

# Joyce Dalton, Low House Farm, Ayside – Tracing The Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women

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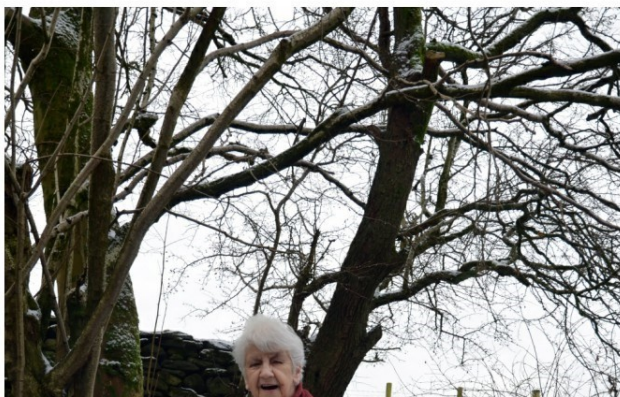
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...researcher from the University of Lancaster, UK, who has been commissioned to respond to her findings and develop a new body of research in response to the exhibition, Tracing the Landscape.



Posted on May 18, 2018 by Natalie Hughes





Joyce Dalton is one of the five farm women who artist Patricia MacKinnon-Day worked with to produce *Tracing The Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women*. You can see this project in exhibition at [Abbot Hall Art Gallery](#) until 9th June.

I met Joyce a few weeks ago at a dinner that had been hosted for the participants of *Tracing The Landscape*. In partnership with her husband Raymond, she has run Low House Farm in Ayside for over sixty years. I did not have much time to chat to Joyce at the dinner so I arranged to meet up with her a fortnight later at her farm. I wanted to hear more about her life in order to fill in the details Patricia had gathered. I put my bike on the train and cycled up from Grange-Over-Sands to spend an afternoon with Joyce and Raymond Dalton.



I asked Joyce how they met. They both grinned bashful teenage smiles. Raymond even blushed.

They had met at a dance in Ulverston. Joyce was sixteen and Raymond was nineteen. He walked her home after the dance, stopping for a chat in a secluded shop doorway before she turned in. Joyce said that, when Raymond kissed her that night, she "melted inside".

Joyce discovered that her father had been watching them say their goodbyes. He wanted to see who she was with – was he decent? Raymond worked alongside Joyce's father as a joiner in a local construction firm. He was a good lad.

"Everything is connected...you ask a question and you'll get a story." Joyce said this a number of times; not in apology or to excuse her rambling, but to explain that nothing should be taken in isolation and that detail was important. The detail knitted together a person's fabric and connected it to other lives and gave it a sense of place.

"My silver dancing shoes were torn to ribbons by the time we got to my auntie's in Ulverston. We had to walk from Barrow." Joyce was telling me about the night Barrow-in-Furnace was bombed during the Second World War: she had been at a dance class with her friend and had no time to change her clothes before her family home was destroyed.

The bombs brought her to Ulverston as a child in a pair of tattered dancing shoes

so that she could grow up to fall in love with Raymond some ten years later at *another* dance. This other dance became the foundations for a life that would build a farm in Ayside, Cumbria.



I listen to these stories whilst sat at a kitchen table eating homemade vegetable soup and looking at photo albums of Joyce and Raymond's grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Behind me are pictures of their prize-winning bulls blu-tacked to a wall-mounted cabinet. Next to this, hung in a corner above their telephone, is a stuffed toy version of 'Crazy Frog', which reminds me of that one-time ubiquitous mobile ring-tone, 2005, and my A-levels in Clitheroe. I am offered a bread roll and I instinctively dip it in my soup. The pair make me feel very at home and remind me a little of my late maternal grandparents: Nana doing all the talking and Grandad speaking only to verify.



I try to steer the conversation towards topics connected with dialect. I want to find out about the language of the area and how it has changed over time so that I can write a blog post to celebrate the particulars of the region and talk about a distinct group of people. However, what I imagine to be an interesting approach to a piece of work, is quickly swept aside as a silly, romantic idea. They had not heard of Cumbric.

Cumbric was a Brittonic language that would have been spoken across the North West of England and the Scottish Lowlands. It was either a dialect of Old Welsh or a separate language that was closely related. Evidence of it comes almost entirely through secondary sources, since there are no contemporary written records.

Whilst Cumbric became extinct centuries ago, remnants of it still linger in place names such as Penrith, Carlisle and Glasgow, which all have Brittonic roots. Then, as with 'Cymru' (Wales), the word 'Cumbria' itself is derived from the common Brittonic word for 'compatriots' (kombroges). Other faint traces are said to have survived in a handful of dialect words and in the 'counting scores' used by shepherds.

I am fascinated by the idea that a dead language is hiding in plain sight within local agricultural slang. Researching this sends me falling through the internet, looking up Youtube videos and trawling through various blogs and Wikipedia pages trying to find real evidence of little bits of living Cumbric. The most useful and credible things I find explain the aforementioned sheep counting system.

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If you look at the comment section of this video you can see someone mention that they "remember [the counting score] being used for sheep auctions in Swaledale in the 1970s". Cumbric's not dead!

Also on my travels I find that the nursery rhyme 'Hickory Dickory Dock' could owe its origins to a version of a Cumbric counting score used the old Westmoreland area – Hevera (8), Devera (9) and Dick (10).

But back to Joyce and Raymond: *Shuttern* was the only dialect word I could get from the pair before the discussion's reins were taken back. A Shuttern is the name for the building where cows are kept during winter. The house we were sat in was itself Shuttern that had been converted by the couple. Joyce explained that they had been converting farm buildings "long before it were the done thing".

The main themes that characterised the conversation were tales of the couple's hard won achievements, of how life had been and how much things had changed. A current concern of theirs is the nearby tourist attraction **The Predator Experience**, which they feel symbolises the area's loss of agrarian tradition. At The Predator Experience you can access falconry courses as well as taking walks with their birds of prey, foxes and a pair of "wolf-hybrid" dogs. The aim is to gain first-hand experience of "natural predators" in a "natural environment". Neither Joyce or Raymond are convinced.

A few years ago The Predator Experience attempted to introduce a pair of cheetahs into the mix. They built an enclosure without planning permission and, according to Joyce, claimed that the cheetahs were vegetarian. It was important that cats were seen as benign herbivores in order to quell local worries about the animals' proximity to livestock and the local abattoir. However, there was a televised interview which caught these cheetahs feasting on chicken!





It is a bizarre image that amuses me a lot: vegetarian cheetahs in rural Cumbria. Online, I find reports from the [BBC](#) and the [The Westmoreland Gazette](#) about this story. I learn that in December 2014 The Predator Experience failed in its bid to obtain retrospective planning permission for its big cats' home "on the grounds that planning officers thought it was 'alien and incongruous' to the surrounding environment." Yet, despite this, plans for a new enclosure were submitted in early 2016 and whilst nothing has been heard since, Joyce and Raymond remain wary of the tourist attraction.

We are in an area whose identity is built on agriculture's ancient routines, which mean even minor disruptions are viewed with suspicion. The deeds to Joyce and Raymond's farm date back to at least the sixteenth century. I do not get chance to see these records but I am told that the earliest are barely legible and written in Latin.

Ayside used to be an area of small family owned farms, whose history could be traced back over centuries. Times have changed and for various reasons, but most notably the commercialisation of farming, this community is dwindling. Joyce tells me that they are now the oldest left in the area but they still do not consider themselves to be authentic farmers since neither come from farming families.

We move into the conservatory with cups of decaf tea and Border brand biscuits, which have been selected for their lack of additives. Joyce is very much into homeopathy and she tries to keep her food as natural as possible.

I am told more stories, this time about Joyce's talent for breeding ponies and bulls. Like herself, she has always tried to treat them without artificial medicine – doctors and vets are a last resort.

Joyce once cured a colleague's pony of colic by feeding it a large dose of her homeopathy pills. A proud grin spreads across her face as she tells me this. She then blows a loud raspberry to indicate the sound of the trump the pony blasted out once the pills had worked their way through its system and restored its health.

Joyce is a formidable woman with a sharp and playful sense of humour. Her tenacity and joy for life is present in everything she does. Their home is full of pictures of family and animals and animal themed ornaments and funny stuffed toys. Raymond catches me looking at a small teddy bear who is dressed as Elton John and positioned in front of a miniature grand piano. He reminds Joyce that she should explain.





Before the couple were farmers, Joyce trained as a seamstress, making petticoats for high-end department stores. She always loved creating things and for years now she has been making teddies for special occasions and to sell at agricultural shows. She also makes her own dresses and the one she is pictured with here is for an upcoming wedding.



It was time for me to leave. Three hours had sped by since I had cycled up the hill from Grange-Over-Sands and I wanted to get back to the train station before the forecasted downpour came. It had already started to drizzle. From the window of their conservatory Joyce and Raymond watched me battle with my cycling jacket, which was flapping around in the wind. Joyce was visibly laughing and this made my struggle to get dressed, worse.

As I cycled towards the coast, through the farmland that had been cut up by the busy A590 by-pass I was reminded of something I had recently read in a book – *The Shepherd's Life (2015)* – by James Rebanks:

"The past and present live alongside each other in our lives, overlapping and intertwining until it is sometimes hard to know where one ends and the other starts"

He describes how little shepherding in the common land of the Lake District's fells has changed. Its routines have remained the same for centuries. Cumbric counting scores are also evidence of these long standing traditions. Thinking about this and the nearly medieval deeds Joyce and Raymond have to document their farm further cements my appreciation of the stubbornness present in Cumbrian farming.

However, things are changing and a way of life is quickly disappearing. It is easy to get nostalgic about "the good old days" and romanticise a way of life that was, in reality, tough and unforgiving. Yet when Google Maps decides to lead me cycling onto the A590, in the rain, with large freight lorries trundling past, I can not help but feel a strange sense of disconnect (and fear).

Raymond had told me that when they were building the road they had mercilessly torn up ancient farmlands whose deeds would have been as old as theirs. Something that had lived in continuum for ages was now coming to an abrupt stop. It has either been flattened by the necessity of efficient transportation or changed to attract tourists or forced out of small family business due to the commercialisation farming. Of course we must move on, but at what cost? I am getting really wet now.



Arriving Grange-Over-Sands train station, I meet a dead end in the form of a rail strike. I am booked into a hostel in Arnside some seventeen miles away. On a sunny day and without a backpack, cycling this distance would be a joy, except it is still raining and I am carrying luggage and my bike and I have been traveling around the country for the past few days. I am pretty tired.



I make it to Arnside, soaked. Eat fish and chips. Rest. Then I cycle to Lancaster the following morning to get a train back home to Liverpool.

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I think about Joyce: all her achievements and the skills she mastered for the pure joy of them – she barely made any money from breeding ponies, she just loved doing it. For Joyce, I think farming has given her the community and platform to really be herself. The physical demands of the work mixed with its unpredictability and sense of autonomy proudly shines through this eighty-year-old woman. In equal partnership with her husband she has built a life that reflects her character.



To find out more about Cumbrian farm life and the women who work in it, visit [Tracing The Landscape: Cumbrian Farm Women](#) at Abbot Hall Art Gallery in Kendal.


– Natalie Hughes

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