

People
IAN LAWSON
AND ALISON
O'NEILL

A new angle on farm life

For his new book, photographer Ian Lawson turned his lens on the shepherdess Alison O'Neill and a year in the life of her Sedbergh hill farm

WORDS MICHAELA ROBINSON-TATE PHOTOGRAPHY PHIL RIGBY



Nearly a decade in the making, Ian Lawson's new book is a beautiful evocation of a year in the life of a hill farm and the woman who runs it single-handedly. Shepherdess: One Woman Farm, focuses on Alison O'Neill, of Shackla Bank at Sedbergh.

Alison, who is known for her Shepherdess tweed clothing and accessories business, met Ian 10 years ago when he contacted her to ask if he could visit the farm to photograph her Rough Fell sheep.

"He came one Saturday morning, we had a quick chat and he showed me some photographs of Herdwicks that he had taken in the Lake District and I realised that he's not just a photographer, he's an

extraordinarily good photographer," says Alison. "It was then I thought to myself, if he's that good I would love to work with him."

The pair became friends and Ian returned to the 37-acre farm over many years, capturing Alison and the farm during different seasons and in very different conditions.

Her flock of 150 mainly Rough Fell sheep, plus some Swaledales and Herdwicks, her dogs, Fell Ponies and her clothing business are all captured in the book.

Alison, who has recently appeared on ITV's This Morning and welcomed TV chef Phil Vickery to Shackla Bank, says she's been through tough times in her 20 years at the farm, coming through a divorce and surviving foot and mouth. The now thriving clothing business, for which she developed her



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own Herdwick tweed, has helped keep the farm afloat afloat. She says the book, which is the subject of a new exhibition at the Dales Countryside Museum at Hawes, will be a precious keepsake of her years at Shackla Bank.

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Shepherdess: One Woman Farm is the third large format photographic book produced by Ian, following his earlier works: Saorsa, about the Outer Herbrides and its Harris Tweed industry and Herdwick: A Portrait of Lakeland.

Ian, who had already had a successful 30-year career photographing buildings and the built environment before he moved to live near Shap, has continued to use the same Hasselblad camera to take the 335 large format pictures for Shepherdess. The silk-bound book, which comes in a slipcase with a suede cloth lining, has already attracted international sales via Ian’s website.

The book includes text by both Alison and Ian. In his introduction he writes: “The moment I drove into the farmyard at Shackla Bank I knew I had discovered something special. This was a unique place, where time appeared to have stood still, or at least lingered a little longer. I gazed in disbelief at the pastoral scene of old, nestled under the green miles of towering fells.”

Ian says the book is about a way of life which is under threat.

He writes: “On her tenanted farm, Alison may just be a temporary custodian, but she knows she carries forward the ideals of generations past, men and women who have lived and worked this land for centuries before her. Such responsibility could weigh upon weaker shoulders, but she bears it with strength and pride.”

www.ianlawson.com
www.shepherdess.co.uk
Shepherdess: One Woman Farm, the exhibition, is at Dales Countryside Museum at Hawes, near Sedburgh until September 8.
www.dalescountrysidemuseum.org.uk

