

## **An Interview with Barbara Sykes from Bingley in West Yorkshire (April 2017)**

**Thank you, Barbara, for agreeing to share your thoughts with the readers of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive. Can you tell us, first of all, a little about your early life and your first connection with sheepdogs?**

I remember my childhood as being filled with the smell of hay, rides on the hay cart, sitting on a massive carthorse, and wandering round the farm with my dad's two collies. I was a bit of a wanderer as a toddler, and when my mum lost track of where I was, she would whistle, one dog would come back to her so she knew which direction to look in, and the other would stay with me until she found me. It was a great childhood, and in those days, I think there was more freedom than there is now for children. There were just three farms, and all the kids from the farms used to spend the days climbing trees, falling into streams, and generally, getting very grubby. I was about ten when my dad let me have a pup, and she was my best buddy right through to my twenties, I learned a lot from her and whenever I had a new dog to train she would be sitting in the field watching like a canine mentor. I had tried to have a litter from her, by one of Ronnie Collins's dogs, but it didn't work out, so Ronnie gave me a pup from one of his own bitches and she turned out to be a brilliant working dog. I remember her once jumping out of the Land Rover in Bingley auction market and turning some pigs that were heading for the road, and not many dogs are brave enough to do that. Yet she wasn't a hard dog, in fact she was brilliant when my kids came along, working by day and being their best buddy in the evening.



**When did you first become interested in trialling and where did you attend your first trial? What was the outcome?**

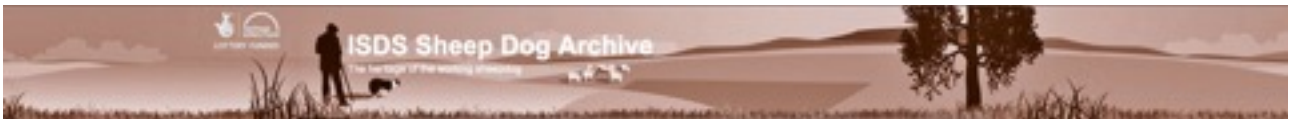
My husband got a job on a farm near Hornsea, and I became friends with Pete Hill, a local farmer and well known in the area for his sheepdogs. Pete had a litter of pups, by his dog Cap and out of

Courtesy of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive/HLF Project,

Written by Pauline Hall,

Photos courtesy of Barbara Sykes,

Copyright owned by the ISDS Sheepdog Archive.



his bitch Rowlston Meg, it was a large litter and as I was constantly badgering him for a pup he gave me the smallest and weakest one, telling me it would either 'make me or break me'. Pete was a great guy and, like a lot of the old shepherds, he knew how to push the buttons to make people get up and do things. We moved from Hornsea to a farm in Nottinghamshire, and at that time I was still training dogs for farmers and shepherds, but had moved into an area of great dog men, and I suddenly realised that I should be getting my own dog going not just for work but for trialling.



*The start of the Redford & District Sheepdog Society*

A group of us got together, and we formed the Retford and District Sheepdog Trials Association, which was lucky enough to have as its members such great dog men as Harold Loates and Hilton Roberts. I had learned so much from the old shepherds while I was growing up but those two inspired me, helped me and were never too shy to tell me where I was going wrong and why. I can't remember which was my first trial, as it's a long long time ago, but it would be a nursery and I would have been unable to stop Meg at the top of the field. That would have continued until I learned you didn't get respect by being shy, you got respect by being a good dog handler. So I soon became known for whistling loud enough and meaningfully enough for the entire field to know Meg was nearing the top of the course! Eric Whitehead, another R&DSDTA member, took me under his wing with a 'niver put novice handlers and dogs together; you need an older dog so here take Drift'. Drift was white, and I fell in love with him, he taught me all I needed to know to have a better understanding of Meg. The first trials I ran in were nurseries but the one I really remember was the Bolton Cup, which I won with Drift coming second with Meg, it was a great feeling as if it was all coming together at last. I remember Mike Harness telling me that sheepdogs were great levellers, they could be world beaters one day but the next week they could make you look an idiot. That's true so I reckon you have to really enjoy those great moments as you never know what's round the next corner. Later that year I was in the English National with Drift and, although we

Courtesy of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive/HLF Project,

Written by Pauline Hall,

Photos courtesy of Barbara Sykes,

Copyright owned by the ISDS Sheepdog Archive.





didn't do anything great, we did get round and I later found out that Drift was known for crossing his course on long outruns. Eric was a canny old devil he hadn't told me about that; I guess he was waiting to see if I'd learned to be a good dog handler. I think I must have passed his test because shortly after that he took Drift back. I was heartbroken but I can see the wisdom in his decision, Drift was never going to be an International dog and Meg did have that potential. I didn't know it at the time but I guess the dog men did, as she and I went on to run in almost a decade of Nationals and were in the English team at the International, where she played a blinder with a sheep that was determined not to get round. Meg's day job was shepherding over a thousand sheep, and we'd run on sheep in the past that had to be backed round a course or into a pen, so there was no way she was going to be beaten on that day. She handled her five sheep to the best of her ability, and finished the course. She was eleven when she ran her last National on one of the hottest days I can remember, and out of 150 dogs, only 30 got round. Not only was she one of the 30 but she tried to get her sheep back out of the waste pen at the end; dogs like that don't come along very often! I've had numerous really good dogs since then but my life took a direction that meant trialling had to take a back seat.



*Barbara & Meg*

**Were there any particular handler/dog combinations that stand out in your memory and, if so, why?**

It's a very difficult question as each combination that stands out will have different qualities. I always admired both Harold Loates and Hilton Roberts as handlers, and I think I was extremely lucky to be able to have them helping me. They were very quiet men and they handled their dogs quietly, and I remember Chris Furness telling me once that he trained his dog to a whisper so that it had to learn to listen to him. Therefore he never needed to shout, he would just raise his voice a fraction. I learned so much from the old shepherds and handlers, and although combinations of man and dog may win accolades, would the same dogs have been as great with different handlers? The foundation dogs for my Mainline dogs were Bosworth Coon and Wiston Cap, but I learned that I needed to balance the breeding to get lovely temperaments and good workers. Good combinations are remembered for good runs, and I can remember running at a trial at Clarence Storey's over a small course with very flighty sheep, and everyone kept stopping their dogs to try and get the sheep

Courtesy of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive/HLF Project,

Written by Pauline Hall,

Photos courtesy of Barbara Sykes,

Copyright owned by the ISDS Sheepdog Archive.



to settle. Tot Longton came on the course, and he never stopped his dog once, he just kept a steady pace all the way round and the sheep never once broke away. Now that was a run; it wasn't a National and it wasn't a big course, but on that day that combination was sheer magic to watch. They will have gone on to win big trials but I'd like to think that on that day Tot Longton felt a little of what we could see. Each decade will bring great combinations with amazing dogs and handlers that a novice should be proud to learn from, but I think the trick is understanding that although winning is fantastic, the actual magic lies in handler and dog both getting it right at the same time. If that's not on a trials course, the magic shouldn't be any less. I can think of watching several handlers who ran in nursery trials but had no wish to compete in the open trials and some of those combinations were pretty outstanding. But I believe my life with my dogs, and the trials I was lucky enough to be able to compete in, were shaped by the old shepherds and their dogs. They seemed to have a content way of life and it shone through in the relaxed way they handled their dogs.

**How, if at all, do you see trialling has changed over the years? Do you think the top dogs of days gone by could hold their own in today's trialling company?**

I think trialling has become more competitive and less of a 'shepherd's day out', and I'm not sure whether that's an advantage or not. At the time I had to stop trialling, I thought I would miss it, but I entered a few trials one year, and I thought the pace of people trying to do more than one trial in a day, or rushing off straight after their run, took some of the fun out of it. I think the National, and International trials, and the Opens with the really testing courses, still have that feeling of camaraderie and, even though big events, there is a more relaxed atmosphere. Maybe because at the big events people are rarely rushing to get to another trial or back to the farm work. So maybe the modern pace of life is a bit to blame for what seems to me, compared to the 'good old days', more competition and less enjoyment. But nothing ever stays the same, and changes are never all bad, but I did love the old ways of everyone taking enough food for the day, and having enough time to spend enjoying it. But then time was one of the reasons I had to give up trialling. Life itself is lived at a much faster and more demanding pace.

Regarding the top dogs of days gone by holding their own with the dogs of today, I believe a good dog is a good dog, and I think those dogs of yesterday would give the dogs of today some stiff competition on the big courses. Most of those dogs of the past worked for a living round large flocks of sheep so working a small course for precision and tight turns might put them under some pressure, but on a large course they would still excel, and even with the most awkward sheep. But all those good dogs need good handlers, someone who has taught them how to use their instincts, brought them on to have confidence and trained them to be the best they can be. I believe those handlers and those dogs will be in every generation, and if in a hundred years time you could bring them all together – a bit like the Field of Dreams – they would all be as magnificent as each other.

Courtesy of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive/HLF Project,

Written by Pauline Hall,

Photos courtesy of Barbara Sykes,

Copyright owned by the ISDS Sheepdog Archive.



**Can you share your memories of your own dogs? How did you acquire them? How were they bred and what attributes did each have?**

I'm writing a book about some of the dogs I have the privilege of sharing my life with, and the things I have learned from them. My Meg provided me with a huge learning curve. She was so quick to learn things that if I didn't get it right first time, I knew she would have picked up on my mistake, and I'd have a struggle changing her mind. I remember my late husband asking me to leave her with him once to help him bring newly lambed ewes into the pen, one set at a time, to check over and mark up. When I got back it was mayhem, she had figured out what needed doing and kept bringing him a ewe and its lambs into the pen, but he clearly wasn't doing his bit fast enough for her so everything was muddled up and she refused to take any instruction from him.

Meg's granddaughter, Megan, was an amazing little dog and just as good at work and on a big trials course. Sadly, she became seriously ill, and died at only four years old, but not before she had come into full milk and helped me to rear a litter of orphaned pups. That's what makes dogs special: when they do something that really stands out. It is not just remembered but rather can never be forgotten. After my husband died, Meg and her son, Moss, helped me to earn a living shepherding, but every night Moss would be in the house and would go to bed with my two children and wait until they were asleep before coming back downstairs. He was my dog and worked for me but when my daughter Vicki needed confidence on the trials course he became, for her, the dog that Drift was for me. He was amazing as he would work with me in a morning shepherding, then we would load up the van and go to a trial, and he would totally ignore me at the trial. I would run Meg, and Vicki would run Moss, but once he came off the course he would come back to me. Meg was a Wiston Cap bitch, her son Moss was by George Mitchell's Roy, and Megan was by Mike Harness's Ben going back to Murray's Glen.



*Moss (George Mitchell's Roy, out of Megan)*

I kept one of the pups that Megan helped me to bring up and named him Hope, he was out of a bitch by Bobby Dalziel's Wisp and out of my Tip who went back to John Thomas's Don. He had a real mixture of strong dogs in him, and dogs that needed some handling. I could never say he was an easy dog to train, and I can remember Thomas Longton once warning me I'd have trouble with him if I wasn't careful, and he was right as that dog really tested me. Hope tore the tendons in a front leg one day working round a large flock so I never got the chance to trial him after that. But he became a brilliant ambassador for the breed, accompanying me when I did training seminars and working

Courtesy of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive/HLF Project,

Written by Pauline Hall,

Photos courtesy of Barbara Sykes,

Copyright owned by the ISDS Sheepdog Archive.





for total strangers when we did the Sheepdog Experience days. He was another great dog of mine who adapted to the occasion to help me to earn a wage and make a life for my family. Laddie was my late husband's dog, he went back to Bosworth Coon on one side and John Thomas's Don on the other, and he came to us after his breeder took him back when he found out he was being abused. My, how that dog could show a set of teeth! It took a long time but he learned to work with my dogs and he even trialled for me. He had an outrun that left a lot to be desired but there was never a sheep turned on him. He was a strong dog and loved nothing better than a challenge. I learned a lot from him. He had a shocking temper, but eventually he calmed down, and became a real friend not only to me but to my two children. I often think of him now when I'm dealing with an aggressive dog in our rescue, as he taught me so much, especially about patience.



When I moved back home to Yorkshire I had Skye, she was out of a bitch of Mike Harness's and by my Moss, I had really hoped to trial her and we did get as far as a couple of Open trials but I was looking after my Dad and the farm at that time. Then there was the Foot and Mouth time, and we were shut down for months so

trialling took a back seat. Skye was a big outrunning dog like her grandmother but we never got the chance to compete after that but she was an amazing dog. She knew when to sit back and watch a young dog being trained and when to come in and help. I never had to tell her she just knew and got on with it, she was a bossy little thing but full of character and very brave.

I have had so many dogs it's impossible to mention them all, but every single one of them taught me something to carry forwards to the next dog. The ones I have mentioned were the ones that I remember for their working and trialling ability or for the simple fact they pulled out all the stops when I needed them but I have a lot of dogs from my past to thank for any knowledge that I have now.



**Your Sheepdog Experience days have proved very popular. Can you explain what format they follow and what others have told you that they have gained from them?**

In the 1970's two things happened: the television programme "One Man and His Dog" and the recognition of the breed by the Kennel Club, and following these, by the mid eighties, there were more Border Collies in pet homes than ever before. But sadly, with the breeding and sale of more and more collies going as companions, there was a total lack of information about the breed. It was at that point where, in addition to farmers asking me to train their dogs for work, people with companion dogs began asking for help and advice, and one of the best ways to help was to get them to understand the breed and its instincts and what better way than with a dog and some sheep. Both then and now there is such a lot of mixed advice about collies, and it makes me so mad when I hear 'collies must be doing; they round up children and nip them like they do sheep; they can't settle down; they are hyperactive;' and my reply is always the same. A farmer doesn't go out and buy a frisbee and book in to an agility club when his sheep are in lamb, farmers have children and the dogs don't round them up and, by the way, they do know the difference between sheep and children. If a collie is hyper, there is a reason for it. After all, a stir crazy collie isn't a collie using its brain, and that's half the problem; they need to be kept calm and taught to use their brains. They are the masters of down time, but only if they are given it. Our Experience days are not designed to tempt people to go out and buy a pup, they are designed to educate. Each event is designed around the group, so it's very individual and hard work to put on but those who already have a collie have told us time and again how much better they understand their dog so I guess it works.

**You have also worked for many years in helping others with problems relating to their dogs. Can you give us some illustrations of the sort of difficulties that can arise, why they do so and what can be done to rectify them?**

I think a lot of the problems arising with collies in companion homes often come from too much information rather than too little. They are told that they must give the dog lots of exercise, they need to have a ball, lots of toys and they need to keep the dog active. By the time their dog reaches adolescence, it's all play and no manners. Collies are very simple they respond well to 'this you can do and this you can't' but people tend to let them live in the grey area and then try to teach them boundaries, but for a bright young collie what you do on Monday you can do every day of the week. There is such a lot of emphasis put on 'training' and they are going to training classes whilst very young pups, yet a year later I get some of these dogs coming to me as their owners are struggling with lead walking and recall. They don't need training to do lots of different things, they need good manners and if a pup isn't allowed to pull then it will always be good on a lead. Prevention really is better than cure for a quick witted collie. I think it's to do with the pace of life again as well; everyone is in a rush and the training is quite competitive, I will get someone ring me up about a fourteen week old puppy that is nipping people and is nervous of other dogs, yet it can sit, stay, roll over and give a paw. That's too much for a pup to have to learn, it needs to be happy, having some fun and learning to respect people and to trust them enough not to be scared. When I explain this to people they totally get it, but had been encouraged to use loads of toys and treats instead of plain love and good manners. A collie thrives on simplicity, keep the instructions clear and simple and don't have too many of them.

Courtesy of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive/HLF Project,

Written by Pauline Hall,

Photos courtesy of Barbara Sykes,

Copyright owned by the ISDS Sheepdog Archive.



I think the pace of life has an effect on shepherds and their dogs as well. My daughter does the sheepdog training now, and people are wanting to bring their dogs in far too young, not because they think they need training then, but they don't have time to give them what they need due to pressure of every day work on the farm.

**Do you think that the comparative lack of sheep that are very used to dogs, compared to the previous farming generations, is having a deleterious effect on the working collie?**

I think it has to do to a degree, but it must surely depend on the individual farmers. If a farmer uses more quad bike and less dog, then his sheep will never be fully used to being mastered by a dog. However, for those who work dogs regularly around their sheep, then that flock will always be respectful of dogs. I guess that more people than ever before use quad bikes, but you'll never get a bike to 'hold' an awkward ewe, and neither will it come for a whistle. I think that anywhere there is a large flock of sheep, there will be at least a couple of good dogs especially on the hill farms. If we are talking about trialling, then to put on a good and fair trial the sheep do need to be used to dogs. I think we have to accept that the days of a shepherd walking the hills with his dog, shepherding his flock from dawn to dusk are gone, but I do believe that we have some good dogs and some good dog handlers and breeders, and that as long as we have sheep in this country they will always prevail – even with the advent of the quad bike - and long may those handlers and dogs continue.



*The dogs that started the Mainline line of dogs*





**Your work with rescue has also been a large part of your life. How did you form it and how long ago? Do you find you are seeing the same basic issues with the dogs and, if not, what other problems arise?**

I have always been involved in taking in collies in need, there was no such thing years ago as the internet or microchips for tracing missing dogs; it was the local dog pound or nothing. At first it was mainly dogs that were lost and I couldn't trace them back to anyone, but as the breed became more and more popular people were asking me to take their dogs because they couldn't manage them. For many years, I funded it myself, but it became impossible to keep taking them in for both space and funding issues. I used to publish a magazine called Freedom of Spirit, and in 2005, one of my subscribers passed away and left a legacy to the Freedom of Spirit with the request it be used to enable the rescue and sanctuary to continue. More kennels were built, a board of trustees formed and, in 2007, the rescue obtained charity status and its official title of the Freedom of Spirit Trust for Border Collies.

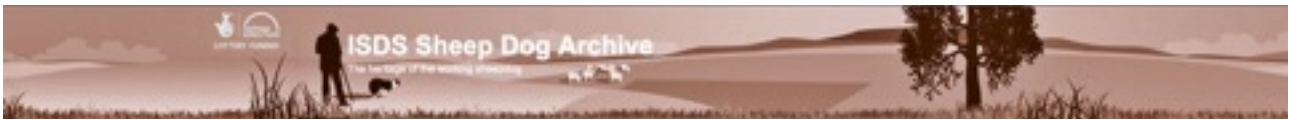
There were few issues with the dogs I took in years ago but now they seem to fit into 3 categories, neglect or cruelty, rehoming due to personal circumstances, or put into rescue because of issues. Are they the same basic issues? No. Things have changed, and it saddens me to see some of the issues they have, and I put a lot of it down to over stimulation. Lots of toys and tugging games, endless ball throwing but there is no relationship. These dogs come to us demanding endless attention, and don't know how to sit quietly and enjoy gentle companionship, and even worse some of them have discovered that a growl gets them their own way. Some people seem to think it is normal, and describe it as the 'collie nip' and 'that's what they do with sheep'. I would be devastated if one of my dogs thought it was okay to nip me, and if its normal how come when they come into rescue, and we work with them, they no longer want to 'nip', enjoying some quality time instead? I think that even today there is still a divide between the pet and farming communities, which I not only find sad, but think that until that divide is lessened there will always be misunderstood collies. Puppy farming happens in private homes as well as on farms, some of the farmers who bring their dogs to us would rather leave their wives with us, and if their dogs could cook they just might! I have never quite understood the element in the human psyche that is cruel to animals. A collie will give and keep on giving; there is no need to abuse or neglect it, it just needs teaching but this is not specific to one type of owner. We actually get more cruelty cases from domestic homes than agricultural ones. For companion owners, there is a lot to be learned from people who come from families who have bred and worked these dogs for generations, and there will be some farmers out there who could learn that a giving a dog a hug now and then is no bad thing. My pet hate phrases are; 'I won't buy from a farm as I don't want a working dog' – they are sheepdogs, that's what they do and farmers rarely breed bad dogs. 'Did you say it was a shepherds dog, oh the poor thing' - about a lovely old dog bequeathed to the Trust when the shepherd passed away. 'He comes back eventually but I have to let him loose to exercise' – then put him on a calmer diet and walk further. This is a breed that thrives on trust and companionship, they don't need fancy diets or lots of gifts they just need to be understood. Finding homes for them isn't always easy, but we have some great adopters from companion homes to small holdings to shepherds, and they come back to us if it doesn't work out so the onus really is on us to train them well so they don't need to come back into our care.

Courtesy of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive/HLF Project,

Written by Pauline Hall,

Photos courtesy of Barbara Sykes,

Copyright owned by the ISDS Sheepdog Archive.



**Barbara, you have been involved with the sheepdog for many years now. Have you seen a change in the ways dogs are bred in that time? Do you feel that, perhaps, there is too much emphasis on breeding to achieve trials success rather than producing a calm working dog?**

I do think it happens more now than in previous years, as there are many more people breeding and more people competing, but once again it comes back to understanding the breed. I can remember once watching a dog running at Longshaw trials, and I mentioned to an elderly shepherd sitting at my side that I thought he would be a good stud dog for my Meg. I was then given a very long lecture on the right and wrongs of breeding and what to look for, and how easy it was to breed but how difficult it was to get it right. But if you can't get it right then don't do it, and a winner to a winner isn't always right; some of the greatest dogs have never seen a trial field. I learned some great facts about breeding that day and all of it made sense to me and after that I always made a point asking about the breeding of any dogs that came to me with problems. And you know, that shepherd was spot on. Most of the dogs that had issues that we struggled to correct were bred incompatibly. I think it's wrong to breed a dog to run trials without considering its work ability. A dog that can't work and handle most shepherding situations may win trials with steady sheep, but would struggle on a testing course. But I'm confident that when it comes to dogs that can work and that can shine on a big testing course, they will always be around. There will always be shepherds who need and value a good dog, and they will breed for that purpose. Those are the dogs whose lines will still be around in generations to come. A dog needs to be strong and brave yet sensitive enough to be able to adapt to different situations within its working day. I don't believe that dogs that win trials but don't have those qualities will last long in the gene pool. Farming and shepherding have changed over the last century but the breeding of good dogs hasn't. There *are* more people breeding, and some may not be doing what that wise old shepherd taught me, but I believe there will always be people like him around who are good dog handlers and know how to breed good dogs. I guess the older we get the more we understand but farmers and shepherds seem to go on forever so I guess the breed should be fairly safe.

**As you reflect on your years spent with the collie are you optimistic about its future in the changing agricultural landscape of Britain in the 21st century?**

I don't worry too much about the breed's future in agriculture at the moment as there is still a need for a good dog, and as long as we have sheep and hill farms, that need will always be there. Should that change then we would probably see a poor resemblance of today's collies being bred mainly for trialling and entertainment. I don't believe that day will ever come, and if it does I wouldn't want to be around to see it. This country has never been without farming, and I don't think it ever will be. No-one can predict the future, and if everyone stops eating meat and the need for wool disappears then who knows? I think that's futuristic and we would have a lot more to worry about than our dogs. But there are a lot of collies in this country, they are one of the most popular breeds and there are certainly not enough farms or sheep for them. We have to accept that a lot of them are in non-working homes, and I think we should all share some of the responsibility of making sure they are understood. I am more concerned about those that are bred not to work sheep; collies being bred for

Courtesy of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive/HLF Project,

Written by Pauline Hall,

Photos courtesy of Barbara Sykes,

Copyright owned by the ISDS Sheepdog Archive.



appearance or for a particular colour. I feel there should be much more sensible information available for people who have a collie as a companion. The breed is no longer just a working dog, it is in companion homes, and in competitions other than trialling, and we are in danger of the breed being divided into two: a dog that could work and a dog that looks like a collie but has no working instincts. It shouldn't be a divided breed. They are amazing dogs, and they were doing their job long before "One Man and His Dog" and before the Kennel Club noticed them, they should be respected and revered for their instincts because a good collie will do anything and live anywhere. It just needs understanding.

I have grown up with them and hopefully will continue to grow old with them, and I have also learned so much from them. Without my dogs I would have struggled to earn a living without my kids being latch key kids, I wouldn't have met all the wonderful shepherds and farmers from whom I learned so much, I wouldn't have been part of an English Team and I would never have written any books. I think that sums up the breed because when well bred, and I mean working bred, dogs can do and give all that. Why would anyone want to mess around with genes and weaken the breeding? So although, because of my work in rescue, I know that not all farmers and not all companion dog owners are kind, the majority are and I take my hat off to all those shepherds who have gone before us and with careful breeding over many years have given us what we have today in the border collie. I truly hope for the future of the breed that this will continue for many years to come.

