IVVER SEN
An Introduction

They are, increasingly, like aliens in their own land.

The men and women of the Lake District, the characters who work with the soil, the wood and the stone, and who tend their farmsteads in the fells, are survivors. They could be the witnesses in the early years of the 21st Century to the end of an era that has been part of a Lakeland way of life since the first Norse settlers arrived on these shores hundreds of years ago and moved inland to farm the valleys and the fells.

You can see the Norse features in the welcoming smile of a Cumbrian face; the features portrayed by the artist Keith Bowen on the cover of this book and in its pages. These are Cumbrians through and through and many of them are the direct descendants of the peaceful Norse settlers who first set foot on this land.

On and around the farms a distinctive way of life has evolved over the centuries, a way of life that has, fundamentally, remained intact until the last few years or so. It is now changing irrevocably. It appears to me that a line has been drawn. It is a line, just as real as the dry stone walls that sweep across the fells and fields and have withstood the test of time, a line that says quite clearly this is a way of life that will in all probability never be quite the same again.

Lakeland communities have changed beyond recognition. In the 1960s and 70s it would not have surprised me in the least to see tumbleweed blowing down my home town's Main Street in the long winter months that stretched from late Autumn to Spring. Keswick is now busy with visitors all year round. Outdoor shops, fast food outlets and restaurant / pubs and cafes have bred. The traffic on the roads is constant and noisy.

Towns and villages have fallen victim to the holiday home syndrome, village services are suffering, children growing up in the village or town where generations of their family have lived may have to move out because of the cost of housing or a lack of local career opportunities.

In the middle of all this it is hardly surprising that an old way of life struggles to retain its identity. Some farmers' sons and daughters still follow in their parents' footsteps but they are becoming fewer. The rest are forsaking the land and the fell farms are becoming less. The old traditions have disappeared or are in decline. Fox hunting on foot with the fell packs was outlawed but the old sports of hound trailing and Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling are hanging on in there; not threatened by the law of the land, but perhaps by apathy among the young.

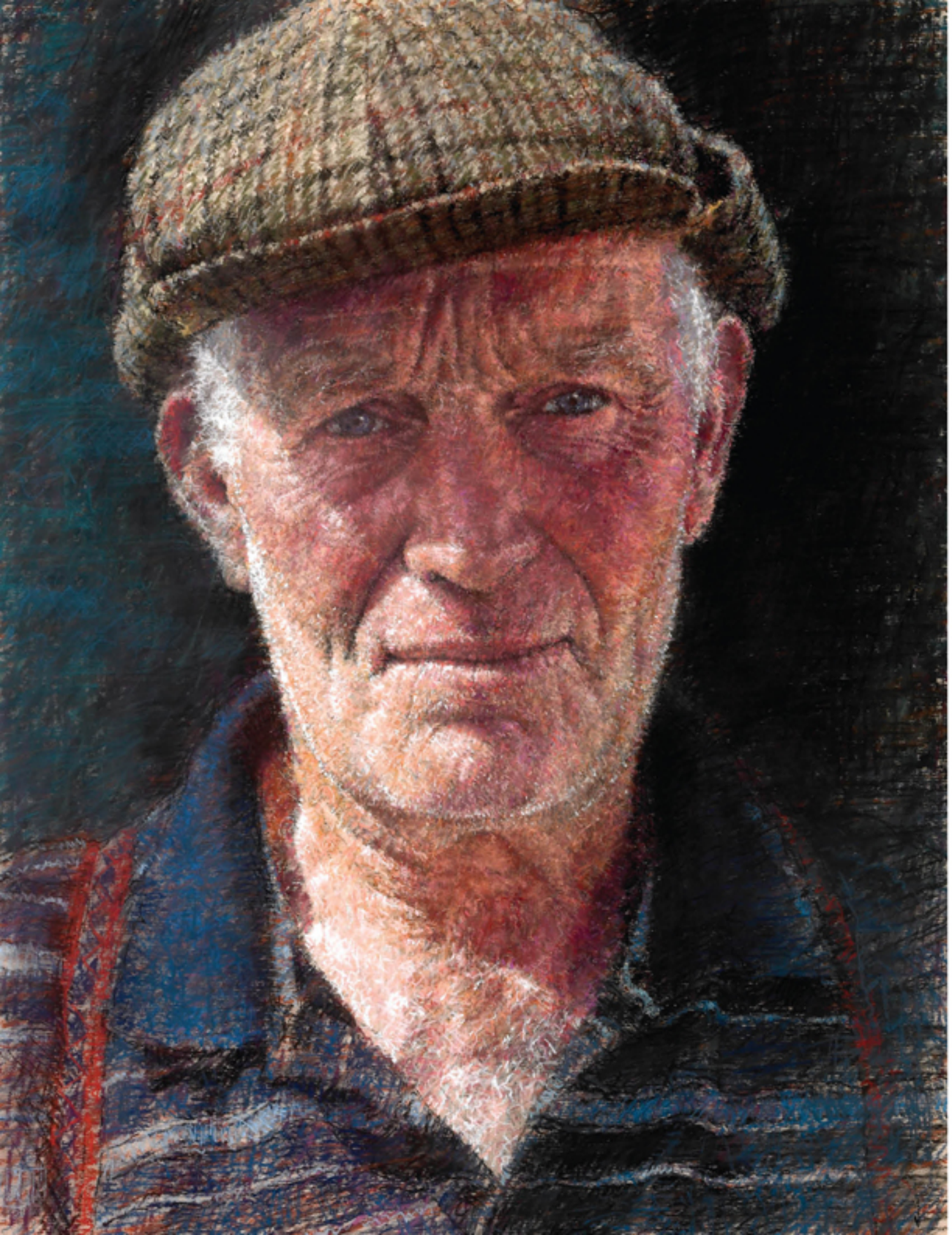
Much is changing and while it could be argued that every generation has its true characters, a distinctive breed of Cumbrian characters is now fast disappearing over the hill. Ivver Sen (ever since) is intended as a celebration of a people and a way of life. It is, hopefully, representative of all the men and the women who for many years have lived and worked the land of the Lake District, one of the most beautiful places on the Planet.

Keith Richardson

IVVER SEN

"The fust time he saw Betty she was clipping a hogg on a stool in the old fashioned way and he thowt 'she's the girl for me' and she's bin wid him ivver sen."

Jonny Birkett, High Yewdale, speaking about his pal George Birkett and his first encounter with his wife to be, Betty Richardson.



Chapter 7

JONNY BIRKETT
High Yewdale

Jonny Birkett in his deerstalker hat. His father originally farmed in Langdale and when the family moved to High Yewdale, near Coniston, in 1940 it was a direct result of Robert Birkett being head hunted, or the 1940s fell farming equivalent of it, by Beatrix Potter.

It's funny how some people judge others on first impressions. Most people will have a fair inkling of whether or not they are going to get on with someone right from the outset and will base their opinion, more often than not, on gut instinct. For Jonny Birkett there's an added twist. He'll also form a view by looking at your choice of footwear and, in particular, whether or not they are clean. And I must admit that it is something I kind of share with this man of the fells, having never been a great fan of slip on shoes with tassels and shiny mock-bronze or silver buckles attached or, for that matter, sandals worn with white socks. Whether I would then take it a step further by taking a dislike to someone with unclean shoes of dubious taste is unlikely, though I would clearly have one or two reservations about their fashion sense. Actions should always speak louder than tassels, buckles and white socks worn with sandals.

Fortunately for me my favoured clodhoppers, a pair of sturdy, dark brown, lace-up brogues (what does that say about me?) passed the Birkett test not once but twice and we got off on the right foot when I met him at his former farm, High Yewdale and then, latterly, at his home in Broughton Beck. You might also catch Jonny taking a look at your hands, the implication being that if they are rough and ready and have seen lots of hard work then you're bound to be all right. If, like me, you have spent most of your working life at a keyboard . . . well, there's clearly no hope.

At this early stage in proceedings I ought to point out that Beatrix Potter, the world famous author and illustrator, did not make a favourable impression on the young Jonny Birkett . . . but I don't think it was a great deal to do with her choice of footwear or, for that matter, her hands.

Jonny's father Robert originally farmed in Langdale and when the family moved from Langdale to High Yewdale, near Coniston, in 1940 it was as a direct result of Robert Birkett being head hunted (or the Forties fell farming equivalent of it) by Beatrix Potter who later bequeathed the farm and its flock of Herdwicks to The National Trust.

"She owned High Yewdale and she knew mi father was quite a shepherd at Side House, Langdale," Jonny explains. "She cem to Langdale three or fower times to see him and the last time she offered to lend him any money he wanted – free of interest – if he would become her tenant at High Yewdale. He said 'til hissell 'I'll not dare borrow any because she'll nivver git paid back', ewes were half a crown apiece then, but he cem to High Yewdale all the sem."

Admittedly, Jonny was only a boy when Beatrix Potter visited High Yewdale but his recollection of her is not entirely complimentary.

"Ah thowt she was like a witch," he recalls. "Dark clothes, clasp clogs. We were all telt to sit back and be looked at but not heard. She used to come and see mi father. She farmed Tilberthwaite hersell and she had men on it and at Hill Top at Sawrey and Troutbeck Farm. Them was the best three farms she had . . . "

Beatrix Potter was passionate about the Herdwick breed and she was the first woman to be elected president designate of the Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association. When she died on December 22, 1943, she left 14 farms and 4,000 acres to the National Trust. She stipulated in her will that the farms she left to the Trust should be let at a moderate rent and that the landlord's flocks of sheep on the fell farms should be pure Herdwick. So it was with a great deal of dismay – and anger in some quarters - that the farming community and others received the news in 2005 that on the retirement of Jonny Birkett and his wife Ruth from High Yewdale Farm, the Trust was effectively going to end the working life of one of those Beatrix Potter farms, and not re-let it to another tenant farmer. The intention was to re-let High Yewdale Farm for residential and rural business purposes. The land and the hefted Herdwick flock would be allocated to a neighbouring farm or farmers.

The Trust contended that the decision was in the best long-term interests and viability of Trust farms in the area as a result of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reforms. The Trust maintained that the world had moved on since Beatrix Potter's day; that 'her legacy changed both during her lifetime and subsequently. Of the 16 farms within the Coniston and Little Langdale area purchased by Beatrix Potter and the National Trust, now only six survive as working farms. High Yewdale, like many of its neighbours, is itself a product of amalgamation and restructuring . . . Beatrix Potter believed that the Lake District should not be fossilised and that it had to change and adapt. Our long term approach means that we are indeed maintaining the Potter legacy.'* The Trust would ensure the historic character and landscape setting of the farm were protected and retained.

After further consideration the Trust stuck rigidly to its original stance in the face of vigorous opposition and a campaign that at one point involved representations being made by Prince Charles, events that prompted the Trust to carry out a report on the future of upland farming in Britain. Campaigners argued that the farm was one of the most viable in the area and splitting it would destroy a unique part of Britain's farming heritage; they saw it as another nail in the coffin of Lakeland hill farming and a wider community already under threat.

High Yewdale Farm was considered by many to be one of the best farms in the

**Words in single quotation marks taken from a letter sent to all National Trust farm tenants in the Coniston and Little Langdale area by the Trust's Area Manager for the Lake District, January 6, 2005.*

High Yewdale.

Lake District. The decision to remove it from the fold was a controversial one that still rankles, especially among the hill farming community. But the deed has been done and the 17th Century High Yewdale Farm and all that it stood for as a working Lakeland fell farm is no more.

We can only speculate as to what Beatrix Potter herself would have thought.

The former farm building and cottage and outbuildings are conspicuous by the side of the road, the A593, just along the way in the direction of Coniston from the well known Yew Tree Farm and its distinctive spinning gallery that was used as a location to portray Hill Top in the filming of the movie 'Miss Potter'. High Yewdale is situated on a bend directly opposite a line of yew trees adjacent to a distinctive dry stonewall made of vertical slabs of slate, reminiscent of gravestones. There are 17 yews in the line, some of them the worse for wear and storm damaged, and they are the source of an amazing story.

Referring to a previous tenant of High Yewdale, Jonny explains: "He had a fit wife and he was fit fella and ivvery time they had a child they planted a tree. Years ago buses used to ga rund the corner theer and the driver would tell them the story and you could hear all the old women on the bus having a good laugh." Indications are that there were 15 trees for their children and two trees for the parents.

Jonny Birkett was born in July 1933 at the previously mentioned Side House Farm, Great Langdale. He was one of four lads and three lasses. Mary, Jessie, George, Ruth and Jonathan (Jonny) were all born at Side House, while Daniel and Robert came into this world at High Yewdale.

"Mi grandfather was at Side House as well," says Jonny. "Ah divvent know what went on before that. Mi other grandfather, they cawd him Myers, he was at Walls End. They originated from Buttermere. Mi great grandmother was a Richardson. Mi mother and Betty Richardson (see earlier chapter 'A Watendlath childhood') were full cousins . . ."

It's a complicated business all this keeping track of family trees and the movement of Lakeland farming families and Jonny soon loses me where his pedigree is concerned.

But Jonny is undeterred and is soon on his way again explaining his family links with various huntsmen.

"Johnny Rich (see chapter Johnny's War) is my mother's full cousin and Anthony Chapman was mi father's full cousin," he adds. "So hunting's in the blood. Tommy Graves (Coniston Foxhounds) was the hardest man I hunted with. He was the fittest. Oh man, he was hard to keep up with and I was fit. I also hunted with the Eshdal hounds. When a hound gave mouth it lifted your blood. I remember when I was five the hounds cem down the valley and mi brother George and mi father set off and I cried because I couldn't keep up. They left us behint . . . "

Jonny's wife Ruth takes up the lament.

"There's nut many old uns left," she says. "Yance ower we used to see a lot of old fellas, the likes of Stan Edmondson, Tommy Graves, Vic Gregg, Sammy Garside. The old lads used to come to High Yewdale on the morning of a hunt and aw stand on the step and have a chat. All the characters have gone and none of the young uns can be bothered."

Ruth's grandmother lived in the old Nag's Head at Wythburn and Ruth (nee Bewley) was born in the school house there and moved to Grasmere when she was 11. She and Jonny met through Young Farmers. In his youth Jonny did not immediately work with his father at High Yewdale. Instead he got a job with The National Trust, planting trees.

"I was gitting two guineas a week," he recalls, "and mi father asked me how much I was gitting. When ah telt him he said 'It'll cost mair than that to keep a fella like thee. Thoo might as well stop at yam and work for me for nowt.' There wasn't much money when we were lads, but it's not how much money you mek it's knowing how to look after it that matters most."

Jonny did not get paid a single penny until he was married to Ruth at Wythburn Church in 1958 when she was 21 and he was 25. They had a daughter, Sarah, and a son, Peter.

"Ruth was terrible lucky," says Jonny. "She met one in a million."

"Aye, the wrong one," says Ruth with a laugh, before adding "I always said when I was little that I was going to be a farmer's wife and have a little girl called Sarah.

And I did and Sarah was my first baby." That same Sarah has given Jonny and Ruth six grand children and a granddaughter.

HM Queen Elizabeth visited High Yewdale in 1985 to help celebrate a National Trust anniversary with the planting of a tree. A marquee was erected at the farm and there was a lunch and speeches.

"It was a very proud day for us," recalls Jonny. "I sheared a sheep for her and I med a speech and presented her with a shepherd's crook and a shepherd's guide (containing all the markings, or smits, of the many Herdwick flocks) so she would know when any of mi sheep got in her back garden at Buckingham Palace."

While the world came to High Yewdale, Jonny was not one for travelling far.

"He won't go across Skelwith Bridge," says Ruth.

That is not strictly true because Jonny once sold 20 Herdwicks at Keswick May Tup Fair to a woman from Sussex and agreed to travel south and shear them at a later date. Jonny hoped that she might in time forget that part of the bargain but then the telephone call came and Jonny and Ruth were on their way. His eventual journey through the Blackwall tunnel was an adventure in itself. His old Landrover would only do a top speed of 42 mph all the way to London and back.

"I'm not keen o'driving," he says, "but ah couldn't ga back on mi word."

Jonny, who has never been abroad, is very much a Lakeland lad at heart and his happiest days on the farm were going out on the fells with his dogs.

"There isn't much we don't know about the Lake District," he adds. "Ivverybody knows JB and ah know ivverybody in t'farming world. If you've done owt wrong there's a cross against yer name for life. So you try and work straight. I might have pinched an apple or two and tekken a fish or two out of t'beck but that's about aw. I did a bit of scrappin' when ah was young – mainly wid tourists – but the police nivver cem. I've had a damn hard life but if I said I hadn't enjoyed it I'd be telling a lie. I was talking to a body at a funeral and she asked me if I would change anything? I said 'no, I don't think I would' and she said I couldn't have said a nicer thing."

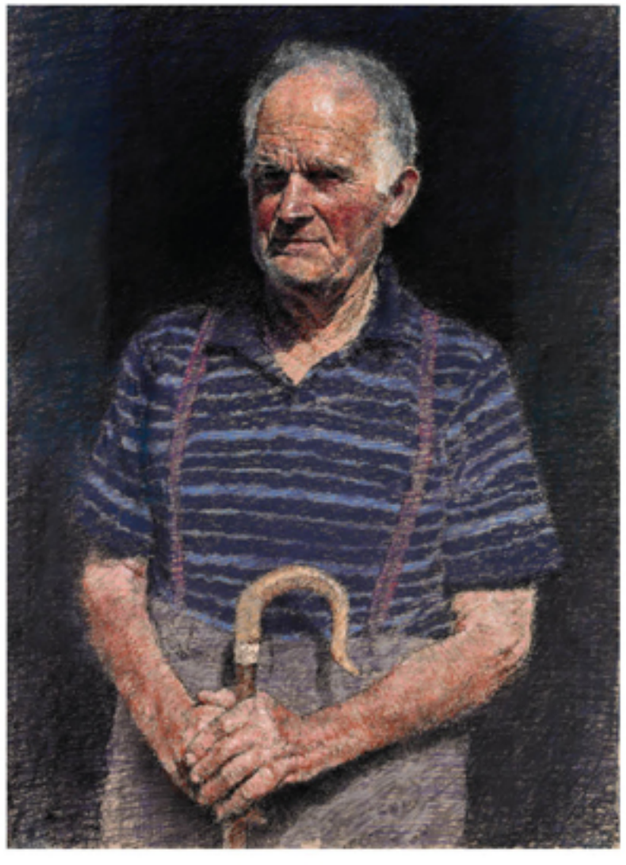
He also, of course, told me the story of the day his old pal, George Birkett first set eyes on his wife to be, Betty Richardson, at Gatesgarth, Buttermere, and in describing the occasion Jonny came up with the quote that provided the title for this book:

" . . . he thowt 'she's the girl for me' and she's bin wid him ivver sen."

Which is also true of Ruth and Jonny.

Like many Cumbrian farming folk they are hard working, hospitable, canny, proud of what they have achieved and philosophical about life and what it brings. They are not the sort of people to dwell unnecessarily on regret but leaving High Yewdale was difficult enough without doing so in the knowledge that their life's work on the farm, spanning 35 years and the raising of a family, and the life and work of Jonny's father before him, was not being handed on in its entirety, beautiful farm buildings and all, to a tenanted farmer, making a fresh start in life – just like Johnny and his father Robert did all those years before at High Yewdale.

The hill farmers of Lakeland are clinging on in a changing world. Sadly, it seems, no farmer will now be adding to High Yewdale's impressive line of yew trees that stretch not just along the boundary of a field but also across the years.



Johnny as he appears on the front cover of 'Ivver Sen'.