

# What farming means to Devon – an overview

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I am flattered to be asked to provide an overview for this symposium, and respectful of the privilege that going first means – others have to worry about repetition. But I guess none of us would have come if we didn't already have an intuitive idea about the 'meaning' of the President's title, so I am only providing you with a prompt – or perhaps another slant on the subject.

To me what farming means to Devon involves all that farming has ever done in Devon for the last 5000 years. Then, it was nearly ALL that was going on – well, a BA toolmaker, maybe a miner, and of course the BA farmers had shoved aside the Neolithic genius who realised that you didn't have to chase them further every day but could drive them back and that was called agriculture. Just as eventually the Celtic farmer would push the BA man out and he would in turn be pushed into a corner by the Anglo Saxon. Who would be overseen by the Norman much as the Roman had dealt with the Celt

So what farming means to Devon NOW is more about the palimpsest of landscape cover and the details of, or in, every layer of that palimpsest that we have inherited. We now exploit that cover as an attraction for a bigger industry, or an ambience for ourselves and our travels from town to town. But that's not all of the meaning. Farming now not only maintains that enfolding amenity (the quality of being pleasant) but adds a huge value to it by producing quality stock and food we can see, sell and taste, and reminds the rest of us, daily, what real work is about, and what it takes to supply a sustenance for those needful of quality and a prompt for the spirit of the discerning.

All these things are part of Adam Smith's 'public goods'. Dartmoor and Exmoor men are already describing their sheep and cattle as 'environmental animals' to be paid for corporately. Within the last two weeks the coastal men have begun the discussion about the price of amenity access. The dreadfully skewed Single (farm) Payment is meant to be buying among other things 'good environmental condition' presumably for us all. Adam Smith must be restless in his grave.

I will flash some images before you. They are of the components of that cumulative farming underpinning of our existence in Devon, whatever our day job.

(Briefly, the images were: a 1960's MAFF map of farms in Devon by size and colour-coded type implying little change since; red ploughland – farming reveals colours we wouldn't otherwise see; farmed landscapes in E Devon, Exe valley, near Meeth, inland S Hams and ancient tenement on Dartmoor; coastal fields with 1960's seaweed spreading; aerial shot of 'hidden farms' between the roads; 1960s barley combining and manhandling size bales; medieval leats in use for flushing grass for an early bite; for Guernseys, for South Devons; Red Devons in fatstock show; South Devon sheep likewise, and grazing above an estuarine creek; the Kingsbridge estuary, – one of thirteen bringing coal, lime fertiliser inland until the 1960s and maritime warmth and damp with it and all that goes with pubs called the 'Ship and Plough'; one of its limekilns; more farming structures: farmsteads, Stokeley Barton, to villages, Slapton, to market towns, Totnes; new colours – oilseed rape, new problems – ploughing steep grass and consequent erosion; Devon banks straddling all the different landscapes of the county: maintenance detail, double banks with a lane between, their vivid flowering and as parish boundaries; and finally the farming people – at a pony drift, and then commoners cleaning a leat.)

Those contemporary commoner hill farmers are doing something that has had to be done since Bronze Age men diverted the tiny head of the West Webburn inside the wall of their corporate stock farm at Grimspound. It isn't a core part of the farming business, just essential to the maintenance of the farming process, and a human necessity, diverted elsewhere for one farm through fields to the dairy sink, out into the trough in the yard and on to the pond beyond the midden, and up the scale corporately into the town gutter or pot leat, and even the reservoir.

If there is a Devon culture, and I believe there is, then it is maintained by men like them, fewer now than when my fifty years here began, but still throughout the county. It is founded in a relationship between man and the land, brown, grey, grey-green and of course red-land, that none of us can deny whether we share it or envy it. We all need to be able to resort to it when we falter in the face of 21<sup>st</sup> Century artifice. Or, if you don't share my philosophical bit, and you're hard and ultra modern, what about when the global – the plane, the ship, even the motorway – food trade falters, for lack of energy, or faster climate change, or a terrorist hold-up. For one of those things will surely come, and not long hence, and Devon farming will then be our saving.