



Kenny and Wendy Watson from Postbridge in Dartmoor

The shepherding and trialling history of the Watson Family of Postbridge is an important part of the story of the Dartmoor shepherds. Kenny runs the family farm and trials locally, while Jed is an International player. Bob has maintained a consistent trialling profile in the west of England for many years.

Many Dartmoor farming shepherds will use Watson dogs as they are proven as good, strong, hard animals that can deal with the terrain of the moor.

Ken's son Kenny talked affectionately about his parents Ken and Hilda. "Dad moved around the moor a bit before he settled at Merripit, which is where I farm today. Life would have been tough for mum in their early days, out on the moor at Whiteworks with no electricity or running water. I did a lot of walking to school in those days. Beside farming and shepherding, dad also looked after the Ministry of Defence firing ranges that were 'next door'.

"He always had good dogs, but also liked the idea of completely new blood, travelling far and wide to view dogs, and he was maybe among the first in the south west to travel to find a particular dog that would vary and enhance his blood lines. Ken's first dogs were from W. J. Evans, and later he was friendly with Glyn Jones (Bodfari) and used his dogs for breeding too.

"Dogs were bigger and stronger back in the day. The modern dog would not be able to maintain the stamina or show the common sense that their forebears had. Old Tam could gather 50 sheep for you to look at, and repeat the process in the next field of bullocks, or even ponies. She was very versatile altering her style, depending on the stock to be shifted.



The late Ken Watson with Sweep



“Ken never liked to rush the training of his dogs, allowing them to mature first. Nursery trials would be entered when the dog was rising two years old. He was a shepherd that ‘asked’ his dog and would coax it rather than chastise it. It was always a certain type of dog too; one that required coaxing rather than chastising, and he preferred bitches to dogs. He could read a dog using the innate intuition given to some people. The dogs learned their basic skills from their work on the farm and trialled with a sound understanding of flock work. His breeding principles always resulted in an animal that was good looking, reliable, honest and that could stand well on its feet and think for itself.

“I worked for Roger Whitten. His dogs were big, strong, and could kill a fox if required. The thing is those strong dogs are too much for 4 or 5 sheep at a trial. Those dogs needed big open spaces, and sheep that will shift. Nowadays the breeding is focused on the trialling dog and they are softer, smaller, quieter and steadier. In those days you could tell your dog to ‘get up around’ and so it would and that was all it needed as a command.

“Dad used to say that if he had to shift sheep, he would do that at the beginning of the week. He would have Thurs/Fri off to settle the dog, square it up with a dozen home kept sheep and generally prepare the dog for the trial. Then, after Sunday, it was back to shifting big numbers. They were good all-rounders. Of course, years ago, it was all farmers, and the new type of triallist does not want a big strong dog.

“In talking about how we did things back-along it seems almost surreal as nowadays our way of life is so different.

“My own farmland is fenced moor land but, in addition, we have grazing rights on the common land set by however many sheep and cattle we have; known as a headage. You cannot stock more than your allotted number. This causes so many disputes. I count the stock on our moor 6 times in the summer and once in the winter. This is for the Commoners’ Council in case of any disputes with DEFRA. Since all the restrictions about grazing and numbers came in, the land has gone back to scrub and has been ruined. When dad was grazing here we had 100 black cows on Stannah Moor all year round. Then we had to join the ESA as tenants because the landlords know how many units you have and adjust the rent upwards. Now, if we want, we can only have 16 cattle grazing from the 16th April to the end of August. All the black cows had to go. Because, if you are going to house a cow through the winter, you might as well be housing the red cows; their calves are worth more than the black ones. After a while, it was realized by the authorities that the moorland was getting overgrown so a new scheme came about. So now, it is about 35 cows from the 16th April to the end of November. The gorse has overgrown to the point that the sheep will not go under it. There is a nice little flat piece at the top which is where all the sheep gather and stay there.

“When we had Foot and Mouth on the moor, we sent the lambs away, but eventually acquired some in-bye land near Bovey Tracey that is sheltered and where my lambs thrive. We are able to fertilise the in-bye ground but not the moor as it is common land.



It is, anyway, unsuitable for tractors with its many bogs. These bogs are particularly dangerous in the springtime when they green up quicker than anywhere else and are lethal for ewes looking for food. Many a time you will see a couple of lambs running about and no mother; she will have gone in. So in the winter we fence off the bogs where the sheep are. It's OK in the summer and the ponies graze there.

“Back in the day when dad and his chums were trialling, there was a great sense of camaraderie among them - they were hugely competitive. But everyone went down the pub afterwards, although most trials had a beer tent anyway. There were few lady triallists, other than Mrs. Barbara Carpenter from the Forest of Dean. She was a well respected competitor with good dogs. They were all working farmers and shepherds and their dogs were appropriate to their needs. Back then, if you had a half decent farm dog, with a bit of rounding off of the rough edges, you had a chance in the money. But not any longer with dogs bred for trialling only.”



Ilington Trial - 1960's. The Kerry Hill sheep were not used to being dogged in small numbers. People from outside the county would travel miles to compete. The Driving class was the West of England. From left to right: Stan Hill (Chudleigh), Ken Watson (Postbridge), Jim Chapman (Okehampton), Ern Endicott, and Fred Land. In front of Ken is son Kenny, in front of Jim is Jed. And Bob is inbetween Ern and Fred. Ern Endicott is a farmer from Newton St. Cyres, and bought his first dog from Fred Land. He used to put on little trials for practice and one day someone said 'Ern, your house is on fire'. 'Yes, OK' was the reply, 'But I've got to pen the sheep first'. Fred Land was the shepherd on the Fortescue Estate at Simonsbath, he was the Jed Watson of his day. Fleece was his best known dog.



Wendy, Kenny's wife, takes up the tale.

“Kenny has not done much trialling for at least 10 years as he is so busy running the farm. Priorities changed; especially after his dad died. We used to have a number of dogs but as time went on we were down to one and that was a farm dog. We have two now, and Kenny does trial one of them. He has done a lot in his time, and Ken Snr. started him off very young. When Ken was trialling we would all go as a family for a day out and my mum and dad would join us too.

“I never really took up trialling, although I had a go once at Liscombe in the new handler class. But I never really took to it. Rachel was small but I thought to have a go when Jed did some training over the other side of the village. I did not really have dog of my own and the one I used was Kenny's and not up to the mark. I enjoyed the classes though.

“My dad, Jack Kittow, was from Sheldon, near Axminster, on the Blackdowns where he lived all his life. He was a farmer and always good with animals. Always had working dogs, and towards the latter end of his working life, someone gave him a border collie and eventually he got into trialling.

“The Abel family came from the other side of the River Tavy from Cornwall, well over 100 years ago; but, although my family go back through my dad's side as farmers on the Blackdowns, back in the 1860's we were part of the Kittows from Cornwall. They walked their stock from Egloskerry, the other side of Launceston, to Exeter and then to Dunkerswell where dad farmed.

“My granddad was an athlete and won prize money for his success and bought the farm with his winnings. He bought the farm in 1922, for £2,000 out of the winnings he had saved.

“Dad knew all the old boys: Walt Passmore, the late Dave Parkmore, and the late John Fletcher. Denis Farmer, who dad worked for, was a member of the ISDS but did not compete. We must have gone to watch a trial and Dad got interested. My uncle used to send for dogs from Scotland. Dad had plenty of patience and could train a dog well as he was a quiet man and the dogs loved him. Especially dogs learning the ropes. Besides Walt, there was Ernie Duke, Brian's dad. Later on, there was Tom Cox and John Bristoe of Simonsbath. Stan Hill was a member of that early group and came back to it after he had retired from farming.

“This was a golden era; probably early to mid seventies. Lots of nice trials around and they all went along. The men were all mates but the 'mateyness' deserted them at the post! Then the competitiveness kicked in. There was Derek Colton as well. Dad became great friends with Ida Welch from Exmoor. Dad had this farm dog and Ida saw something in dad's ability as a handler because she gave him a young registered bitch called Charcourt Bride. This little dog changed dad's profile, and they went on to win lots of prizes. Dad won Novice Victor Ludorum a couple of times. I bought a dog, Glen, which Dad ran for me and won the Devon County Maltese Cross Championship with him. When



Miss Welch passed away she gave dad her shepherd's crook. A supreme accolade! Dad was not a shepherd in the true sense of the word. We had beef and then dairy at home. After bulk tanks put an end to that, he went to work for my cousin and started with the sheep. After a while he got some at home and I helped. I was lambing about 65 ewes by the time I met Ken and moved away.

“Dad had the ability to get the best from his dogs and they idolised him. He would have made a brilliant shepherd had he started with sheep as a young man. Shepherding is something in you. You need the skills but shepherds are born not made.

“As he never sold a dog, he ended up with 7 or 8 at one stage, several of which would be retired. When they have worked all their lives, you owe them. Another thing to remember is that if your dog does not like you, then it will not work for you.

“You can see on the trial field people who do not have that link with their packet of sheep. Of course you can buy a top dog and work it until it is worn out, but you will never be able to coax the best out of a mediocre dog and make it a top dog.

“These people think ‘Well, I obviously know what I am doing so we’ll get a pup!’ It does not follow that you will have success with this new animal because you will be imposing what worked on your first dog onto your second; forgetting that this is an entirely different animal.”

Appropriately Kenny and Wendy met at a sheepdog trial!



Dartmoor trial - left: Hans Zetson with small child, Jim Chapman, Perce Parker, Ken Watson, Henry Scott (host of trial), ?, ?. Bottom row, left: Darkie Ellis, Stan Hill, ?.

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