be launched and a more gritty autobiography in production, she doesn't have much time to dwell on life lived alone.

She hasn't always been a country girl. As a young woman, Alison bought a rucksack and went travelling and did a host of jobs that didn't involve farming. 'But I woke up one day and knew I wanted to go back to the land so I arrived here with just £60 in my pocket. You could say that, like the sheep, I'm hefted.' ♦

You can find out more at www.shepherdess.co.uk.



Shepherdess Alison
O'Neill has been farming
on the fells for 20 years

