

## **An Interview with Tony Iley from Longframlington in Northumberland (March 2017)**

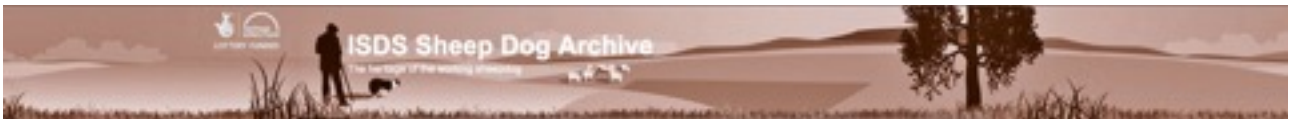
Tony Iley came to shepherding from school teaching, from leading one sort of flock to another. Disillusioned with the teaching profession, he became a shepherd in the Cheviots some 35 years ago. It is a move he has never regretted. He has a deep feeling for his woolly charges and, in an interview with The Independent back in 1990, said “I always take it personally when I lose sheep.” A successful triallist, Tony was in the English team in 1983. He has also judged both in Britain and overseas. His Goss 91940 was the sire of Chad 120312 who, with Allan Heaton, acquitted himself so well in South Africa that he stayed there, going to work with Merinos with Ron Philip. Tony’s Jace 62098 was the dam of David Carlton’s strong and reliable dog Tony. Tony was drawn to obtain Jace by being very impressed with Tot Longton’s Jed, a bitch from an earlier litter but from the same breeding line.



He used to write under a pen name for the much liked and respected “Scottish Sheepdog Handler”. This magazine was extremely popular, and was later incorporated into “Working Sheepdog News” under its first editor, Sheila Grew. Thereon, to the ISDS’s International Sheepdog New (ISN). Tony has written two books on sheepdogs, ‘Sheepdogs at Work’ and ‘100 years among Sheepdogs’, and soon there is to be a reprint of the former.

**Tony, thank you for agreeing to share your thoughts with readers of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive website. It is now nearly 40 years since your publication “Sheepdogs at Work” first appeared. How, if at all, do you perceive sheepdog breeding, training and trialling has changed in that time?**

Things have changed a lot in the last 50 years. Some changes for the better, some not. Back then, the standard working dog diet was flake maize and fishmeal, with a bit of milk when the house cow



was milking. Now we can tweak the diet to cover almost any requirement that the working dog will face.

I think nowadays there are many more handlers on the top rung and capable of winning at the big events. This is due in large part to the variety of classes and lessons available for anyone with the determination to succeed. Back then it was very difficult to break into. It felt like a secret society to someone just starting and with no connections to experienced generous handlers. I think there were only two books about sheepdog training when I wrote my first book, and certainly no videos or dvds. It probably wasn't as secretive as I thought at the time, but there were very few people with the ability both to train a dog and to set out the process logically and give the reasons for each step on the way. Now there are many excellent people with both skills.

There seemed to be a sensible correlation between the number of pups bred and the number of people training them but now I feel that this is no longer the case. This is detrimental to the breed in general, and to many of the individual pups which don't get the chance they deserve. Not enough thought is put into the breeding. But this is not a new thing; often working shepherds would take a moderate or poor bitch to a popular stud dog mainly to supplement their income. As interest in the craft of sheepdog trialling has grown the breeding and training of dogs has inevitably become almost industrialised and, although there have been some benefits to breeders and talented trainers, I look back with nostalgia to the days of the shepherd with his two or three main dogs and a couple of pups being schooled.

*Tony's Chester at the 2007 English National at Stokesley. Chester was in the English Team three times.*

**Can you tell us a little about your first sheepdog experiences, first dog and how you feel others shaped your response to working and trialling dogs?**

The first time I saw a dog working was in a field near the village in Lancashire where I grew up. I was fifteen or sixteen at the time, and was transfixed watching a butcher load some lambs into a trailer with a dog called Bing. From that moment, I knew that I would have to have one of these dogs, and learn how to train, and use it. I had a small allotment with a dozen hens, a pig and a drove of pigeons. It took a while to win my parents over to the idea, but a few months later, I saw an advert in the Farmers' Guardian for a registered Border collie pup for three pounds. The pup I chose was a rough haired black and mottled bitch, and she lived in a kennel at the allotment. I heard that it was possible to train a sheepdog using ducks, and so four ducks joined the menagerie. The first time I tried Shen on the ducks they just flew away and it took about a week to retrieve them from the surrounding area, one at a time.

Soon after this I noticed a man running a dog on sheep in a nearby field. I had to creep up on him and watch from behind a wall because as soon as he saw me watching he stopped running his dog. Even after I got to know him, he wouldn't run his dog if he knew I was there. After I had read the two available books, and progressed by trial and error on the ducks, I used to sneak into the field of sheep at 5 AM and spend half an hour in heaven. Shen eventually competed at her first nursery trial, and gained 18 points out of 50. She eventually won a nursery in her second season, and had a few open trial prizes throughout her life.

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She changed my life. My overriding passion was to learn all I could about dogs, sheep and shepherding which culminated in my taking a full time shepherding job in Scotland, but not before placating my parents by qualifying as a biology teacher and completing my probationary year. This gave me the opportunity to study famous handlers, their dogs and their methods. As friendships were formed, I studied people like Jock Richardson and his three great dogs Cap, Mirk and Sweep, and learned so much about naturalness and bringing out the best in a dog. I was now in a position to gain a deeper understanding of the craft of handling and trialling and this journey was, in no small part, due to the time I had spent living next to Jim Cropper at the time when he was training and trialling the great Fleet, Clyde and Bonnie. Jim was honing the skill of precision work, and showing an uncanny ability to read sheep, and to analyse every step of the way to win a trial. It was a great experience to write "100 years among sheepdogs" with Jim's collaboration.

There are too many top dogs to detail but a few others come to mind easily. Wyn Edwards' Bill, Jim Cropper's Sid, David Carlton's Tony, Bobby Dalziel's Wisp and Dryden Joe, Johnny Wilsons Peg and Spot, and many others.



**In your book "Sheepdogs at Work" you devote a chapter to William Caig. Can you tell us a bit about why you selected him for study?**

When I got my first shepherding job in Scotland, Willie Hainey was my neighbour, great friend and mentor on everything relating to sheep and dogs. He was a great shepherd almost in a biblical tradition. He inspired me with tales of old, concerning men and dogs; there was no one for whom I had a greater respect. William Caig was Willie's great hero and so, even though I had never met him, he became one of my heroes too but I suppose it was out of respect for Willie Hainey that I included the material he provided on William Caig in my book 'Sheepdogs at Work'.





### **Do you have fond memories of particular trials and, if so, why?**

Perhaps the trial that has a special place in my heart will always be the Holme open trial at the Ram Inn, Cliviger in Lancashire. It was the first trial I ever went to, and I was still at school at the time and public transport wasn't an option. So I walked to the trial. It was 7 miles over the hill and took two and a half hours! The trial ran in parallel with the main show of Lonk sheep in the country. Competitors and spectators gathered at the top end of the field in an area of trees, mostly rhododendrons, and a small stream ran through the middle of the course which at times could become an obstacle more difficult than the gates or pen. One year, the trial had to be abandoned at lunch time or the lives of the sheep would have been in danger trying to cross it. Top handlers from all over the north of England and Wales competed, men like Tot Longton, Ivor Hadfield, and many others of international renown and it was a great pleasure to see them all. But this wasn't all. The local scouts erected a tent, and made a fire using the dead wood from the trees, and cooked up pie and peas. I can still smell the wood smoke and taste the pies made by Peter Connearn, the local butcher and chairman of the Holme sheepdog society. These memories from over fifty years ago will remain with me all my days.

The other trial which has a special place in my heart is the Deerplay hill trial. At the time of its inception I was living in a cottage at Turn Hill Farm next door to Jim Cropper. When Jim first talked about putting this trial on I was amazed. Surely no one would come to run a dog over such deep ditches, peat hags and rushes to pick up sheep that would be unseen by dogs and barely seen by handlers. But come they did, and thirteen of them managed to get their sheep at that first event. A couple of years later, I had the privilege of judging and the trial was won by Clarence Storey with Blade who I think went on to win it another two times. The rest is history. The Deerplay Hill trophy is now one of the most sought after in England.

### **It has been said that, due to quad bikes and insufficiently “dog trained” sheep, the future of the working dog might be in jeopardy. Is this a view you share?**

Quad bikes have most certainly affected the way most shepherds manage their sheep. A couple of years ago, I sold a dog to a working shepherd who looked after 1000 sheep. I showed him the dog going about 400 yards to gather sheep, and he commented that he never sends a dog as far as that. He rides up to the sheep, before putting the dog around them. The emphasis was on a dog that could move a bulk of sheep working at close quarters. I expect this is not an unusual scenario nowadays, so a different set of skills are required in these dogs. Even with the diminishing number of hill shepherds that we now have, many can use quads to some extent on a hill, and this too means that the outrunning and independent thinking skills of the dog are not as important as in the past. But the good news is that all these important skills will not disappear because they will be tested at the epitome of the craft at National and International competition. People will always thrill to see dogs of exceptional ability conquering trials like Deerplay Hill, and the dog with these skills that can also jump off a quad and push a mob of sheep through gates into pens will always be valued and sought. The future is bright.



**“Look for the dog that is master of every situation” is a quote from “Sheepdogs at Work”. Do you feel we are going down the right path to ensure we produce that type? You place strong emphasis on temperament as being vital in breeding programmes. Have you seen a change in the prioritising of this trait or are you confident that it remains a high priority amongst those who breed sheepdogs?**

Look for a dog that is the master of every situation. That is the advice I gave to breeders fifty years ago, and it still holds good today. Owning such a dog is an aspiration quite rarely accomplished but spotting these dogs to perpetuate the breed is not impossible. Trials are run in such varied situations and on such different types of sheep that an assessment of a dog’s natural ability can be made over a period of time. It’s not just about the run itself. How does the dog operate when a bad sheep is presented? How does it take the sheep off the field to the exhaust pen? What happens when another dog interferes with the run; when a gun goes off or how does it cope with any one of the many possibilities that cannot be planned for? Is the dog fazed or does it master the situation? A dog that masters every situation is worthy of using in continuing the breed. It would be even better if the breeder could see the dog working at home on a flock or on the hill without the excessive commands sometimes needed to win a trial.



In every situation, temperament is crucial, and character is the icing on the cake. A dog with a good temperament can accomplish much but the bad temperament is to be avoided at all costs because the cost may one day prove to be too high.

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**Looking back at great dogs and handlers from the past, do you feel they would acquit themselves as well today?**

The judging of trials is more of a science now, and the degree of technicality needed to win is sharper and more defined than in the past. When sheep are reasonable, the standard can be exceptionally high. In the past there were points for command and style which encouraged a different way of running and the top men had honed these skills to the same high degree of perfection that the top modern handlers have with the new skill sets. The majority of the top men of old, who could adapt to the modern standards, would hold their own. The exceptional ones like J. M. Wilson could do almost unbelievable things with their dogs. Wilson was the Einstein of the dog world: a genius, and whatever the decade or the century he would remain iconic.



*Bevis Jordan with Tony at the 2010 English National at Alnwick*

Thank you Tony, for sharing your views and reminiscences with the readers of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive Website.

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