
Opening Extract from...

Seasons of My Life

Written by Hannah Hauxwell

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SEASONS OF MY LIFE

Tales from a solitary Daleswoman

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with Barry Cockcroft

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INTRODUCTION

The message on my desk from a Yorkshire Television researcher was brief and very much to the point:

'Some friend of mine hiking the Pennine Way met a woman called Hannah Hauxwell living alone on an isolated farm in Baldersdale. No electricity, no water, good talker, could be worth a look!'

Alone, with neither water nor electricity? It was early summer in 1972 and I was putting together ideas for a series tentatively titled 'The Hard Life'. This lady's life sounded pretty hard.

Since the opening of Yorkshire Television in 1968 I had been working the Yorkshire Dales as often as possible. Urban life had no appeal for me so I began to make short films among the hill farmers and other Dales characters for inclusion in *Calendar*, the daily news and current affairs programme for the region we served. This thread developed into a regional series of

twenty-to-thirty-minute programmes called *Country Calendar*, which had an immediate and very gratifying impact on the viewers. The local Press began to comment very favourably, and *Yorkshire Life* magazine even invited me to write about my films. Other independent television stations began to transmit them, so gradually they went network, coast to coast across the country.

Consequently, the head of the documentary department, John Fairley, and I sat down to try and analyse what it was about *Country Calendar* which had appealed to the public. What was the essence? John Fairley pinpointed it . . . it appeared in his judgement that it was to do with hardship and loneliness. Sequences featuring shepherds spilling sweat on the fells, Dalesfolk suffering extremes of weather as a matter of course, small people in a huge, beautiful but often hazardous landscape had excited the interest of viewers and television journalists alike. A phenomenally large postbag reinforced this view. So I was charged to seek out more Dalesfolk who lived a hard and lonely life. I briefed researchers in the department to let me know if they picked up any leads.

Thus, when I am asked (and it happens frequently) how I ever managed to find Hannah Hauxwell, a totally unknown figure at the top of an isolated and mainly abandoned Yorkshire dale, I can honestly say

that I was, in a way, specifically looking for her, or people like her.

I very nearly didn't find her, as it turned out. That memo on my desk led me to the bottom of Baldersdale on one blustery July day. It looked a very empty place. Driving slowly along I came across a solitary figure examining the quality of his grass (it was nearly time to cut the hay) and solicited his aid.

'Hannah Hauxwell? Eh, lad! She lives at a place called Low Birk Hatt, but it's right near the top of the dale. Tha'll nivver find 'er!'

But I kept trying. I travelled some miles further along a road which wound sinuously along a truly attractive dale (and by then I was something of a connoisseur) augmented by the glistening waters of what I took to be a lake (it was actually Hury Reservoir, which wanders at length). Then I came across a sign which marked the Pennine Way, but it was pointing towards the high moors, where only Swaledale sheep can survive. Clearly that was the wrong way, so I began to follow the route in the opposite direction, abandoning the car when the unmown grass and rutted track began to scrape heavily against the exhaust system. By necessity, I had to climb over several dry-stone walls which were crumbling from a generation's neglect, dislodging the occasional half hundredweight on to my shins, and came to a ridge. The prospect it

revealed was distinctly unpromising. I could see two farmsteads in the distance, and both appeared to be abandoned. The sky had darkened ominously, and the kind of keen breeze which presages rain sprang up.

I considered the situation carefully, and came close to abandoning the project and seeking prospects other than this Hannah Hauxwell from a fairly long list. But I plunged over yet another trembling dry-stone wall and chose, for no particular reason, to head for the farm on the left.

The nearer I approached, the less promising it became. There was no smoke issuing from the chimneys, the paths were overgrown, the slate roof of the barn was in a state of disrepair, and there was neither sight nor sound of life.

Quite suddenly a curious figure appeared from the rear of the farmhouse and began walking towards a pile of stones in the middle of the side pasture. A woman with hair as white as a pensioner's, wearing what appeared to be several layers of carefully laundered rags. It was a sight which stopped me short. I watched spellbound for a moment – she hadn't noticed me – then cleared my throat and said, 'Er . . . Miss Hauxwell?'

She reacted like a roe deer on hearing an approaching predator, appearing to levitate about two feet in the air. I thought for an instant that she was going to

flee across the fields, taking the boundary walls in her stride. I was not aware at this time that her life was so solitary that she could go two weeks without seeing a soul.

Hastily, I explained who I was, and the nature of my visit. She relaxed immediately and smiled in that seraphic way which would later transfer to celluloid and stir the emotions of a large section of the English-speaking world. The greeting she extended was delightfully antiquated, almost Victorian, in its mannerisms. She talked animatedly, clearly eager for conversation, and showed me around her house as she innocently described an extraordinary lifestyle, totally devoid of the comforts and standards everyone else takes for granted. The farmhouse was lit by oil lamps, the water was drawn from a stream running forty yards from her front door. Further upstream, a cow up to its hocks in the same water . . .

A couple of mesmeric hours later, I bade her farewell, and began the long trek back to Leeds and the Yorkshire Television studios. This time I knew I had a film from the Yorkshire Dales which would go straight on to the network.

But nobody at that stage, however fevered the imagination, could have forecast the impact Hannah Bayles Tallentire Hauxwell would have on the public.

ONE

Baldersdale – A Classic Yorkshire Dale

Baldersdale, one of the tributary valleys of Teesdale, has been home to the various branches of the Hauxwell family for several (maybe countless) generations. It is a Yorkshire dale in a classic sense with sweeping contours and a fierce beauty on the grand scale, although in recent years it has been placed in County Durham (not that locals pay any attention to such cultural vandalism). But Baldersdale does have one extra visual blessing rarely seen in the Dales – water. Hury Reservoir was built a century or so ago and it stretches sinuously up a major portion of the valley. The eastern fells are reflected along its surface by day and the moon by night. The only other substantial piece of water in the western dales is Lake Semer Water, near Bainbridge, in Upper Wensleydale.

Baldersdale possesses another significant factor – it is a closed place. You can enter from the main road running along Teesdale but there is no way through at the top of the dale, unless you travel on horseback, or on foot, if you possess the stamina and know how to

use a compass. No one just passes through Baldersdale, and this clearly played a major part in preserving its isolation in the days when it was a full and vibrant community, as, indeed, it certainly was. Today the place echoes with emptiness, its brown stone dwellings and farmhouses mainly abandoned, some neglected and crumbling, others no longer in existence. There are no children to educate so the schoolhouse is now a youth centre, the chapel no longer has its worshippers, the pub is now a farm.

But Hannah can vividly recall Baldersdale in its finest days, as a place where the full theatre of life was played out. She can even recall the minutiae which put flesh on the bones of memory – speech mannerisms, individual eccentricities and habits, clothing, names (even nicknames), hairstyles . . . everything. She builds up a full and fascinating portrait of a community with an acute sense of history which gives her descriptions a unique dimension.

As Hannah moves fluently along her journey into the past, what emerges most strongly to the listener is a sense of privilege – that here is a survivor of a lost way of life which was so innocent and simple, so materially deprived, yet spiritually rich, that it might have been part of another civilization altogether, surviving from an earlier century, perhaps. Such was their isolation that their way of life hardly reflected at

all the kind to be found just a dozen miles away. Baldersdale was largely unaffected by contact with outside influences – to travel further than Barnard Castle, a prim and pretty little market town which could scarcely claim to be cosmopolitan, was virtually unheard of, and such visitors as there were never stayed long enough to impart revolutionary new ways and ideas. The horse and not the internal-combustion engine provided the principal method of transport, and day-to-day living was based on unremitting toil and self-sacrifice. The land they tilled and the animals they raised absorbed most of their working hours. It was a constant battle, fuelled by the basic survival instinct which kept men moving ahead over thousands of years towards what we are pleased to call modern civilization today. In Baldersdale that process gathered no speed at all and, indeed, never even crossed the finishing line.

The entire community was also welded together by two other elements. The knowledge that the only help you could expect in times of trouble or need would have to be sought from a near neighbour; and, even more fundamental, the bond of blood. Dalesfolk around the first half of the century tended to marry within their close community, so nearly everyone was related to nearly everyone else. Hannah's parents were half-cousins and there were many convoluted

relationships. For instance, in Chapter Five of this book Hannah records that her piano teacher's father and her, that is Hannah's, grandmother were cousins! How on earth that evolved is probably a relativity equation comparable with Einstein's.

A century ago, Baldersdale had a population numbering several hundred and supported a blacksmith, two pubs and even a small flour mill. It had declined substantially by the late thirties but was still a thriving place compared with the Baldersdale of today.

Oh yes, Baldersdale was a busy place in my childhood, full of people. There was always someone in the next field to say 'Hello' to, and the school, which had two teachers, usually had more than thirty children in attendance. There must have been more than twenty farms, plus the school, the chapel and the Strathmore Arms. They used to hold Hury Show in a field alongside the pub, and there was a wooden hut called the Show Room to be used on the big day, where dances were also held on a regular basis.

Low Birk Hatt Farm has always been home for my family. No one else has ever lived here. Although I was born at Sleetburn further up the dale, I came here when I was three years old, so I do not recall any other place as home. We used to rent it from the Kipling

family before Daddy bought it, but even my great-grandfather William Bayles farmed at Low Birk Hatt.* It was a mixed farm, with cattle, sheep and geese. I remember my uncle Tommy Hauxwell, who came to live with us to manage the farm after Father died, telling me about the time Great-Grandad bought a big flock of geese over in Stainmore, which is more than six miles away over the moors. And he drove them home all the way, presumably with the help of his dogs. Uncle said he will never forget as a little boy the sight of all these geese coming over the hill beyond our top pasture.

He must have been quite an enterprising business-man, my great-grandad, because he ran the butter cart in Baldersdale. It was red in colour and had much bigger wheels than the ordinary farm cart. A mare called Smiler used to pull it, and he would collect all the butter and eggs in the dale to take to Barnard Castle. He would call on some farms and others would bring what they had to sell down to Low Birk Hatt. I've heard that this farm was a very busy place on Tuesday nights and Wednesday mornings and the kitchen would be piled high with eggs and butter. Then Great-Grandad would drive the lot down to

* The Kiplings probably built and certainly owned Low Birk Hatt, but never lived there, according to Hannah.

Barnard Castle to get the best price he could in the marketplace.

People would turn up again in large numbers on Wednesday nights to be paid for their produce. Naturally Great-Grandad would take a share, a sort of commission for his trouble, if you like. And he would bring back goods from the market, such as meal, and sell or exchange that for what the Dalesfolk had brought. The old system of barter, I suppose.

Great-Grandfather was running a farm at the same time, so he must have been a very busy man. And life was quite a struggle for everyone, it seems. I'm going back now to before the First World War, sometime in the early years of this century. But I do know that when times were bad, the people in the dale had to use the wool off the backs of the sheep themselves instead of sending it away to the wool merchants of Bradford after shearing. They would make more money that way.

We had a spinning wheel at Low Birk Hatt – it may be still around the place somewhere – and the whole family would spin the raw wool and then knit it into stockings, gloves, jumpers and skirts. I do believe that in years gone by they paid the annual rent for Low Birk Hatt by spinning and knitting.

Eventually the Kiplings put Low Birk Hatt up for sale and there is a sad and curious story associated with

this. It concerns my great-aunt Jane Bayles, who was my father's mother's sister and lived at Hury at the bottom of the dale. She was both a clever woman and a fool at one and the same time. Her sister, my great-aunt Margaret Bayles, married a Dalesman called George Brown, and lived at Blackton Farm. They hired a man with red hair called John Bell to catch the moles which were plaguing their land. From what I can gather he was as mad as a hatter, and really no good at all. He was what we called 'a hook', which means a slippery fish.

Anyway, Great-Aunt Jane shared everyone's low opinion of John Bell for a time, even going as far as to declare that he wasn't right in his head. And then, would you believe it, she went and married him. I gather from the little bits of information which came my way that the match was a disaster. I do know that he outlived Great-Aunt Jane and he made a lot of trouble by claiming items of property to which he had no right. He brought nothing at all into the marriage, and the family wanted nothing to do with him. I heard that Uncle Tommy was in Barnard Castle one day when someone asked him, 'Are ye owt 'a kin to yon John Bell?' Uncle denied it and when challenged said, 'Aye, he might have wed my aunt but that doesn't mek 'm owt 'a kin to me.' He was a real pest, and thank goodness he and Great-Aunt Jane had no children.

But Great-Aunt Jane did a very strange thing. My father and mother were living at Sleetburn, where I was born, with my grandparents and a great-uncle, when Low Birk Hatt came up for auction. Daddy wanted that farm very badly but they didn't have much money between them, so he had to go to the bank and ask for a loan. And then – what a lunatic thing to do – Great-Aunt Jane began to bid against my father at the auction for Low Birk Hatt. Uncle Tommy always said that there was insanity in the family, so that incident proves it, if nothing else.

Goodness only knows why she did it, but it put the price up, of course. It was knocked down to Father for £1,600, which in those days – it was the 1920s – was a very high price. I do know that he became very depressed when the times were bad and he had the mortgage payments to meet. It was a great struggle for him and we all suffered because of it.

Oddly enough my father allowed Great-Aunt Jane and John Bell to live at Low Birk Hatt after he had bought it. I cannot imagine why. But I do know *that* great-aunt was not exactly popular after the incident of the farm sale, and eventually John Bell left her so her brother, Great-Uncle William, came to work the farm.

It was always considered necessary for a man to shoulder the main burden of work at a farm the size of ours, and I suppose the main reason why the place is

a bit run down these days is because there was no man left to take over when Uncle died. I had to do it all by myself.