Happy Birthday Spot On - from The Forest of Bowland

The Forest of Bowland has been host to Spot On for many years, I have two particularly fond memories that stand out: one was sitting in the back of a VW camper van in the car park of the pub at Newton in Bowland with a couple of friends (it was a very select audience!) listening to stories and mix tapes from the driver. The other was at a packed village hall in Dunsop Bridge where 'Sward' was performed after being originally commissioned by our colleagues in the North Pennines AONB for their 'Haytime' project – it was a wonderful evening.

I always feel that The Forest of Bowland has a magical ring to its name. Like something from a storybook, you imagine it has castles surrounded by dense thorns and wolves, with princesses to be rescued. I remember the first time a friend visited it many years ago and came home to tell me it was just 'like the Yorkshire Dales must have been 50 years ago: quiet, hidden and remote.' Happily, I found Bowland for myself soon after, first as a visitor and then fortuitously when job hunting and under threat of redundancy. I came to work for the 'ANOB team' in 2004 and I stayed for over 20 years.

The Forest of Bowland was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1964 in recognition of its wild sweeping moorland, remote villages and undulating pastureland. Protected for the nation, it has remained somewhat remote for the last 60 years, unknown and often bypassed. With its long history of large private landed estates, many of them with grouse moors, the area did not become popular with the ramblers, fell runners and hikers of the twentieth century as it was very often portrayed as 'closed' to the public. So, apart from the much loved and well visited Pendle Hill, the footpaths here are less well trod than you would expect; but they are perhaps more beautiful for that. And therein lies the problem: Bowland is an area that is protected for the nation and yet not really enjoyed by it to the full. Where are the wide range and large numbers of people who live nearby in the towns and urban areas of Lancashire, Greater Manchester and North and West Yorkshire. Why are they not accessing this beautiful place?

In our work on regenerative tourism, health and wellbeing and inclusion we have identified that the reasons are many and complex. Yes, the physical distance is difficult to overcome without a car; but the knowledge, confidence and time required to access this landscape are also barriers. What will it be like when I get there? What is there to do? What do I need to bring with me? Are we allowed to walk and picnic there? People need good information before they will visit, a gentle introduction with support on hand and a warm welcome provided by hosts and business owners. We try to provide that, and to encourage more people to try a Bowland experience for themselves the next time around.

As for the folk that live and work in the National Landscape, as it is now called, Bowland is a familiar and much-loved place. Despite the physical, and often social, isolation; the lack of public transport and the long round trips to secondary school and supermarket, it remains a vibrant living landscape. True, many farmsteads are physically isolated and digitally excluded, and only some villages are lucky enough to have a pub or a shop (but rarely both). Communities are car-dependent and often oil dependent too, with little access to gas. But they are a resourceful lot! The landscape and villages may still look 'old fashioned' but I can show you robot milkers, regenerative farming practice, gigabit full fibre rural broadband installed by farmers, and village halls run on renewable energy. Time has not stopped here, life may be a bit slower, but change does come.

As in many rural communities the social capital of Bowland is high. Residents are used to dealing with weather related emergencies by themselves: 3 days without power during winter storms is not unheard of and snow ploughing by tractor or digger is pretty commonplace too. This year the annual Hodder Valley Show was cancelled a couple of days before it was due to be held as the ground was flooded. Volunteers swung rapidly into action to relocate the public luncheon to a village hall and the horticultural and crafts were moved to a massive barn for judging and viewing. The day was saved and proved to be very enjoyable too!

Looking to the future I think the most likely changes we will see here will be to the landscape itself. Farming is tough here, the weather is sometimes harsh, increasingly 'unseasonable' and profit margins are fine. With ongoing climate change and the recent changes in financial support and incentives from the Government, many farmers are going to have to reassess how they can make ends meet. There is talk of 'land use zoning' and the possibility that protected areas like this may in the future be earmarked for nature rather than food production. How will this be realised? Many farmers argue that if we remove the cows and sheep then wildlife will not magically return, much is dependent on the farming processes that have been in place for generations. Without the grazing, mowing and managing, the fells and lowlands will become weed infested and unattractive to nature and to humans. Is that true? Can farmers instead be supported to manage their land with nature and beauty as a priority and food production as a secondary income? What would the landscape look like without the livestock, with more trees and woodland: would it still be beautiful, would nature thrive?

SPOT ON

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The grouse moors are in a similarly precarious state. Climate change has definitely had an impact on the breeding success of red grouse and other game birds in recent years. The record-breaking bags of the early 20th century, nearly 3000 birds shot in one day on the Abbeystead estate in 1915, are a thing of the past: how could that ever be sustainable? Heather beetle infestations and poor weather have already reduced the number of shooting days experienced on many estates and this impacts on the income generated versus the costs incurred in managing the moors and rearing the birds. There are only so many years you can forgo an income from your land, even if you are amongst the wealthy elite of this country. So, what could the moors support instead? Could the peat covered Bowland fells become the functioning carbon sinks we aspire to, a haven for raptors and wading birds, a hotspot for wildlife tourism safaris? But if so, what of the infrastructure and habitat management required, what of the wildfire risk, what of the impacts of human disturbance and the loss of the wilderness we look for? It's maybe not as simple as we first thought.
An unpredictable future then, but one that we hope can exist in a landscape just as outstandingly beautiful as today.

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