

## Review: Documentary feature film Addicted to Sheep

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○ OPINION



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A documentary about tenant sheep farmers in Upper Teesdale could be an unlikely hit at film festivals this summer



A scene from Addicted to Sheep

The Oscars will be doled out in Hollywood this weekend, rewarding the best cinema releases of 2014, but it's a fair bet none of the judges will have seen a film like Addicted to Sheep.

The feature-length documentary charting a year in the life of the Hutchinson family, hill farmers in Upper Teesdale, had its first cinema screening this week at [the Gala in Durham](#) with many who appear in the film seeing it for the first time.

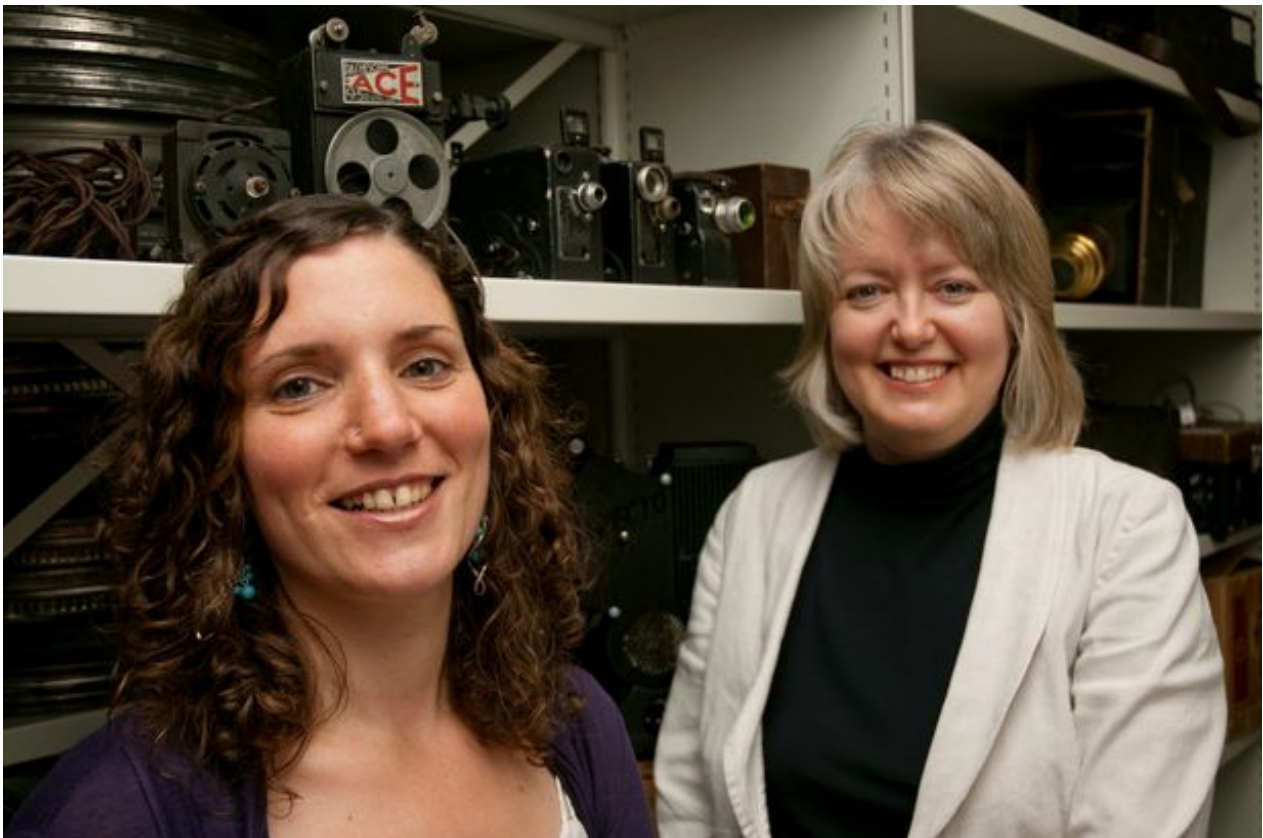
The film shows the beautiful sights and sounds of this upland landscape through the seasons while taking the viewer uncomfortably close to a lot of muck and slop – things the farmers live with every day.

French director Magali Pettier, who grew up on a farm, originally planned to contrast English and French farming families. As she explained in Durham, “financial reasons and time” meant she had to revise her plans, focusing instead on the County Durham family recommended to her by Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services.

You sense she recognised the Hutchinsons as cinema gold. In the end she spent four years with Tom, Kay and their three children, Jack, Esme and Hetty, who are now aged 13, 12 and 11 respectively. They are the stars of this film, a close and loving family whose daily routine would make most of us shiver.

We see them up and out in all weathers and at the crack of dawn. We laugh as Hetty – a much younger Hetty – struggles to close barn doors and, as a tethered cow does what cows do, murmurs mournfully that she wishes they’d pick up their own mess.

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Addicted to Sheep producer Jan Cawood and French director Magali Pettier

Tom Hutchinson, a policeman’s son who inherited his love of farming from his grandparents, looks at sheep the way people at Crufts look at dogs or a cosmetic surgeon finds room for improvement in a human face.

The film opens with him tethering a powerful tup (it's tups and yows in these parts, rather than rams and ewes) and pointing out its very minor imperfections – a bit too broad here, too little hair there.

The comical title comes not from Magali but from Tom who says to camera: "Swaledale sheep are the most addictive sheep known to man."

It's a love-hate relationship. The Hutchinsons love their Swaledales but the sheep could be forgiven for thinking otherwise as they are scanned, shorn, decorated with splodges of dye, locked in, locked out and pursued hither and thither by Tom or Kay on a quad bike and their nippy sheepdogs (who have also mastered the knack of pillion riding a quadbike).

In Magali's favourite scene, Kay is seen barking instructions to an unseen dog as she crouches in a field giving a lambing yow a helping hand – in a very literal sense. There is blood as well as muck in this film and we might blanch but the Hutchinsons, once the job is done, head cheerfully off for breakfast.

Tom explains how livestock can inexplicably become deadstock. Many farmers will tell you, he says deadpan, that a sheep's one aim in life is to get out of it sharpish. "She's achieved her ambition," he says on one occasion, removing an ex-sheep with a tractor.



Kay and Tom Hutchinson with Jack, Hetty and Esme at the Durham premiere of Addicted to Sheep

But it's clear these people live for their sheep which, for the most part, have the run of the dales. Hutchinson holidays are visits to the ram sales while a trip to the livestock auction, bringing the chance of a chat, is really "skiving", giggles Kay. Dedication brings its rewards. At a local show the Hutchinsons clean up, winning 10 trophies with 13 sheep.

Assessing his general situation, Tom says with a characteristic twinkle: "We're in desperate, desperate need of a lot of money."

You won't hear that said too frequently on the Hollywood catwalk this weekend.

But like any Hollywood blockbuster, Addicted to Sheep benefited from top talent.

It has a beautiful and atmospheric soundtrack by James Burrell and Chris Watson, the renowned wildlife sound recordist from Newcastle, also had a hand in it.

Editor Matt Dennis was called in to edit Magali's 62 hours of footage down to an informative, heart-warming and visually stunning 85 minutes.

Magali, who worked with producer Jan Cawood, said at the Durham premiere: "We're a small team but we think great things will happen to this film. We have been having discussions with [the BBC](#) and we have interest from festivals as far away as Arizona.



A scene from Magali's film Addicted to Sheep

“We’re pretty confident there’s an international audience for it and we hope we’ll receive some TV commissions. We have had interest from [the Tyneside Cinema](#) and other independent cinemas. To some degree it’s a word-of-mouth thing.”

She hoped the fact this is the Chinese Year of the Sheep might help the film on its way. Unlike some Oscar contenders, this is a film that will stand as a historical record.

The Hutchinsons, like other small-time farmers, are tenants on the Raby Estate where Lord Barnard, we learn, has resisted the temptation to amalgamate farms in order “to keep the dales alive”.

It keeps farmers on the land and also sustains the local primary school whose pupils provide some of the film’s best moments.

Tom and Kay Hutchinson have no money set aside for a pension and, in Durham, Tom described their daily routine as: “Have a cup of coffee and then go out to see what’s gone wrong.”

But with a 15-year lease on this beautiful but tough corner of rural England, they consider themselves lucky.

And now they’re film stars – with a new friend in Magali Pettier. “She was part of the family in the end,” said Kay.

Tom, after joking that they hadn’t known what they were letting themselves in for, said: “The reaction has been very good from the neighbours. Nobody has smashed anything or set fire to anything. Magali has represented the area pretty accurately for what we do and who we are.”

Look out for Addicted to Sheep. It could be one of the best films of 2015.

Online review available: [http://www.thejournal.co.uk/culture/film-news/review-documentary-feature-film-addicted-8684891#ICID=sharebar\\_email](http://www.thejournal.co.uk/culture/film-news/review-documentary-feature-film-addicted-8684891#ICID=sharebar_email)