



Image by Louise Taylor, taken in Upper Weardale.

Ewan Allinson (sculptor/waller/researcher)

Louise Taylor and Richard Glynn – Photographers

UTASS – project partner

Report on completion of Phase 1 by project-lead Ewan Allinson

Unfortunate timing and an over-wrought approach to recruiting six farmers to participate in the project meant we got off to a stuttering start.

In March of this year, I had a meeting with Diane Spark and Bob Danby at UTASS with a view to creating a shortlist of farmers to write to and put to them the offer of two days of free dry-stone walling in return for me spending time out on the fell with them and recording their thoughts and then to incorporate these recordings into the proposed exhibition.

Photographers Louise Taylor and Richard Glynn will visually reveal these values, spending time with those farmers willing to be photographed.

I drafted a statement and this was emailed out to the shortlisted farmers with a covering letter from UTASS. This was the statement that I sent out:

Hefted to Hill – a request for cooperation

Summary

Hefted to Hill is 2 ½ year project focussing on farming in Teesdale, Weardale and the Gaunless Valley that sets out to capture and communicate the values at the heart of family farming and then use that to influence the terms of policy-making. The confirmed project partners that can help make that happen include UTASS, University of Newcastle, Natural England, and the Centre for Scottish Land Futures. It is funded by lottery money via the Northern Heartlands Great Place Scheme.

Your thoughts on a wide variety of farming issues will be captured in recorded conversations as you, with me in tow, go about your day's work. The photographers Louise Taylor and Richard Glynn will also help capture how values shape the farmed landscapes that are at the heart of our area's identity.

An exhibition incorporating sculpture, text, audio, projection and photography will provide a portrait of each farm and the values which underpin it. This exhibition will do a tour of those churches and chapels across the area that are willing to allow open access. A printed publication "Hefted to Hill" will portray each farm in the farmers' own words and with photographs of farmer and farm. We will seek to produce an academic paper, conference presentations, policy reports, radio podcasts, an online blog and public talks. The testimonies will be archived online in such a way as to give other artists and researchers ease of access to the material.

A note about me.

Originally from Patterdale in Westmorland, I am a freelance sculptor, dry-stone waller and researcher with a degree from Oxford and a Masters from Penn State. Between 2009 and 2015 I lived in Teesdale and built about 5 miles of wall for a number of farmers while also contributing as Vice-Chair to the Heart of Teesdale Landscape Partnership. I was behind the successful symposium Artists, Farmers and Philosophers in 2016.

The process

I want to act quickly so that I'm out of your way before lambing starts.

1. I would like to drop by for a chat in the coming couple of weeks to explain more and answer any questions you have.
2. I would like to spend a full day with you before we embark on the day of recording. Can I suggest that if you have any walling gaps needing fixed before lambing, we could perhaps work together on them. At least that way you get some free walling into the bargain.
3. If you are happy with everything, then some day in late March, early April, we will wear microphones and just talk over the course of a working day, ideally doing something that will involve us going out to different corners of your farm.

I then disappear for a couple of months into the sound-booth and start trying to organise the testimony into themes and get them typed up. At every stage, you will have complete say if there are is anything you want deleted or made anonymous

Sadly, these letters coincided with the Beast from the East which coincided with the beginnings of lambing for many farmers. A moment of greater stress for them would be hard to imagine and my proposal would have been an unwelcome distraction. I also think I complicated matters with my text and made it sound more forbidding than it needed to be.

I do have a network of farmers in Teesdale that I know well but I was keen to recruit farmers I didn't know. And so in April I knocked on the door of Bobby Shann in Middleton – in Teesdale. He is the finest dry-stone waller I have ever met. He is single-handedly responsible for miles of rebuilt walls in Teesdale and is held in the highest esteem by farmers up and down the dale. His imprint of excellence upon the landscape merits a medal. I explained to Bobby my offer to farmers of two free days of walling in return for conversations. The next day he presented me with a list, beautifully written and notated, of six farmers he had phoned who were interested in taking part. Bobby's commendation counts for a lot.

Of the SEVEN farmers now recruited for Hefted to Hill, four are from Bobbie's list, two are already known to me and one was on the original UTASS list who, having originally declined, was then persuaded when he happened to stop for a chat with me while I was walling in Forest in Teesdale as part of this project.

The Participating Farmers

Cockfield, Gaunless Valley	Owner
Upper Weardale	Owner
Middleton in Teesdale	Owner
Ettersgill, Teesdale	Raby tenants
Holwick, Teesdale	Strathmore tenants, retired.
Middleton in Teesdale	Owner
Forest in Teesdale	Raby tenant plus small farm in Baldersdale

The gist of my opening pitch to these hill farmers was to emphasize the sincerity of Northern Heartlands efforts, and licence, to use artists to feed the farmer's voice into policy discussions, to give weight to their overlooked knowledge and nous of the landscape and place, to articulate the values behind their hard work in shaping the landscape and not shying from the spiritual aspect of their connection to their farms. I was able to refer to Addicted to Sheep as a great example of how an artist can capture and communicate values that are otherwise unknown to the public. I know I have won their confidence to undertake this delicate task.

They are all agreed that there needs to be a new covenant between the public and hill farmers that captures people's imagination and which articulates the public goods delivered by them that merit the public money this family-farming sector needs.

All of them have warmed to the title of the project, appreciating the degree to which they themselves are hefted to their farms.

Particular enthusiasm for its scope was expressed by, now retired, tenant farmers near Holwick in Upper Teesdale. They were the driving force behind the founding of Teesdale farming charity UTASS whose national renown is well established.

The bottom-up/top-down traction of Hefted to Hill

Bottom-Up

The potential for Hefted to Hill to become a signature project for Northern Heartlands is dependent upon the degree to which it resonates at both the grassroots level and the meta level. The more it achieves traction on one side, the more it will gain weight on the other.

The farmers now recruited to the project are already advocates for it and are talking about it with other farmers. The further into the project's timeline we progress, the greater will be the degree to which this happens. The proposed sausage casserole event at UTASS in the autumn should attract real interest and help consolidate this grassroots endorsement and provide essential critical input.

The exhibition itself, travelling to six venues across the Northern Heartlands area in summer 2019, will be a golden opportunity to expand the grassroots reach of the project. Bringing the exhibition to some of the coalfield communities can perhaps help bridge some of the historic divides that separate communities whose shared resilience should unite them in the interests of long-term sustainability and having confidence in pride of place.

Top-Down

There are several policy fields for which Hefted to Hill has real potential to influence discussions at the meta level.

Firstly, as one of the specified elements within HLF's Northern Heartlands offer letter, it is a project which HLF will pay close attention to.

Equally, the selection of Northern Heartlands as a Natural England pilot area for their Conservation Plan means that the findings from Hefted to Hill, and the use of the arts to discover and communicate those findings, should feature heavily in their reports and assessment of this pilot.

Over and above this, I have been actively pushing Hefted to Hill within various policy and research networks including:

1. #AALERT (Arts and Artists in Landscape and Environmental Research Today). As a member of the organising committee for this Valuing Nature (<http://valuing-nature.net/>) funded project, I was able to get the tenets of Hefted to Hill scrutinised and discussed at an event at the National Gallery in London in February by a stellar line up of academics and artists. I am active in evaluating and writing up the follow-up to this event, which will be built upon during the next Valuing Nature conference in Cardiff later this year. See my write up of the event for the IALE UK newsletter

<https://iale.uk/arts-and-artist-landscape-and-environmental-research-today-aalert>

2. Understanding Everyday Participation Conference – University of Manchester
<http://www.everydayparticipation.org/call-for-abstracts/>

My abstract regarding Hefted to Hill was selected for this event in June. The abstract read as follows:

Hefted to Hill

Everyday aesthetics in hill farming.

This is a keynote project for the Northern Heartlands HLF Great Place Scheme, in Co. Durham. The scheme's modus operandum is to engage artists to help articulate the cultural values informing people's everyday attachment to place so as to embed those values within policy.

Hefted to Hill focuses on hill farmers, recording their testimony as they, with me in tow, go about their day's work. From rotting carcasses to hay meadows and dry-stone walls, the full reach of the daily-aesthetic will be captured. Photographers are involved and an immersive multi-media exhibition of text, audio and imagery will tour the region's chapels in Summer 2019, showcasing the values inherent in hill-farming and the public goods that flow from them.

While aesthetic theory does inform rural policy, farmers' aesthetic values are never considered. This is an affront rooted in the Kantian roots of that theory. Contemporary redress is being sought. Pauline von Bonsdorff advocates a deference towards farmers, arguing that "the intimate and long-term relationship between farmer and land has the potential to be a norm, rather than the opposite, of an aesthetic appreciation of landscape". Isis Brook observes that the farmer's "quality of attention and the levels of discernment are what we would refer to as connoisseurship."

I will share some of the initial farmer-testimony and see how this pertains to the philosophical challenge explicit within the project, drawing upon John Dewey as a counterpoint to the Kantian status quo.

This event was rooted in a social science approach to understanding everyday life. The conference was very helpful to me in revealing the social science approaches (and the limitations thereof) to valuing everyday life.

My presentation included the following slide:

LANDSCAPE

Justice/Injustice

	PHILOSOPHY	POLICY	GOVERNANCE
<i>Top Dog</i>	Kant Environmental aesthetics	Top Down -Knowledge/ Reports/Papers -General -Ecosystem Services	Top Down 'Experts' <i>coercion</i>
<i>Underdog</i>	Dewey Everyday aesthetics	Bottom Up -Nous/Testimony/ Conversations -Particular -Attachment & identity	Bottom Up Locals <i>collaboration</i>

This schema provided the conceptual basis for my talk and is modelled upon the hourglass model of Northern Heartlands, using the arts to engineer productive flows between the bottom-up and top-down, as per this subsequent slide:

LANDSCAPE

Justice/Injustice

	PHILOSOPHY	POLICY	GOVERNANCE
<i>Top Dog</i>	Kant	Top Down	Top Down
Artists as stirrers	Ranciere: adisciplinarity	Perceived independence	Honest broker/narrative builder
<i>Underdog</i>	Dewey	Bottom Up	Bottom Up

My presentation was well received. I was especially pleased to make the acquaintance of Dr. Patrycja Kaszynska of King's College London who is project manager for the Cultural Value Scoping Project. See:

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/Cultural/-/Projects/CulturalValueScoping.aspx>

Dr Kaszynska is enthused by Hefted to Hill, and its precursor in the symposium Artists, Farmers and Philosophers, remarking that it represents "a genuinely fresh

and novel approach to getting the cultural value inquiry going". She is keen to be involved in any symposium that Northern Heartlands organises around these themes.

3. Individual Scholars

I have been in touch with a host of eminent scholars about the project. These include leading US philosophy/aesthetics professors including Emily Brady, Arnold Berleant, Steven Fesmire, and Tom Alexander, all of whom are engaged by my use of the philosopher John Dewey in articulating farmers' aesthetics and values. In the UK, I am liaising closely with historian Dr Annie Tindley and Professor Sally Shortall, both of Newcastle University with a view to developing the research potential of Hefted to Hill as a PhD application under the AHRC Northern Bridge programme. www.northernbridge.ac.uk

Through an American intermediary, I am establishing contact with innovative farming groups in New England. She has also introduced me to Prof Michael Frisch whose app PixStori could prove a useful digital tool for the project <http://www.pixstori.com/>

I was also put in touch with historical geographer Dr. Sue Shaw at Durham University by Teresa Raine (one of the Hefted to Hill farmers). Sue was Teresa's co-founder of UTASS. She wrote an academic paper on hill farmer suicides and stresses, the publication of which sparked the birth of the charity.

I met up with Sue at Durham Cathedral. In addition to her academic career, Sue had worked at MAFF and DEFRA. She reasoned that the key problem for this project was in having any kind of real impact on policy. She explained that DEFRA has become a weak ministry and has been shedding expertise of the kind that might have been responsive. One wry observation she made was that we had entered an era of policy-based evidence rather than evidence-based policy.

In spite of her pessimism, she felt that Hefted to Hill does have a trump card that would allow it to stand out in a world ruled by data and numbers, and that is the potency of the personal narrative.

4. RSA Food, Farming & Countryside Commission

I have established contact with Lynne Davis, the Engagement Lead for this commission, the publication of which next year will have a significant reach into DEFRA thinking. Lynne's background is in the international Peasant AgroEcology movement, whose focus on family farming makes it highly pertinent for Hefted to Hill. I facilitated a meeting between Lynne and Chris Woodley-Stewart on her recent tour of the North East. I will be liaising closely with her as the project develops. Her interest in Hefted to Hill, with its emphasis on farming values and spiritual values, stems from shortcomings she identifies in the AgroEcology movement, as she explained to me below:

sometimes the social aspects are dropped in academia, so it can be a challenge to communicate the social aspects. But fundamentally there is an indigenous aspect of relationship to land and landscape as sources of life in peasant agroecology. This spiritual aspect is part of the reason the social aspects are sometimes forgotten.

Notes on the next phase.

In terms of Phase 2, the wealth of feedback from farmers and academics thus far has re-affirmed the importance of not being programmatic in the way we go about this. Trust is everything and the project must respond to the material that the farmers give us via the processes to which they have signed up. Their common complaint when asked to contribute to consultations is that in spite of freely sharing their expertise, the farmer's voice is never reflected in the reports and policies that, supposedly, take account of those consultations. Hefted to Hill is an exercise in getting those voices heard, using the arts to present that expertise in a compelling way, able to shift some of the ground within the policy sphere.

The two days of free dry-stone walling that Northern Heartlands has paid me to do for the seven selected farmers as part of Phase 1 has been a perfect way to set things up for Phase 2. This approach has already received plaudits from Alice Kershaw, HLF's Head of Business Process Review who, in a report concluding her Clore Leadership Programme Fellowship, wrote:

Ewan used his skills in dry stone walling to get the insight he needed from local farmers, knowing that they would value this approach and that this action would be the little bit of leverage he could use in order to get what he needed from them. Ewan is an example of the type of leader we increasingly need, he has learnt how to take different approaches in order to lead in a complex world. As he said when I visited him in the Tees Valley, leaders need to work with both 'wit and sweat' to make change happen.

I will be spending two days at each farm. The first day will involve recording a conversation over the kitchen table and in some cases will include family members in that conversation. The second day will involve recording conversations with the farmer him/herself out on the farm.

An arts methodology

If this were a social science project, I'd be going into each conversation with a list of questions which I'd seek an answer to. It would be an interview. This is very different and I don't doubt that the nuggets that will provide the exhibition with some of its highpoints will be the result of strange tangents within the flow of discussion. Getting conversations onto themes of spirituality will not happen by asking questions about spirituality.

There are, however, a set of themes that I will be referring to and seeking discussion on. Most of them have just naturally come up in the unrecorded discussions already had with each farmer. These include:

The nature of their expertise

The public goods they deliver

The values they practice in their farming

How those values have changed

The depth and nature of their attachment – hard work and heftedness

Hefting of sheep/ the character of sheep and cattle

The merits/de-merits of tenancy vs ownership

Post Brexit hill farming – what does it need to address to keep hill farming sustainable in NH area

- what happens to the landscape if it doesn't remain sustainable

Policy over time and its effects on their farms, good and bad.

For the purpose of report-writing, some of the testimony will be transcribed. However, the real power of the material lies in the voices themselves, in the way they say what they say. The Northern Heartlands contains a patchwork of accents and the recordings will capture some of these nuances.

The photography by Louise Taylor and Richard Glynn will provide the real-world context for this treasure trove of voices. Their differing approaches will provide the visual grain, enabling audiences of the exhibition to place these voices in the landscape settings from which they emanate. As such, together we are on course to reveal aspects of farming values and attachment/commitment to place that can help reshape the public view of hill farming locally through the touring exhibition/installation. In choosing chapels and churches as the venues for the exhibition, we will also re-affirm the powerful, though perhaps waning connection between farming and spirituality in the area. The exhibition will become something of a pilgrimage therefore, connecting contemporary farming to the area's religious heritage and doing so via art.

Louise and Richard will take a lead on determining which places of worship will be chosen to host the exhibition over the summer of 2019.

An Additional Element

Not yet fully integrated into the project planning is the need to also create reports/papers on Hefted to Hill which could feed into a spectrum of policy settings.