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Dalesfolk: John Sayer

PEFORCE, this column is often about the past: when you write about people's lives, they tend to look backwards. For a change, then, we will today look towards the future...

In particular, the future of upland farming, which is at present in a state of total chaos yet which is of fundamental importance to the Yorkshire Dales.

Having spent the past spring and summer writing about foot and mouth, with its non-stop series of rumour, allegations and contradictory statements, I am confused (a feeling, I am sure, shared by hundreds if not thousands of readers).

I do not know what the future holds for our hill farmers so I went to see a man who hopefully does: John Sayer, lifelong tenant farmer and adviser to governments, the NFU, national parks, English Nature and many other bodies.

And he told me forcefully: "Upland farming must survive for if it goes down it will take tourism with it. Without the two, there is absolutely no future for areas like this..."

We were sitting in the summerhouse in his garden off the village green at Arncliffe, as the sun beamed through lines of cumulus clouds skidding over Littondale. With a wave of his hand around the hills, he added: "And this is too important for the nation as a whole to be allowed to go back to bracken, bog and scrub."

Now John Sayer, MBE (for services to agriculture and conservation) admits he is something of an optimist - "my bottle is half full rather than half empty."

And, as he approaches 70, he has needed that optimism in a life that was far from a bed of roses. The son of tenant farmers from Wensleydale, his family moved to Buckden when he was a schoolboy and he went to Ermysted's Grammar School in [Skipton](#).

He hoped to go to university but his father died when he was 17 and he was forced to quit his education to run the family farm. Cash was short and he took a job with the now scrapped MAFF touring the whole of the old West Riding inspecting newly born calves.

Those which didn't meet MAFF standards would receive no subsidy, so his judgement meant money was at stake - "my parentage was called into question on more than one occasion," he chuckles.

But he yearned to be back on the farm with his wife Elaine, mother of their two daughters, so - much to the derision of his MAFF colleagues - he took the tenancy of Low Rylands Farm, Arncliffe - "they said I would never make a living in the Dales. I should take a dairy farm in Cheshire."

Cash, if anything, was even tighter. They had trouble selling their house and a Buckden well-wisher - unbidden - sent him a cheque to buy stock until the house was sold. So, once again, he began the hard toil of making a living out of rented land in an area where geography and the elements have to be battled as well as stubborn beef cattle and sheep.

But his stay with MAFF had widened his horizons and he began to get involved in what he calls "the politics of agriculture."

He served on the NFU Hill Farming Committee for 24 years and for 12 was on the Minister of Agriculture's hill farm advisory committee. He took a keen interest in the latest experimental farming techniques being studied by the boffins and, later, became an adviser to English Nature. He is still a member of both the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority and Craven District Council.

But what about the future, the subject we had met to discuss on a fine summer's day?

Now retired from farming, he still retains an expert interest. He chats knowledgably about the WTO (the World Trade Organisation), CAP (Europe's Common Agricultural Policy) and the intrigues of European farming politics.

But, most of all, he is concerned about the future of the Dales, their farmers and the tiny communities they live in - a way of life under threat now as never before.

"Hill farming has lurched from crisis to crisis ever since the bad winter of 1947, when thousands of sheep died in snowdrifts," he says. "But there has never been a crisis as big as this."

So what do we do?

"Well farms will get bigger as more and more people leave the land so tourism will become more and more important," he prophesies at a time when the tourist industry has been, arguably, hit even harder than agriculture.

"What people don't see is the link between farming and tourism. The farmers protect what visitors come to see. The two are inter-dependent.

"At the same time, I have realised for years that farmers cannot go on indefinitely producing food that has no market. Hopefully, the farm support system will be re-thought to compensate farmers for their environmental work - because, make no mistake, hill farms cannot compete on the world food market without subsidy.

"Now this is not going to go down too well amongst some of my colleagues. Many of them hate the idea of being park keepers. But it will be better to be a park keeper than having no business at all.

"We must rethink things so that there is a future in the Dales for young people. It is the only way to save Littondale and places like it."

So there it is, from the horse's mouth. John Sayer has worked both sides of the fence. He knows what he is talking about. I wonder if there is anyone in the new Department of Food, Environment and Rural Affairs who is listening?