



A Welsh working landscape

Written by FUW Head of Policy Dr Nick Fenwick for the Spring 2018 edition of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales magazine

As the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales celebrates its 90th birthday, the Welsh farming industry finds itself in the greatest period of uncertainty seen for generations, with the imminent release from the bonds of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy seen as an opportunity for politicians, non-governmental organisations, charities and others to push forward their own varied agendas, many of which would change the face of rural Wales for ever.

At the centre of the issue, yet often forgotten amidst academic discussions over trade deals, World Trade Organisation rules and all else post-Brexit, are the 16,000 or so Welsh farming families and the many thousands more working in related industries who form the cornerstone of Wales' rural economy, culture and landscape.

In an age where people move around so much, and ideas about our rural history are more likely to have been picked up from TV programmes and Sunday newspaper articles than from knowledge passed down through generations, it's easy to forget that the majority of Wales' farming families were working the same land - or land nearby - not just 90 years ago, but as likely as 900 years ago.

For those families, the changes seen over the past century have been massive, with mechanisation, successive government policies and economic pressures changing the industry arguably more than in the previous century.

But in spite of the sort of views propped up by ingrained associations between Wales, its mountains and its sheep, the changes which have occurred since the year of CPRW's inception are very different to current popular ideas of wild Welsh mountains ravaged by sheep.

Farmers in their 80s and 90s complain that many of the hill pastures they and their forefathers once shepherded have become overgrown and void of wildlife due to falls in livestock numbers, while from Anglesey to Monmouthshire - 'o Fôn i Fynwy' - they remember with affection the camaraderie, hard toil, dangers and dust of long gone harvests which were once part and parcel of both the farming and social calendar.

In 1928, the area utilised in Wales for the production of crops was around 355,000 acres - around half what it had been in the 1870s. By 2016 the figure had fallen by around 40% to 220,000 acres, with vast reductions in the production of oats and mixed corn making up the lion's share of the fall.

This change, driven by economic factors, was significant in hill and lowland areas alike, and was part of a complex set of changes that led to livestock numbers in lower-lying parishes in particular increasing many-fold.

Yet the association between sheep and mountains has, in the minds of the public, placed the increase firmly in Wales' wild uplands.

Such ideas, with sheep taking the central role as villain, are as manna from heaven for those who see Wales' mountains as the perfect blank canvas on which to 'recreate' the post-ice age upland landscape cleared by Wales' first farmers some five thousand years ago.

Given where such ideas emanate from, those families who have farmed such land for millennia rightly question whether the arguments favouring the choice of Wales as the ideal 'blank canvas' for such an

experiment - rather than other areas similarly impacted by humans, such as Oxfordshire or Hyde Park - are merely a convenient cover for a modern form of colonialism.

And for many, the environmental damage done to vast swathes of our uplands by the previous well-meaning - and arguably more economically valid - policies of the Forestry Commission during the 20th Century is still a raw memory.

The imminent loss for upland farmers of the protection provided through the Common Agricultural Policy has not gone unnoticed: At one end of the spectrum, a host of bodies see an opportunity to impose 'wilding' type agendas on large areas, either by influencing policy makers or through direct acquisition, helped along by financial hardships, negative equity and falls in land prices. Meanwhile, the same anticipated falls raise hopes for some with interests in commercial forestry of a bonanza which could bury entire farms in softwoods, as happened in Wales during periods of the last century.

Such policies would naturally have a further devastating impact on those species which rely on open mountains and moorland being grazed by livestock, but under some policy scenarios those currently farming such land would be at least be left with some form of income.

Potentially more at risk are the families who make up the majority, both in the uplands and lowlands, whose farms are generally smaller and made up largely of fields, with little or no mountain pasture; the post-Brexit 'payment for delivering public goods' policies proposed by governments on both sides of Offa's Dyke will need to be particularly clever to avoid extreme economic impacts for such holdings and the innumerable businesses which rely on them.

Referring to such threats can be described as pessimism, but without such recognition it is impossible to ensure the dangers of a post-Brexit world are not exacerbated by idealistic, superficially well-meaning policies which take no account of the true economic, social and environmental structure of rural Wales.

Conversely, given a well-founded, thoroughly investigated policy, we have the opportunity to ensure the interests of food production, wildlife, landscape, forestry, culture and all the other public benefits our communities provide continue to complement each other, and are not compromised once we leave the European Union.

Central to such a policy must be to ensure that our landscape remains a working one, and that the farming families and those people, businesses and industries which rely on them are retained; without these, the rural Wales to which CPRW has devoted 90 years will be left a shell of what it once was, and little more than a museum for English tourists.



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