

Documentary film-maker Magali Pettier explains to Keith Seacroft her fascination with the world of sheep-farming in the high Pennines.

The sight and sound of sheep were common when Britain was a mainly rural society. Wool underpinned the economy so securely that the Lord Chancellor sat on a sack of it in the House of Lords. But sheep-farming is now largely unseen, at or beyond the edge of modern life.

In the remote high fells of the North, who would do it, Magali Pettier asked herself.

Her own family kept cows on lowland pasture in Brittany and she knows how the work, demanding and relentless in all weathers, brings limited financial reward.

"Farming often runs in the blood," Magali says. "But we don't have tenant farming in France and I wondered: why would anyone opt into this way of life?"

"My initial quest revealed that for some, despite the difficulties, upland farming is not only attractive but compulsive - hence the film's title, *Addicted to Sheep*."

Her initial idea was to film in the Pennines and Brittany, contrasting the experiences of different families across a year, but she found the pull of Upper Teesdale took over.

Magali gained her degree in photography, video and digital imaging at the University of Sunderland in 2005 and has since lived in the North East working on a broad range of film and photography projects, including a digital fellowship at Teesside University.

Addicted to Sheep has been her longest-running independent film and something of a leap of faith, involving filming alone, off and on, over an 18-month period.

Her passion for documentary filming echoes the commitment of hill farmers who choose an occupation that only just earns them a living.

Magali is now editing 62 hours of material into a feature-length work, aiming at festivals during 2014-15. She wants to show a farming couple's emotional commitment to their work and their school-age children, also reflecting their bond with the landscape and quest for an ever-better flock of Swaledales.

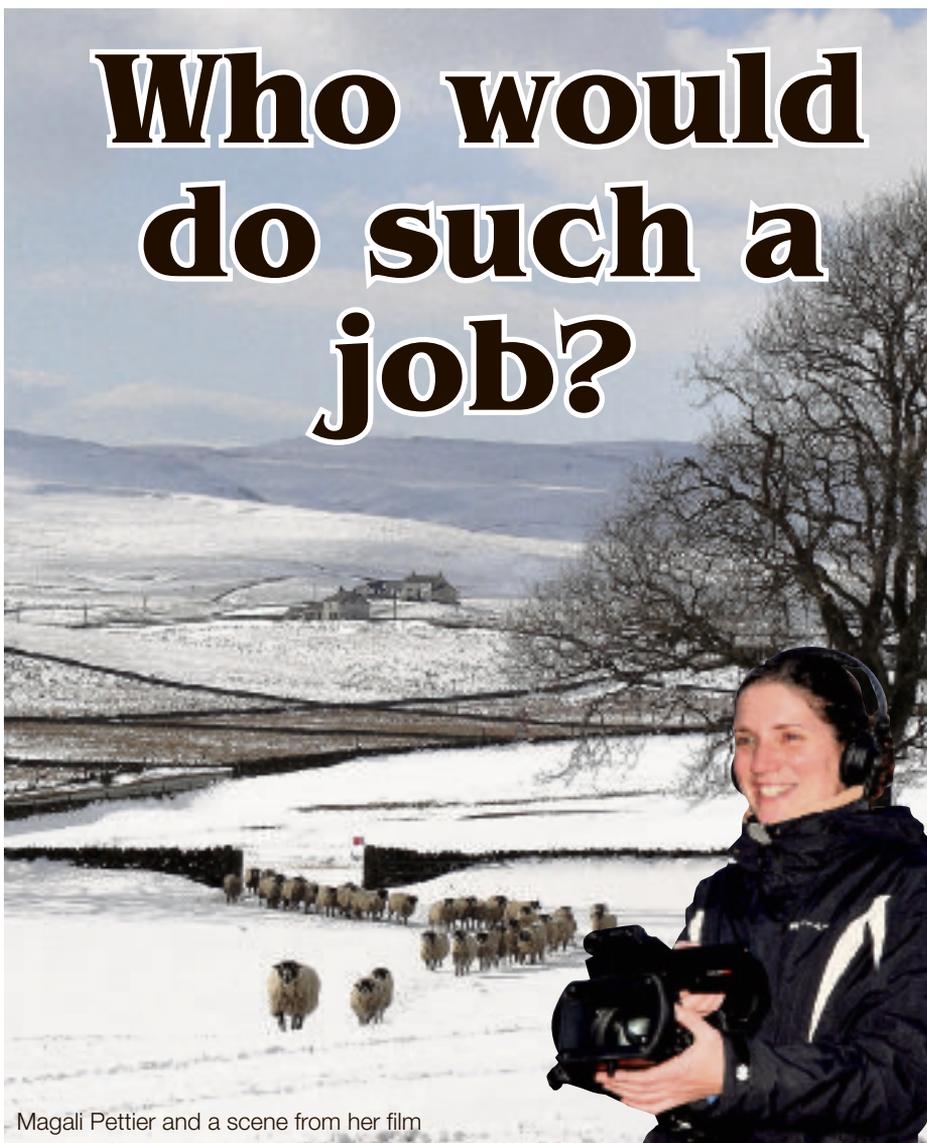
Film-maker and family spent a long time talking to plan and focus the project. Magali needed to observe and understand, and also wanted the family, especially the children, to get used to her and the camera. Filming alone, she avoided the distraction of a big crew.

"Because of the nature of the location, I set out to make a film that makes you feel you are there, so, for example, when it's cold, you feel cold!" she says. "Where nothing seems to change, I wanted to capture the forever changing quality of the light, while remaining true to the stillness of the landscape."

"There are breathtaking and remote sights, beautiful sounds of nature at work and traditional ways of farming. It was also very important for me to capture opinions about living there from people of all ages and so I also filmed at the local primary school and within the wider community at sales and sheep shows."

She shot day-to-day life over the seasons on the Raby Estate, County Durham. Nothing was staged. All the action, positive and negative,

Who would do such a job?



Magali Pettier and a scene from her film

happened as and when it was part of the farm routine, including a still-born lamb and a troublesome gate-hanging job.

Magali's work has a quiet, observational style, with no 'celebrity farmer' element. She records the dedication that maintains the character of an area of outstanding natural beauty that visitors enjoy and celebrate but sometimes take for granted.

"The portrait has to be balanced," she says. "You show the hardship and enjoyment. And I had to gain their confidence. They let me shear a sheep, I let them look through the camera lens."

"To begin with they made everything sound simple, but during filming I began to see all the complexities and the stress. Sheep may not need daily attention, like dairy cows, but they and their environment demand constant commitment. It tests the emotions and squeezes a limited farming budget. It helped me coming from a farming background, even though my family's situation was different."

Magali's work has attracted significant industry recognition for quality and ambition. She secured some initial funding and mentoring from Northern Film and Media after successfully pitching the concept at the Sheffield Independent Documentary Film Festival.

Her informal mentor, Emmy Award-winning director Patrick Collerton, has praised her cinematography and the work-in-progress

has been endorsed by film-makers such as the team behind *The Moo Man*, a UK 'doc' that was the surprise hit at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival.

She has also worked with Newcastle-based Chris Watson, one of the world's leading nature and wildlife recorders, on early concepts for the film's sound design.

It was Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services that introduced Magali to the Durham dales farming community. Project officer Lucy Jenkins says: "*Addicted to Sheep* is a sensitive and spellbinding portrayal of the world of an ordinary farming family and their exceptional way of life."

Rebecca Barrett, of the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, adds: "A small number of farmers in the upper dales of the North Pennines are the custodians of some of the richest wildlife habitats in England. The role that they and their ancestors have played should be fully recognised."

The challenge now for Magali is to portray all this in 60-80 minutes. She is inviting like-minded people and sponsors to back the final stages of the three-year project.

Donors may have an interest in the film-making process or investing in Magali's talent or in bringing to attention the exceptional way of life of an ordinary farming family.

Find out more about the film at www.addictedtosheep.com