

The Devonshire Association: President's Symposium

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Devonshire Farming Customs & Culture
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(Tony Beard - The Wag from Widecombe)

My brief is to look at Devonshire Farming Customs and Culture of the past leading up to the present. To appreciate this it is necessary to go back as far as possible and gradually move forward towards the present day. In so doing one has to appreciate that the old saying 'Necessity is the Mother of Invention' applies to Agriculture as much as to any other industry. When Devonshire began to be populated by Homo Sapiens most of the centre of the county was a vast forest and it is still referred to as 'The Forest of Dartmoor'. Very little of the 'Old Forest' remains and the most well known section I suppose is Wistman's Wood, near Two Bridges.

As with any forest and jungle the most satisfactory way of eking out a living for its inhabitants either human or animal, is Hunting and Gathering. The predators hunt, the large living off the small, and the predated generally living off the 'fruits of the land'. An old Farmer I knew as a child, when asked what he had for breakfast would always reply - 'Fruits of the Land Buye' and when asked what that was the reply was always Bread, Cream and Honey. Think about it, Cereals, Cow and its products and nature's Bees, flowers etc.!! I do love the wisdom of our Ancestors, and their appreciation of what the countryside is all about and what it has to offer.

Our early Hunter/Gatherers I am quite sure used the uplands for Summer occupation and retreated to the more hospitable areas of the coastal regions for the Winter months. The dried harvest of the Summer, skins, meat, fruit etc. being brought back home, and the food made more palatable by the addition of water.

Gradually with more sophisticated tools they began to clear areas in the forest and it became obvious to them that the opened areas with extra light and with the supply of untouched fertility things began to grow, more plants bearing berries and fruit. These areas also proved attractive to the animals of that time, creating grazing areas and this in itself made hunting easier. Instead of pursuing their prey they could wait for the animals to come to them and with weapons and traps and additional skills their food supply improved. From the Hunter/Gatherer developed the Farmer who decided that the next step would be the domestication of some of these wild beasts and the cultivation of the most productive crops. The capture of young animals and rearing them, gaining their confidence, and with the animals gradually losing their natural fear of mankind is a slow but rewarding business, ask anyone who has broken in a Dartmoor pony!

It does annoy me when people leading guided walks across Dartmoor often state that the bulk of Dartmoor has not been farmed. Dartmoor is often described as the Last Wilderness, it isn't, it is an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty which needs careful management by Man. Believe you me, it could easily become a Wilderness, no good for Man or Beast.

The use of fire is the primitive way of clearing an area of 'trash' and the phosphate created adds to the soil's fertility for a few years. When the crops become poorer in quality and quantity, the people simply moved on. After a few years they return to an old site that has once again become overgrown and the operation can

be repeated. This is not the 'rape of the countryside', it is an early form of management and could be described as Environmentally Sound Practice. This primitive process is still carried out on Dartmoor, we call it 'Swaling'!

As generations evolve, knowledge improves, the use of natural resources, tin and copper, making bronze tools and implements. Then iron, much harder and ultimately steel, as these tools became available they gave increased power to the farmer. We must not forget that it is only in comparatively recent times that the power of steam and fossil fueled engines have been available, so what of the intervening years? With the early domestication of wild animals came management. Cattle, sheep, goats and the like once tamed could produce meat, milk, cheese, food for the family readily available. Horses gave transport for goods and a source of power to mankind and the wild fowls bred to live in close harmony with man all added to the food supply, nutrition and ultimately less early mortality.

Early field systems can be found with the remains of round houses, yards into which stock could be brought for protection from the wild predatory animals that still roamed the countryside.

Many of the hedges of today are built on the foundations of these old Dartmoor Reaves! These reaves were built by using the stones that littered the ground, an act of clearance. It is quite amazing when on Dartmoor the extent of the old 'Ridge and Furrow' cultivation marks of several hundred years ago are still visible. Heaping up the soil, the furrow from where much of the soil was taken creating a channel for drainage. They were growing crops. Who said there was No Farming done on Dartmoor. The 'lynchets' at Challacombe for example, not unlike the 'terracing' in the Mediterranean area, practised by the 'moors'. Walls and hedges running along the contours of the hills which stopped the erosion of the cultivated soil. The creators of these knew what they were doing; thankfully very few hedges have been removed on the moors, unlike many arable areas where miles of hedges have been removed in the name of progress. In my native parish of Widecombe there has only been half a dozen hedges removed since the 1842 Tithe map was produced.

Coming more up to date the Medieval Strip Field System, little narrow fields running down the side of a hill with a wetland, marsh, often referred to as a 'Moor' at the bottom by the river. This gave cottage farmers a piece of good grazing, a little early grazing near the river due to its moist position and water to drink for the livestock.

The Medieval Times, a time of a real Feudal System. Most of the land was owned by 'The Lord of the Manor' the Squire. He controlled everything and everybody. His elder sons would be in the Army or Navy as officer material. The youngest would be appointed by him, financed by him, and as Vicar of the Parish still beholden to his father. All the peasants, farmers and local craftsmen would be tenants of 'His Knibbs' and he would sit in a special pew in Church so that he could see who did or did not come to Church. Failure to attend would be a 'black mark'. The tenancy agreement would be very detailed and had to be strictly adhered to. It stated where and when and how much farmyard manure, burnt lime etc. should be sown, the crops to be grown, and rabbit and vermin control, but definitely no hares, foxes, badgers or game to be taken, failure to abide strictly to the tenancy agreement would result in immediate dismissal - out of house and home and down the road immediately. Imagine if you can a farmer, his wife, several children (large families were the norm) and elderly relations all thrown out with nowhere to go and often as a

result little or no prospect of finding another Landlord to take them on. No good reference coming from the past master!

These tenancy agreements led to strict farming practices.

Many moorland farms have Common Rights attached to the farms. This gives them the right to graze a specific number of animals on their local moor. This is also a remnant of Medieval Times. The Manorial System means that Livestock can only graze on the piece of Moorland belonging to the Manor in which the farm is situated. Some farms have Venville Right. This is a right to graze on the aforementioned 'Forest of Dartmoor'. This dates back to the time when the Duke of Cornwall was given the bulk of Dartmoor by his father the King as a hunting Chase, but primarily as an opportunity for the young Duke to gain experience in man management in preparation for when he became King in due course.

The exterior hedges of some Dartmoor farms are built in the style of 'Corn ditches'. To explain this one needs to imagine a stone wall, say six feet high, its main purpose was to keep stock in a field, and the stock on the moors out. The game, deer in particular, would sometimes jump these walls and in an effort to keep them out, a ditch, perhaps 3-4 feet wide and 2 feet deep would be dug along the exterior of the base of the wall. If, however, deer did get into the field the farmer was expected to make it easy for them to get out and so a slope was created inside against the wall so that they could run up the slope or easily jump out over on to the moors again.

The Rotation of Crops:

When the quality or quantity of grass in a field became poor it was ploughed up. On Dartmoor due to the type of soil, it was always the norm to till Swedes first. There were a couple of reasons for this. First to sow 'brassicas' in a newly ploughed field generally led to a good crop. To grow swedes after another root crop would result in a poor crop, the disease 'finger and toe' named as such due to the finger-like growth that appeared on the roots and resulted in the crop dying or at least poor quality and rotting. Gout is the other name for it. By grazing most of the crop in the field by sheep, eating a small area at a time by fencing off small plots (folding the crop), the fertility from the sheeps' 'droppings' was being returned to the soil. There was a saying that 'sheep walked with Golden Feet' this referred to the fact that where they had grazed a good crop followed. A cultivator (scarrifier) was then used, before that invention a digger would be manually used to dig up the bottom of the turnips so that the sheep could eat that part too! Waste not - want not!

This was often followed by a cereal crop, oats normally. The third year the field was ploughed again as by that time the old grass sward that had been ploughed two years before had rotted down and it would then be suitable to sow, mangolds, potatoes, kale or flatpole cabbages. The fourth year after ploughing again another crop of corn would be grown but it would be 'undersown' with grass seeds so that when the corn was harvested in August/September the ground would be covered with a new crop of grass which would be grazed or mown for hay for several years to come. This was the rotational system which was often stipulated in the Tenancy Agreement. Certain fields would be classed as permanent pasture and these on NO account were to be ploughed. These pasture fields are what are now referred to as Hay Meadows. They contained a mass of different herbs, wild flowers and grasses,

now appreciated as wonderful habitats for all types of wildlife. Why are they so rare today? Remember 1939-1945 W.W.II. We were isolated, we had to grow as much of our own food as we could. People who had a garden were implored to 'Dig for Victory', and they did. Farmers had to produce all the food they could. They were asked to clear rough ground of rocks and stones to grow more. Pasture fields were less productive than arable fields, 'plough em up and till Teddies and Swedes' This would feed both the cattle and the population. Wet ground was drained, all in the name of productivity, the environment did not matter then, survival was the name of the game!

It must be realised that it is possible to turn a pasture field into an arable one at the rate of an acre in twenty minutes but it takes twenty years to get that acre back to a pasture field.

One has to remember that self-sufficiency was the name of the game. Children also had to earn their pocket money and mine was earned by catching rabbits and moles. We sold the rabbits to the rabbit man who called twice a week and took them off to the cities and towns to supplement the meagre meat ration that they were entitled to. The moles were skinned and they were sent away for coats. I remember well one of my father's fields being sown to corn and grass and the next morning it looked as if it had 'varicose veins' due to the activity of the moles overnight.

Moorland farmers often bought a crop of swedes from an 'incountry' farmer for his sheep to graze from Christmas until March. This would be at Totnes, Blackawton, Marldon or somewhere similar, the sheep would be brought back to the moors for lambing. Some incountry farmers brought their cattle out on to the moors to graze the newtakes during the summer, 'agistment' was the term used. The moorman would help collect the stock from the Denbury, Marldon area and each farmer on the way would add his stock to the driven herd and it was not uncommon to see a 'sea' of cattle a mile long progressing out to places like Postbridge on my part of the moor and this happened from all directions around Dartmoor.