



Bridget and Mat Cole from Meavy near Yelverton in Devon

Moving to a lower part of the Moor, there is the Cole family at Greenwell in Meavy situated on the edge of south-west Dartmoor. Here, there is a different farming pattern from the Abels. Greenwell has many 'lowland' acres in its portfolio.



It is a combined family farm comprising of Mat, his brother Neil, and matriarch Bridget who is a very active member of the farm business. Bridget has lived at Greenwell for most of the last forty five years. She came from a farming family north of Okehampton and met Arnold at Young Farmers. She says the Dartmoor boys used to stray north on a regular basis!

At this time Arnold was already farming at Greenwell, and was the third generation to do so. His grandfather had come to the farm from Sourton and his father, one of five children, eventually took over the Cole acres. The Cole dynasty had started in the 1920's behind the Little Chef on the A30. The eldest brother farmed close by, Uncle Jack was at Linecombe and the rest of the family went to a farm near Lydford.

Bridget took up the story, "The Cole family has spread all around Dartmoor far back into the mists of time. I know

we are related to the Coles at Ashreigny. My sons, Neil and Matthew, are the fourth generation. Arnold's father was Henry. Greenwell was established as the Cole family farm in 1931 or thereabouts. It was part of the Buckland Abbey Estate."

Although it might seem remote, it isn't really, as modern communication has stepped up. Bridget said that she had been at Greenwell for almost 45 years and had seen some amazing changes. Mains electric came in about 12 months after she went there. This was helpful, as coming into the old freezing farmhouse with draughts everywhere was difficult. There was only an old generator that was allowed on mornings and evenings before it ran out of fuel. Bridget had come from a brand new centrally heated farmhouse so it was a dreadful shock. It's only since Matthew took over the farm that the house has got central heating! Besides Neil and Mat, there is a sister Beverley, and several grandchildren.



Eldest son, Neil, runs Dartmoor Prison Farm as part of the family business. Mat looks after Greenwell and some land at Lamerton. Mat continues the story.....

“Long term management is a joint activity while, day to day, we manage our own farms where we both have a staff member. The total enclosed acres represent a large holding for this part of the South West that includes 500 acres of enclosed moorland. Also we have rights to graze the local common and Dartmoor. We have three hefted flocks of sheep, and a considerable number of breeding ewes. Also pedigree flocks of Blue Face Leicester and Whiteface Dartmoor, and they live in some ground in the valley, where they can be trusted not to ‘break’. Most of our ewes are Swales and Blackies that breed pure, while about one third are crossed to a terminal sire. Usually these are the older ewes that produce a few hundred Mule ewe lambs per year to sell and add value to the lamb crop.

The wethers are fattened and the pure ewe lambs retained for breeding. We have beef suckler cows, mostly pedigree Galloways and Belted Galloways, who graze the moor, a herd of South Devon/Galloways that graze the Prison ground and a herd of pedigree South Devons that graze the Home farm here. Everything is fattened and, having had such a lot of problems with bovine tuberculosis, everything is sold through a local butcher ‘Howells of Tavistock’ and the Dartmoor Farmers’ Cooperative.



Our farm business has evolved since Dad took over in the early 70’s when it was just the home farm of about 200 acres. As opportunities presented themselves we have taken them. Unfortunately the ‘farm next door’ is rarely available, so we have previously bought land away from here in the 1990’s and the 2000’s, having rented previously all over the place. We got the Prison land about eight years ago and that has set us up.

The Prison Service in Princetown decided that, as there were no jobs in agriculture for prisoners to take up once they had left, there was little point in running the farm for them to learn farm skills. The Prison still does fork lift and tele-handling training because those are relevant work skills for the men.



We took it on for a five year tenancy, but now it is permanent, and is well over 1000 acres in size; most of it is rough grazing with just a small parcel of cutting ground. The cattle are housed at the Prison in the winter from about October. We are benefitting from the financial input on the buildings that the Service put in all those years back.

My dogs are with me all day every day, and I generally have at least two with me in the Land Rover, on the tractor or the Quad. I probably spend more time with them than anyone else including family. They are the most valuable members of my team. A workman can be easily replaced but not one of the dogs. Meg and her sister have been the best of dogs for the last ten years, and I stupidly have not bred from either of them. It's all too late for that now".

In helping Colin Pearse to present his book about the White faced Dartmoor sheep "Drifting Away to New Pastures", Mat had this to say about the working sheepdog.

"Almost without exception, if you have sheep you will have a sheepdog. They come in all shapes and sizes, tight and shaggy coated, pretty ones and ugly ones. Some will be good at their job and others not. They are always there within a whistle, if not at heel then in the back of the truck or Quad. They are a loyal and trusted part of the farm team and frequently are not given the accolade they deserve; being more essential than a tractor, Quad or even paid staff. For an upland farmer on Dartmoor, with its huge open spaces to search and cover, it would be impossible without them."

He continued "At Greenwell over the years, we have had plenty of working dogs - all Border collies and mostly bitches. We found that, when having dogs as well, the puppy population went up! Recalling their names I can see each one and remember how they looked and worked. Toby was a miserable beggar to work with, but would happily play with my brother and me when we were very small. Flash was a promising bitch but she injured her back leg which was subsequently amputated. She remained a member of the working team but obviously a bit limited out on the Moor. Patch was the first dog I owned and trained, and was what you could call the 'runt' of the litter but she turned out to be very quick and gave her all.



Always at my heel, she would not work for anyone else. My current main dog is Meg. She is a strong short-coated bitch that has worked with me these last ten years. Totally the best dog I have ever had: hugely loyal and obedient, she never gives up and no task is too great, from gathering hundreds of sheep from the common to cornering rams in a field.



“Meg and her sister are starting to slow up and I need another young dog. I have trained them myself through trial and error. I start the young dogs, with another older dog, and gradually build up their portfolio of skills until they reach a competent level. My dogs read me as much as I read them. When I am up on the moor, they will know what I expect of them and get on with it, working with little command. The dogs understand what I am doing. It’s intuition. I get them to ride on the Quad as soon as possible and to stay there. A lot of the time I am in fields with cows and calves or ewes and lambs. The dogs need to sit up tight with me. Don’t need a dog running about. Besides which, with long distances to travel over the moor, they conserve energy by being on the bike until I need them to work.

“Our hefted sheep will travel 10 miles from here cross country. Everyone used to ride horses and the dogs could keep up, but the Quad goes too fast. I generally get my two best dogs to gather the hefted sheep and then get someone to bring out the trainees and youngsters to drive them home. It is very hard work: with acres of tufted grass and peat and, in summer gathers, you will have flocks of 500 to 600 sheep. I know lots of farmers use only the bike but our sheep would laugh at you. If you haven’t got a dog then you are not properly shepherding.



“There are places on the holding where I cannot get with the Quad such as deep valleys. Here, the sheep will just stand there and look at you. I have not thought to have a Huntaway because they bark and I would not know how to train one to bark on command. The Border collies have always been my

dogs and I cannot see any reason to change. My brother works his dogs in an entirely different fashion from mine. We each have issues with the other. My dogs work for no-one else but me which, of course, is lovely but there are times when I would like them to work for my wife maybe. The new puppy has now latched onto this system, and has no time for my wife at all. None of my dogs are registered but I know where to buy one from a good line”.