



## Colin Pearse from Dartmoor

Years ago a shepherd's life was, in most situations, a solitary one. This was not especially so on Dartmoor as there was a myriad of little farms and communities - people communicated and socialised. However, in remote areas many shepherds wrote or sang poetry and Colin Pearse is one such. He always kept his beloved Whiteface Dartmoor sheep but also he is renowned for his knowledge and understanding of the countryside in and around Dartmoor that he has expressed in his numerous published poems.

The weather plays a fundamental role in how the moor is perceived and how it operates as an entity in an ever changing mood. The weather controls all moor life.

So, by its very moody nature, the moor attracts many artists, photographers, writers, poets, musicians and film makers. Among these are photographer and film maker, Chris Chapman, the Lakeman brothers (singers and composers both), composer Nigel Shaw and many others. These people catch the 'essence' of Dartmoor in their creative work.

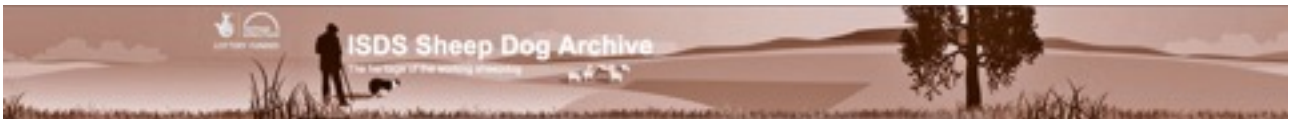


Unmistakably Whitefaced Dartmoors in a lovely Dartmoor lane.  
Moving Whitefaced Dartmoor sheep down a Dartmoor lane with a dog and just a 'sheep dog's story'  
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One of the 'many others' is Colin Pearse, the Dartmoor farmer poet following the tradition recorded by one Jonas Coaker, also a farmer poet born in 1808. Having recently 'retired' from farming his Devon cattle and his Whiteface sheep, Colin has been compiling wonderfully illustrated books about his beloved Dartmoor and, in particular, the Whiteface Dartmoor breed. His wife, Hazel, has retained a small flock of Whiteface Dartmoor ewes, and her young grandsons delight in helping with the tending and the showing of these beautiful creatures. Colin keeps a small herd of cattle 'to keep him out of mischief'.

*Photo from Coli Pearse's book 'Blissful Restless Dartmoor'*

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Although not strictly a shepherd in the true sense of the word, Colin Pearse has spent many solitary moments creating poetry that reflects the nature of the day-to-day work entailed in shepherding and cattle tending; observing the nuances of the natural world that abound. The moor has a culture that has not been affected by the passage of time or of modern life. It has a depth to it that perhaps is replicated in the Cumbrian fells. The record keepers, such as Colin himself and his friend Chris Chapman, have contributed to creating an essence of the land, the smell of which leaps out to you from the written page.

The surname Pearse is very well known. Many of you might remember the old 10 verse song about Widecombe Fair. It starts “Tom Pearse, Tom Pearse lend me your grey mare .....” . Tom was Colin’s great, great uncle. This year Colin found an 11<sup>th</sup> verse that was never printed. It refers to the fact that the horse that was loaned was only shod in one foot. If this story is only half true, it is still part of Dartmoor folk lore. No doubt an unstable old horse carrying eight men was not going to arrive at Widecombe Fair in time for the sale of animals!

And the literary link does not end there. The well known Shakespearean actor Paul Rogers was a relation, on Colin’s father’s side. Colin used to listen to him and his command of words especially when he read a Book at Bedtime with his wonderful lyrical voice. He was awarded a ‘Tony’ in America for his stage work. The sound of words eloquently spoken has stayed with Colin. Paul was 96 years old when he passed away a couple of years ago. Granny and Colin’s father were often quoting verse, and had little ‘sayings’ that they shared.



Jack Rowe at Teignhead Newtake rounding up the Scotch ewes and lambs, with his horse and dog. ©ISDS Sheepdog Archive, Colin Pearse

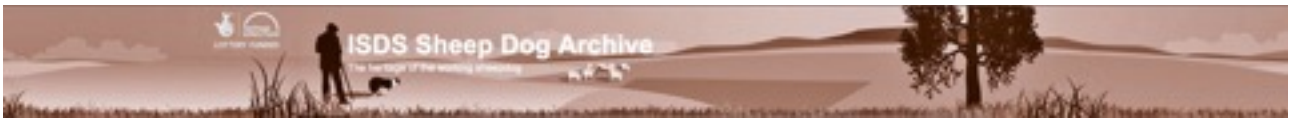
In the several books about Dartmoor that Colin has published, he catches a way of life that is vanishing. Many of the characters that helped him with his first book contributing their stories have now passed on so the piquancy of their inclusion is all the more intense.

He tells his story:

“On my Dad’s first tenanted farm of 47 acres, we boys had it really hard and had to help with milking by hand before we went to school. We had to clean

out shippens, shift mangel wurzels (root vegetables for stock) in the snow, cut cabbages and so on. Right from the beginning when I was old enough to toddle out to the yard, I developed my life-long affinity with animals.

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“I remember the cows eating their way through the hay and the aroma of the linseed belching out from them as they foraged. Milking by hand gave intimacy with the animal as you pressed your head into the flank of the cow, with the ensuing warmth and response of the animal as the milk frothed up in the pail. The memory of those times has stayed with me and still resonates deeply.

“We walked the lanes for years, my brother and I, observing nature. We could touch blackbirds on their nest and get close to the long tailed tits - the master builders. How does that little bird get the lichen onto the outside of its nest? And about 2,000 tiny feathers inside? We knew the whitethroats and the willow warblers. All these things appear in my poetry. One of the most wonderful nests was a whitethroat nest woven around the stem of a stinging nettle. So delicate it was, blowing in the wind. We had pleasure that children today rarely get.

“The fact that the farm was very traditional helped. Nothing was done in a hurry. We still used horses, no tractors, all gentle and quiet. Lapwings were in all the fields around our home, they could veer and fledge before hay making took place in July. Thus they survived. And we turned hay by hand with a pike. Life was poetical for us. Although my foundations were the genetics I had inherited, all the wealth of nature surrounding my brother and I helped form the men we grew into being.

“There was a very traditional English teacher at my school in Totnes who made us stand in front of the class and read a few lines of Thomas Hardy or another author. Being a shy introvert, I lived in my head and heart, absorbing the nature around me and so, combined with the rich aspects of the English Language, I was able to express my feelings in the words I used to write. I would question everything - how did the those colours of feather and egg come about? how did that little bird know how to build those amazing nests having never observed their parents do the same? Why this? and why that? and why is it different from something else? and so on.

“For many years my family lived in sight of the Dartmoor Tors but as Dad built up his business and we moved closer to Dartmoor, my poetry became even more stimulated. The untimely death of my twin brother had a profound effect on my poetry as well: ‘Somewhere eternal where doubt and fear just cease, and love and repose and freedom take their place to fill, where time stands still.’ And that is what you hope for. This vision of his being re-born is powerful stuff.

“A more mellow poem, ‘Where I walk, I walk the history beneath my feet; In field and barn and yard along Dartmoor’s sunken lanes; At first light I glance over growth wrapped hedges where butterflies dance; through well trodden gateways that I peep; granite framed with posts to hang the five barred wooden gate; I walk the history beneath my feet’. I feel it. I feel the sound of Saxon feet. Here where I live was a Saxon settlement. It was all here for them. The Saxons were great shepherds as they had reliable Dartmoor water and sheltered valleys to nurture their stock.



“‘Barrowmoor’, the family farm where my son is now farming is from the Saxon meaning ‘Bridge beside the Moor’.

“Embracing farming (which is poetry in its own right) results in a love of words and of nature, gained from my family, uniting in me. It only takes two lines. ‘I feel we’re touching winter again, it must be the darkness and the rain’. Those two lines have set me off into a full poem; inspired by the first few words to bring further delight.

“Then there is the commitment to animals. The sheep have always been around; from my grandfathers on both sides. My father started with the Grey Face Dartmoor that were always a bit of a challenge to say the least. Lambs found difficulty finding the milk bar with all the wool on the ewe’s undercarriage. Different gene set to the WhiteFace. Their behaviour was very different. With their dirty faces came their dirty behinds. They were not a maternal breed, the wool all over the place.

“Sometime around 1808, there were 14,000 White Faces in the Parish of Widecombe. So many that they became known as ‘Widecombes’. Very manageable sheep that did not get hung up on the gorse on the moor as did the Grey Face. Back then there was one family of three brothers who took 1000 sheep from Pudsham to the Warren Inn (on the main Moretonhampstead to Postbridge road). When they got to the pub, the sheep parted into three flocks and travelled to their individual heft. In the autumn they came together with hardly a sheep out of place. The continuity of that type of management over centuries is amazing to behold, and once broken is almost impossible to restart.

“Part of this management involves ‘swayling’ or burning the common at regular intervals in a pre determined pattern. This activity which is ‘controlled’ has rules with which to

comply that gives a number of benefits. The obvious one being that the scrub, gorse, bilberry and heather can be regenerated, and that re-growth sweetens the fodder intake for the animals. But it also creates a better haven for wildlife; the soft fresh shoots that emerge after the burning provide readily available food for ground nesting Curlew, Snipe and Lapwing chicks. Controlled burns are between November and the end of March”.



Always seems to be hands-on at ‘dipping time’. Here at Whay Barton (then owned by Leonard Pearse) can be seen from left to right: Will Hutchings, Maurice Mortmore, Terry Davis, Arthur Mortmore and a really inquisitive group of lovely Collie dogs having driven sheep to the dip. ©ISDS Sheepdog Archive, Colin Pearse (Photo: Len Pearse)

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Colin continues by quoting the nature poet, John Clare: “I saw the poems in the field and just wrote them down’. I too saw the poems on the moor and just wrote them down. The whole cycle of spring comes along and the swallows then returning. About 40 of them nested here during 2016. They find it difficult to find a new lair if they are displaced. I have wondered why a neighbour who converted a barn did not place a porch on the front of the conversion for the swallows. Anyway a lovely 18 verse poem evolved. A few lines of it follow.

‘The first Swallow’:

‘Up in the field it’s still muddy, still messy; ring feeder mud and sheep lambing; and you look up and you see the first swallow; totally captivated by this exciting moment in spring; coming away from the challenges of farming; in winter on Dartmoor where it is harsh and unforgiving.

‘At last the waiting’s over, the first swallow I see; Yesterday, no sign on high to say it’s nearly here; Today it’s clear, tail forked and feathers sheen as if planted in the sky; Flying hither and thither; I with joy almost cry; I wonder where, oh where, has it been? If only I could fly on its tiny wings; and be with the first swallow as it passes by and protect it on its journey in the sky; No footprints through the sky to follow, so how does it arrive?’ - that poem is very special.

“My sheep history is in tandem with my cattle history but my father liked sheepdogs and always had dogs around. I think modern shepherding is about shaking some cake in a bag and off they follow you, while you are on the Quad. Despite all that history of the breed only two flocks of Registered Whiteface Dartmoor go to the moor now in the summer. One flock belongs to Patrick Coaker at Winney Down, on a heft north of Kenny Watson and the other is the Caunters (Weekaborough) of Green Hill, Hexworthy to the south. Probably 200 sheep in all while, years ago, we were talking of 100,000 summer grazing over the four quarters of the moor.

“I never had great success with shepherding dogs. I was never a natural handler. Stan Hill from Chudleigh used to sell me dogs. My father, on getting a new dog, would put butter in the palm of his hand for the dog to lick and thereby ‘fond’ my father. So the dogs always returned. Dad was a good handler.

“Here is a story: ‘Seventy years ago the Dartmoor Shepherd with the Prison service, went out to see his sheep with a horse and sledge. It was so cold that they were all frozen to the ground. Lost all the flock. All were Greyface. Helpless and hopeless loss. This was the hard winter of 1947 when 3 million sheep were lost in the UK. What fuelled the tremendous loss was the summer of 1946 which was the wettest known by Colin’s wife’s (Hazel) grandfather. The first rick of hay made was the 12<sup>th</sup> September. So death of stock came not only just from the cold weather and snow drifts of the winter, but by the lack of fodder grown in the preceding year. Anyway, the Shepherd got back to the stable on the Prison farm, took off his overcoat and it stood up on its own where he placed it. Stiff with ice.

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“People these days would not know how to cope with those conditions as we have not had them since. Winters of '62 and '63 were a challenge though. But due to better weather reports, farmers brought their long woolled sheep down in-bye. Sheep, in a blizzard, go with the snow and end up in a drift with several more heaped up on top. The whole lot can suffocate.

“Of course, the dogs were a great help because they could mark where the sheep were buried. Wilf and Jack Irish stayed up all night to keep their sheep active; kept them walking around and around in the snow. What dedication! Hazel’s cousin Will Hutchings woke up one morning in 1947, and the sheep were on a level with his bedroom window.

“These tales were always touched with humour too. There were strong communities in those days. We had a village, a hall, a church and the loneliness that can occur these days was not experienced in the same way then. All the little days out at various shows saw to that. Just like the sheepdog trials, the shows were a day out for the shepherds and provided a little bit of competition as well. And they drove their stock ‘to and from’. One farmer, who will remain nameless, sold his dog eight times as it kept coming home.

“They were hard days but maybe more honest than now.

“These days farming incomers are making farming life more of a challenge because they do not have the understanding of the history of the terrain. Death Duties have been a problem and many farms have been split in order to pay the tax. Buyers want a house and a field so that they can play at farming so you would think that everyone is happy BUT it does not work like that. Dartmoor farming is as much an art as it is a skill, and an innate understanding of the moor is vital. For example, where do the commoners’ rights go? The newcomers are usually completely ignorant.



“The old Dartmoor farmers and shepherds wonder how it will all pan out as tourism is an industry that none could foretell all those years ago. So many people with too much money choose to buy the old houses and make them into little palaces, and then complain about the low speed limit across the moor. These limits were put in place to protect the sheep, cattle and ponies that have been wandering the moor since time immemorial. And many cannot cope with the silence”.

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