

Sheep Pens

I am interested in making work that explores the ancient relationship between humans and sheep. I think this relationship tells us something about who we are as people and the pull between hunters and pastoralists that still intrigues us. I like the way traces of this old relationship comes down to us, here, locally in the structures built to husband sheep. In upland Northumberland most of the land is given over to sheep farming, too sparse and thin for other farming. Beyond settlements almost all of the stone structures here relate in some way to the human-sheep ecosystem.

Stells, stone sheepfolds are emblematic of the ancient Northumbrian landscape, as much a part of it as its water, bracken, heather, grass and wind. A stell is usually a low, thick-walled rough-stone ring, broken by a narrow entrance. Almost ageless, and found in the remotest places, they are strong and squat enough to have survived the interminable buffering of sheep and wind.

Sheep pens are different. Mostly made from wood, these are the places where sheep are gathered to be dipped and sheared. These present themselves as more complex structures, often sited in a way that exploits the lie of the land - a dip or valley where sheep can be more easily gathered, or built against an existing structure such as a stone wall. Sheep pens can look provisional, even improvised. The most rudimentary are an amalgam of what comes to hand - corrugated iron sheets, broken gates, old pallets tied up with gaudy nylon twine. Usually some strands of rusting barbed wire. Others are more organised, expanding into a complex maze of channels and pens.

Pithily described as 'three dimensional flow charts', sheep pens are functional, evidence of their utility in the present moment captured by tufts of wool caught on barbed wire, plastic containers scattered around, a forgotten crook hanging on a gate. One, submerged amongst sorrel and nettles is nothing more than rusting gates held together with bailer twine. Another - this one marked on the OS map and spreading out maze-like over a valley floor, has a more municipal feel with a complex system of stocks, cantilevered traps, pulleys and built-in concrete dips. All pens bear the signs of continual use, the constant buffering of sheep eventually wearing down even the strongest wooden structures, with a palimpsest of new timbers replacing old ones. But even if the latest formulation of a pen is new, its antecedents may have occupied the same site beyond living memory. All have in common their total absence of embellishment or adornment. They are anonymous. Their geometry speaks only of use. These strange rural elaborations are the antithesis of art.

Drawing

Drawing seems a good way to think through these structures: it has the capacity to be diagrammatic, and systematic, but at the same time expressive, combining intensely worked passages with sparer fields. A drawing can be read from left to right, as though on a scroll, or viewed from above, like a plan. Drawings are good carriers of information. Making a drawing, particularly a large one is a process that leaves on its surface evidence of its making - smudges, pencil shavings, rubbings out and other erasure marks. I think of these drawings as having been 'made' in a way that's analogous to the subject matter, so I've included scraps of material taken direct from the site: - dried buttercups and twists of bailer twine.

Buttercups.

June of 2021 was, according to local knowledge particularly buttercuppy in Tasset. Some combination of weather effects must have encouraged their early summer bolt more strongly than usual. In full sunlight the hay fields were iridescent and glimmering. Buttercups have a unique structure amongst plants. The top layer of each petal is extraordinarily smooth. Just one cell thick, it contains pigments that absorb blue light and reflect yellow light. Gently anchored beneath this layer is a thicker starch layer. Pockets of air between the two creates the glossy sheen that enables buttercups to be so reflective – the same mechanism apparently that gives the sheen to soap bubbles and oil slicks.