



Administration of the Commons on Dartmoor

How these Dartmoor Commons are now administered is very ably set out in a small booklet entitled “Life and Tradition on the Dartmoor Commons”. Written and compiled by Professor Ian Mercer - Chairman of the Dartmoor Commoners’ Council and Cherry Seage, Secretary to the Council.

We are told that there are 92 separately registered commons on Dartmoor and most without physical boundaries between them. The Forest of Dartmoor common is central and is the largest.



It is clearly written “that the future conservation and maintenance of Dartmoor is heavily dependent on the survival of the hill farmers and their ability to graze their animals on the commons”. This statement would ring true of all the hill common land in this country and so the current state of affairs in matters agricultural is a cause of major concern for the many and varied parties.



The booklet continues “the experience and specific skills required to manage the stock and vegetation has been passed on from one generation to another. There are 850 registered commoners but less than a quarter of them are farmers who continue to use the commons for grazing, so it is clear that the pool of those skills is diminishing as years go by.”

As the formation of the soil types has given rise to the wildlife and habitats of the area and Dartmoor is of international importance in reference to blanket bogs; upland heaths; upland oak woods, cave systems and a wide variety of non-domestic wildlife. So one can appreciate that there is a delicate balance of management required for the Moor; the domestic cattle and ponies are as key a feature as are the sheep.

All these components form the Dartmoor landscape and the link between these is the high moor and the Commons.

It is the husbandry of the Commons that has the biggest influence on farming methods and it is worthwhile taking a moment to understand a little about this ancient system.

Historically all people in the county of Devon had the right to graze the Commons - except, for some reason, the burghers of Barnstaple and Totnes. Many did so until the middle 1920's. People drove their cattle and sheep to the Moor in May and back again in October. They also had rights to dig peat for burning, domestic firewood, bracken for bedding and, also to take stone or gravel for domestic repairs. It was also possible to take fish and to feed pig acorn or beechmast. All of these aforementioned items were for domestic use only.

It is clearly written in “Life and Traditions of the Dartmoor Commons”, “that the future conservation and maintenance of Dartmoor is heavily dependent on the survival of the hill farmers and their ability to graze their animals on the commons”. This statement would ring true of all the hill common land throughout this country and so the current state of affairs in matters agricultural is a cause of major concern for many and varied parties.

The Commoners Association was formed in 1956 to create a common voice for activities particular to those farmers who owned rights to the Moor. But this was a voluntary association and had no legal status. Prior to this coming together each common had its own voice and there was not a lot of joined up thinking. All the individual associations joined the voluntary Dartmoor Association so that one voice could be heard in regards to planning decisions and act as a united voice when Government decisions are not welcomed.

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So how do the commons work? The Moor is divided into four sections with Dartmoor Forest, in the middle. Each quarter has 4 Council Members who have a more than 10 livestock units entitlement with one commoner entitled to graze less than 10 livestock units. There are also representatives from the Dartmoor National Park; the Duchy of Cornwall; two owners of common lands and one veterinary surgeon. There is a book of Regulations as prepared under Section 5 of the Dartmoor commons Act 1985 which all commoners abide by. With nearly 30 people to keep the commons alive and well, a firm and kindly hand must surely be at the helm!

Fencing was a big issue because, by Law, a farmer has to fence his land in order to keep his stock secure. But, by definition, Common Land is unfenced and this was a major stumbling block when the Statute was being prepared. In-by land is fenced and it is generally accepted that the owners of land adjacent common land have a customary duty to maintain a fence on the boundary of their land to prevent stock from straying off the common.

A Register of Grazing rights is kept in the Association's Tavistock office and this ensures that farmers do not exceed their grazing rights. The ninety two Commons on Dartmoor have thirty seven local Commoners Associations with a Chairman and Secretary for each one!

The result of the coming together of the County, the Association and the National Park was the Dartmoor Commoners Council established in 1985 as the umbrella organization but each individual Common enters into its own agricultural environment agreement with Natural England. Final arrangements were made in 1986 with four members for each quarter - two farming and two non farming members. It has legal status.

Management of the individual commons depends on the nature of their agreement with the Government Body. They take care of their payments received from the RPA and distribute it to each member. To receive payment Commoners must be subscribed and registered with the Commoners Association. There is an Annual Report to each of the thirty seven.

'Dartmoor National Park' was established and overseen by a Devon County Council committee in 1951 and moved to its present National Park status in 1997. Russell Woolcock was Secretary to the Commoners Council from 1986 until 1997.