

Memories of a sheepdog expert

You're young and in love, you want to be together, what do you do? Go to the movies maybe, book a table for two in a restaurant, drink champagne in a hot tub?

Country romance can include all these and it can also be vastly different. After all, who needs all that when you can be riding pillion on the back of your loved one's motorbike heading off in the direction of the coast.

For Mary Heaton, or Sleightholme as she was then, over 60 years ago happiness was being with her future husband Allan at a sheepdog trial in Seamer following the aforementioned mode of transportation back in 1949.

Sheepdog lover, WI devotee and tenacious cricketer Mary, as well as being a well-loved wife and mother, passed away in February last year having completed a sterling innings of 87 years and her legend lives on thanks to her eldest son Andrew, who is developing a knack of producing highly interesting books relating to the Heaton family.

Scrapbooks are often kept for indeterminate periods and usually never see the light of day. They are either left in a box of keepsakes or discarded as being of little or no value or interest but Andrew's latest offering is destined to keep his Mum's legacy around for much longer than she may have ever anticipated. He has published two spiral-bound books reproducing what were ten scrapbooks he found after her passing.

"I knew Mum kept scrapbooks but I wasn't aware of their extent and the amount of history they contain about sheep dog trials from the 1950s when she first started keeping press cuttings and other archive material including marvellous shepherd profiles, nor was I aware of just how much was in her boxes and files and on shelves through books, booklets, trophies and catalogues."

"The scrapbooks contain so much history and are an amazing collection. I'm sure everyone who has been involved with sheep dog trialling will be fascinated to look back and see people they remember and read about them."

FOR THE RECORD

Along the way Andrew even found a little exercise book he'd written about his Dad's trialling exploits when he was nine years old. It also includes sketches of their dogs.

"It's funny reading it back to yourself. I wrote about it as though we were a team, that it always felt like we were. Mum seems to have kept everything and I'm really pleased she did. Mum was so thankful for her life and what sheepdog trialling had done for her. She said, "I have been very lucky to have enjoyed my chosen hobby for so long and to have met some wonderful people from all over the world."

Mary's dedication to the journals recording the sport, particularly cuttings that contained references to Allan's and later her own results, was mirrored in the way she led her life as Andrew recalls.

"Mum was an inspiration to me, my sister Janet and my brother Mark who died tragically young. She and Dad always told of having dog-it is. They were absolutely committed to the sheepdog trialling world and mum, who had been a timekeeper, judge's book keeper and become a judge also started competing in 1965. She won her fair share of trophies, ran 14 dogs in her career and became, along with my Dad, one of the best known couples in the sport. In 2000 she became the first woman to be invited to judge at the English National Sheepdog Trial held at Allerton Park."

“In 2002 she judged the largest sheepdog trial in Canada. Together she and Dad travelled the world through sheepdog trialling, not bad from having started on the back of a motorcycle going to Seamer!”

Andrew’s early life revolved almost wholly around sheepdog trials and he attended his first before he could even say his first words or walk.

“I went to my first sheepdog trial in Edinburgh at just four months old in 1951. That’s when Mum started keeping the scrapbooks.”

“Mum and Dad always maintained that it was a hobby that never cost them a thing because of the prize money and the trading in dogs. They were dual recipients of the Wilkinson Sword award for their outstanding contribution to the International Sheep Dog Society, sheep dogs and sheepdog trialling, receiving the award in their 80s.”

Sheepdog trialling was by no means Mary’s only pastime. She was born at Great Barugh near Kirby Misperton in 1929 and had three brothers Alf, Eric and Joe.

The family moved to Wold Newton when she was six and to Scoredale Farm, Millington when she was thirteen. Coming from a family of brothers she developed a competitive streak that saw her enjoy darts and cricket, the latter being a sport she was to excel at and captain Leake Ladies.

Mary’s other love was the Women’s Institute. “Mum became a member of Millington WI when she was 14 and subsequently moved to Knayton WI and Brandsby WI as she and dad moved farms. She was with Brandsby WI over 50 years.

“I’ve managed to get the ten scrapbooks into two volumes – one covering the 50s, 60s and 70s and another covering the 80s, 90s and 2000s – which I know will make fantastic reading and will bring back vivid and wonderful memories for those who have been involved in the sport.”

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