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LLOYD

ISSUE 1

A SHEPHERD'S LIFE FOR ME.

*On the fells with shepherdess and
designer Alison O'Neill.*

PLUS: GONE FISHING. MILLION MILE MAN.

Issue 1

Lloyd South Lakes



The Ultimate
Driving Machine



DALES DIARIES

**Rosie McGlade meets Cumbrian
shepherdess Alison O'Neill, whose tweed
clothing is designed at her farmhouse
kitchen table, in-between the hours she
spends tending her sheep on the fells.**

Alison O'Neill is one of those rare things; a romantic, living her dream of being a shepherd, designing beautiful tweed clothing woven from the fleece of her native breed sheep - skirts, jackets, and waistcoats she models herself and which, suddenly, are in great demand.

Her website features beautiful photographs of her in her designs, at work amid her flock in the

Howsgill Hills above Sedbergh. Her long black hair is tousled, her beautiful skirts and waistcoats are worn over woolly socks and muddy boots. It's tomboyish and feminine at the same time - very real and undeniably sexy.

It's hard to conjour a picture of a Dalesman without a tweed jacket. They don't wear mini-skirts though, and Alison's set her apart - her father's shepherd's crook at her hand and her grandfather's whistle, carved from red deer antler, around her neck. There's something wildly free about it, and it sums her up perfectly.

Today, after torrential rain, her day wear has by force been green rubber leggings, and ▶

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A DREAM REALISED.

Shepherdess Alison O'Neill with her sheep and her dog Shadow on the Howgill Hills

her work boots are caked. I'm relived to have made the trip in the new BMW X5 - the perfect companion for this harsh fell country. I find Alison at her kitchen table working on her Shepherdess clothing range, Valentine the cockerel and his father Romeo pecking at the door, sheepdog Shadow issuing a warning bark; it's time for his bowl of milk and it's not something he likes to share.

"It's all about good, honest products that last a lifetime," she says of her clothing. A woman in London, she says, has bought a skirt, waistcoat, jacket, and a bag, and on the Tube or at work they put her in mind of Alison, out on the hills.

Born Alison Winn, a good Sedbergh name, she was bred into generations of farmers, but her parents struggled, as so many hill farmers do, and when she was 12 they sold up. "It broke my heart," she says. "My brother and sister had other dreams, but I'd spent all my time milking the cows by hand, feeding the hens, walking out with the sheep on the hills. It was my world."

For Christmas that year she received a plastic farm set, which she played with behind the settee in their new home, imagining it was real. She allowed the farmer to be conscripted into her brother's cowboy and Indian games. The

farmer's wife, with her pinny and tea towel, was put in charge, raising the sheep and the cows in his place.

After school, she took jobs in London, Manchester and then all over the world, ranging from the Inland Revenue, to grape-picking, to fitness instructing. "All things I wasn't very good at," she says now. In her early thirties, in Morocco with her then-husband John, she poured out her heart. She wanted to come home and farm, just as everyone was leaving farming, but he agreed.

They had about £60 each and spent years searching for a farm to rent. "Eventually I spotted an ad in the local paper, and wrote a long letter explaining that my grandfather, his father, and grandfather before him were farmers in the area. There were 30 other couples after it, but blow me, we got Shacklabank Farm on May 12, 1999. It was just 30 acres and had been intensively farmed, its buildings encircled by a sea of tin, but it was one of the happiest days of my life."

From the farm gate you get a 360 degree view of the Pennine countryside. Alison says people say it's the most beautiful view they've ever seen. It's also one of the last working hill

farms in an area where many others have been swallowed up into larger units, their farmhouses now holiday homes.

A month after moving in, Alison gave birth to her daughter Scarlett and started farming – to the amusement of some of the locals. There were many times she thought it would never work, but she mastered it. To help make ends meet, Alison, now a single mother, put a couple of caravans on site and did B&B, then trained as a mountain guide so she could take guests walking and then have them back for supper in front of the fire.

The guiding took her around the Lakes and Yorkshire, then up to the Outer Hebrides, where another magical thing happened - she discovered tweed. Then a national newspaper ran a story on her Barefood Shepherdess holiday business and she was inundated with calls - most of them not about bookings, but about the skirt she was wearing in the photos - homemade from the Harris tweed she'd bought in Scotland. "I made some skirts up for the people who contacted me and posted them off. Then a country magazine featured me and I received hundreds of emails enquiring about the waistcoat I was wearing. I thought maybe I could start a little sideline."

The name was easy – Shepherdess – and Alison started sourcing tweed from the Isle of Harris. Then she had her own sheep fleeces spun, dyed and woven into tweed of her own. Her skirts, waistcoats, jackets, and bags are now made up in four-six weeks per piece by local seamstresses using more than 300 tweeds, with clasps made of Sheffield steel and antique British leather buttons.

Alison now has a unit at Farfield Mill in Sedbergh, where at weekends she meets and fits customers for clothes which, she says, will last a lifetime. She has three breeds of sheep – Herdwicks, whose wool she uses for Cumberland tweed; Rough Fells, whose wool she prizes for her Westmorland tweed; and Swaledales, whose fleece goes into Yorkshire tweed.

"I'm 5ft 3ins and an average size 12 and so far I've modelled all the clothes myself," she says of the stunning photos on the Shepherdess website. "I was looking into using professional models, but a friend said, 'Alison, you're an average woman



with lines and all the rest because you have lived, and that's why people love your clothes'.

"I keep to classic styles and my favourite skirt looks fantastic on teenagers with brogues and woollens, while we had an 86-year-old woman with gorgeous flowing white hair buy one and wear it with a silk blouse and kitten heels."

Alison has attracted the attention of a photographer who's working on a book of a year in her life. She's also been asked to pen notes for an autobiography. So will the bright lights take her away from the farm and her sheep? Not for a second. With Sunny the fell pony instead of a quad bike and Tweed the terrier at her heels, she knows where happiness lies. "I'm 52, I can skip around hay meadows in my bare feet, wear red lipstick and do anything I like. You get to that age of just being you and you realise people are okay with that." And I am convinced, as I make the trip back to the city in the X5, savouring the drive through this bleak yet beautiful land, that they are. ■

COUNTRY LIFE.

Shepherdess waistcoats are priced from £199, skirts from £199, and jackets from £495. Off-the-peg Shepherdess products are available at Armstrong Ward, Kendal, Reghed in Penrith, and the Lakes Distillery near Cockermouth. Alison O'Neill is at Farfield Mill in Sedbergh most Saturdays – contact her through her website to check availability www.shepherdess.co.uk