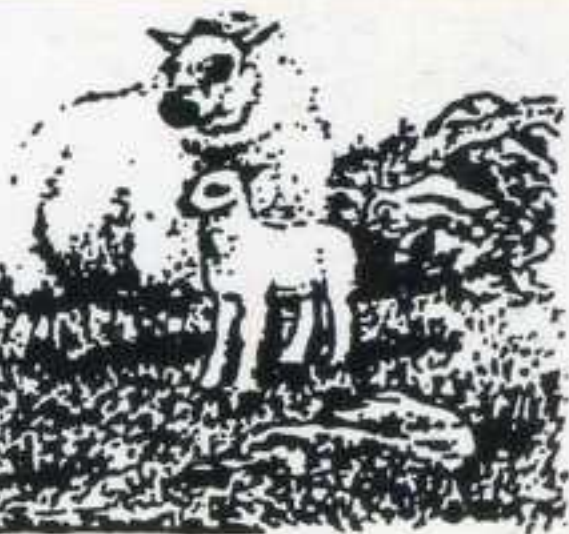


WORKING SHEEPDOG NEWS



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VAL'S PALS

WSN went to visit Val and Bob Powell



Val and Ria penning.

Cold Ashby is an attractive village in Northamptonshire lying roughly equidistant from Leicester and Northampton itself. As we drove through the village we noticed the "Black Horse" was advertising a lamb roast, but our destination was about half a mile beyond the village. Lovell's Lodge Farm is the home of Val and Bob Powell.

On our arrival, we found them just completing the drenching and pour-on dipping of 105 lambs. This year had been better than average in many ways: only 14 barren ewes out of 800, and benevolent weather for turning away, but, after an early start, the grass had dried out and even the recent rains had been insufficient to replenish the water table back to the levels before the hot summers of 95 and 96. The lambs, however, looked happy (once they had been released from the handling pen!) and healthy.

We were invited in for a cup of tea and a slice of cake ("not home made, I haven't the time"). The farmhouse is homely and comfortable, nestling in a valley of its own and invisible from the surrounding roads. Reminders of collies are everywhere, from the copy of Marjorie Quarton's "One Dog, his Man and his Trials" in the bathroom to the three dogs in the kitchen who behaved impeccably throughout our interview which commenced thus:

WSN: You have dogs in the house. Do you think that presents any problems with a work dog?

VP: No. Some older shepherds don't like to have a fuss made of their dogs, but I feel it's important to talk to them a lot: the bonding is closer and they begin to learn more. Don't forget that in the old days a shepherd would spend all day with his dog.

WSN: When did you take up trialling?

VP: My father was a shepherd, as was Bob's uncle, so we have both been involved with sheep and dogs all our lives. I started trialling in 1980, and Bob a year or so earlier. We went to an event, and saw a novice dog not doing very well. Bob commented that he'd got a dog which could do as badly as that, so we invested 50p and entered a trial the following week. After that first run, a kindly old chap from Romney Marsh took Bob aside and told him where he'd gone wrong - "You didn't stop your dog". Bob replied that he'd tried to, and vowed never again - but I'd already paid the 50p for the next week's trials.



Ria shows her skills.

WSN: Have you always lived in this area?

VP: No. We originally lived on the Isle of Sheppey. Then we had five Christmases in five different places. When the last of these jobs came to an end, I was horrified when Bob said he'd applied for this job in the East Midlands, but when we came here and saw how attractive it was... We are not more than 2½ hours from Petworth in Sussex or Pastors Hill (Barbara Carpenter's home). Leicester and Market Harborough are only 20 minutes away too.

WSN: Where do you get your dogs from?

VP: I've been very lucky over the years. Many of my best dogs have been given to me. I took in a pup suffering with pancreatitis, and nursed it indoors. My aunt said it would never work if it lived inside, but I got it going. Sadly, it died at 2½, but I'd got the bug by then. Ted Hope, whose obituary you carried recently, was a great friend and a big help in the early days. He had a litter of eight week old red and white pups. Nobody wanted red dogs then, and he gave me one, Nellie, who was a very good worker. People always admired her, even when she was less than perfect, because of her colour.

WSN: Do you breed from a particular line?

VP: I'm not keen on breeding for the sake of it, so we have a litter only when we need to. We have a strain from my father's Sheppey line, which is now in its eighth generation, and has served us very well.

WSN: How important do you think bloodlines are?

VP: Not particularly. It's more important to find an animal to gel with. I prefer bitches myself; they like to work with you as a partnership. Bob prefers dogs, but I feel that they always tend to be in competition for the pack leader status. We never work or train each other's dogs, and, as we usually work together, that can be very useful.

WSN: So do you train dogs for other people?

VP: No, although I have done so occasionally. Once I have built up a bond with an animal I hate to get rid of it. For the same kind of reason I don't like to have too many dogs. Some people do really well with one dog, then suddenly have four or five, and don't really have enough time to give to all of them. Our ideal is to have two each, but having said that, we now have three!

WSN: What is your philosophy behind training pups for yourself then?

VP: I believe in putting in time to build a pup's confidence. Too many dogs are rejected at 8 months old as being no good, when all that is wrong with them is that they've not yet matured. Border Collies are essentially a sensitive, one might almost say nervous breed, but are genuinely pleased when they do things right. I like to let them develop at their own pace to maximise their potential. Of course, as I have just said, that means that the bond develops so strongly that I don't like to part with them. I always advise people that if their dogs have faults they can't eradicate by training, they should either accept it or else pass them on to someone else.

WSN: What attributes do you think are important for a trialling dog?

VP: I think it's important that a dog should be a work dog. The top dogs should all be capable of doing a day's work on the farm. Gentle, robotic dogs are becoming a problem, and where the sheep are very easy, that type tends to do well. Sheep need to be more of a challenge.

chance to working dogs. I like a dog to be a character and show a bit of initiative. That can lose you a trial of course, but it is essential in a work situation.

WSN: So what do you feel about hobby triallists?

VP: In his day, John Russell was the exception. As a hobby triallist he was and still is a great handler. Nowadays as many as three quarters of handlers are hobbyists, and some of them, because of lack of opportunity, have less ability to read sheep.

WSN: What particular problems can you identify in trialling generally?

VP: Fast dogs - you spend too much of your time watching the dog rather than the sheep. Secondly, eyesight - for seeing the line and turns on the cross drive.

WSN: Is there anything that irritates you?!

VP: You see a lot of articles, and WSN is guilty of it sometimes, which suggest that there is a "them and us" attitude. This isn't so, in my opinion. We are competitive but not that intense. There are a few bad sports at every level, but most people go trialling to enjoy themselves. To win is a bonus. A very few people, however, need to learn how to lose. Trialling is a great leveller, as Ted Hope often commented. You have to be in the right mood, and the dog also. The sheep can, of course, be in any mood!! Never forget or underestimate the part the sheep play in the success of the enterprise - they may not even have been dogged.

WSN: Whilst on controversial subjects, what about gripping?

VP: The rules state "judge's discretion", but disqualification is often automatic. If I were judging, and saw a dog slicing in on a corner, taking hold of the sheep, it would be off, but a decisive peck on the nose of a stroppey ewe is decisive shepherding. Even so, if my dog grips during a trial, I usually come off so that I can immediately make it clear to the dog that gripping is undesirable.

WSN: Do you feel that anything is underpenalised?

VP: Bad shedding deserves a greater penalty. A lot of people practise for a trials shed rather than a true work situation. Dogs aren't stupid, and they must understand why they are asked to hold sheep and then, almost at once, let them go back again. That isn't practical shepherding. Also, I think that dogs can soon get bored with working six sheep to no obvious purpose. I certainly do - so I try to start general flock work as soon as possible.

WSN: Are there any handlers whose close work you admire?

VP: Jack Chamberlain (breeder of Val's bitch, Ria) always makes penning look so easy.

WSN: Any other comments you would like to make on trialling?

VP: Nerves are an important element - especially at a big event. They can be communicated all too easily to the dog and even to the sheep. A lot of people when starting, forget how many points you can lose for being off line. Driving is the really classy bit of trialling, the part which, apart from the outrun, I enjoy most.

WSN: So if you were judging, how would you mark a drive which got the gates with a lot of wobbles, as opposed to one with straight lines but just missing the gates?

VP: Well, obviously you have to knock a point off for each sheep missing the gate, plus one more for being off line. If the sheep weren't off line they would not miss the gate, but they'd still get more points than somebody who went all over the place to get through a hurdle.

On the subject of driving, the following day Austin Bennett, who judged the Pastors Hill Ladies Trial, commented (not specifically about the Pastors Hill trial, but about trialling in general) that on many runs, the dog flanks without really driving the sheep. We put this point to Val:

VP: You can win a trial with an obedient dog which will stop and flank on command, but I agree that that isn't really working the sheep. We are in danger of losing the natural ability of the dog to move sheep on its own.

Val demonstrates the skills of Ria and Isla

WSN: What is your greatest achievement to date?

VP: The Aberbrechan Double Gather is the highlight of my career (to date, she hastens to add!) Apart from that, I ran Nellie at the National a couple of times, and this year will be running Ria at the National for the fourth time.



At this point, Bob returned from his farm meeting, and we had a conducted tour of the farm. We met the dogs, sheep, lambs and the old mare who enjoys her retirement contentedly grazing in this beautiful part of the Northamptonshire countryside.

The next day at Barbara Carpenter's Pastors Hill Ladies Trial (see report elsewhere in this issue) we met Val and Bob again, and were pleased to see that they won three prizes: first place in the Family Fun class, the cup for the highest pointed run of the day in any class and the OLF prize. In her successes Val was partnered by Ria and Bob by Max. It was not Isla's day, but she triumphed a week later winning a local novice class with Val at the Cropredy Trial. ©ISDS Sheepdog Archive, WSN