

The Dartmoor Clear Days Gather

Chewing on his pipe, Cyril gazed toward the distant hill and remarked "I think us'll drive down to the bottom, they'll be across 'afore long for their coffee"

It was a 'warm' grey day – not that the weather was warm - there was a stiffish breeze and the sky was overcast - but it was benign as days go on Dartmoor. Altogether a welcoming day and this was the day that I joined the Abel family for the late Autumn Dartmoor sheep gather. This is the gather that coincides with the Commons Clear Days – an annual occurrence on Dartmoor. This story is all about how the Clear days fit in with the overall management of Dartmoor National Park.

Before I joined Cyril Abel - Patriarch of the 'Clan' Abel, Dartmoor's oldest family - on the Clear Days sheep gather, I thought to do some research, as I did not want to appear too ignorant of what it is all about or what happens.

I would like to paint a picture of the Moors of Dartmoor: Dartmoor National Park covers 368 square miles and is the largest and wildest area of open country in

Caroline Woolley



Cyril and his pipe with photographer and film maker, Caroline Woolley © ISDS Sheepdog Archive

the south of England. These Commons form some 38% of the Park whole area, and of this 75% is moorland. It was this vast open space that promoted the area's designation as a National Park in 1951.

The Park is not owned by the Government – the term National indicates that it has been identified as being of importance to the natural heritage of our country and therefore has a special worthiness for protection and attention. Many individuals, organisations and large landowners own Dartmoor and this includes some public bodies. The Duchy of Cornwall owns 70,000 acres and is by far the biggest landlord; of this land, just under 50,000 acres is common land.

As a National Park is a living entity – people live and work there – then it is the responsibility of the National Parks Authorities to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage and to also promote to the general public opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area.

Sheep and the shepherding of them is crucial to the management of Dartmoor, and the roller coaster that hill farming has become seems to be somewhat of a threat to the balance that nature has always provided in this wild place. This will put further responsibility on the National Parks in their bid to continue fostering the economic and social wellbeing of local communities on the Moor.

The climate is dominated by the south west winds – cool and wet. On the high Moorlands where the altitude is over 1500 feet (450m) the conditions can be severe.

Princetown has an average of 83 inches of rain a year, while Widecombe in the Moor which nestles in a fold of hills less than 10 miles away averages 61ins per year.

This is harsh country – particularly when the weather is rough – there are few, if any, single trees! The indigenous people of the Moor are hardy, have a deep sense of wonder and respect about their home ground and recognise their own limitations within it. This is reflected in their approach to the husbanding of the land. They know how far they can go with it.

But a little while back the 'powers that be' deemed that the Moor had too many sheep and lowered the stocking rate, tying it all up in the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme of 1987 – Dartmoor was part of phase four of that initiative – which was introduced as a voluntary arrangement.

Fred Penwill from near Mary Tavy, Tavistock has a few things to say about the lower stocking rate and the effects it has had on the grazing.

"...with not enough stock on the Moor, the undergrazing is resulting in more gorse and a lot of old grass about. Some of it is two thirds of a metre high. Sheep won't eat the long grass and there are more ticks about on the Commons than I've ever seen."

Colin Abel from Peter Tavy, added that out-lambing had become a bigger problem as the excessive vegetation can cause the lambs to be more susceptible to joint ill.

Fred also said that Louping Ill is more of a problem now. One of his Shetland Ponies caught the disease and the vet had never seen it before in a pony.

One of the objectives of this particular gather – added to the natural time of year for tugging, is that some years ago, sheep scab was rife on the Commons and it was decided that the best way of ridding the little pest was to clear the Moor of all sheep thereby sending the little ectoparasitic blighters into oblivion.

It only works if the sheep leave the Moor. So if there are one or two left amongst the dense growth – well, you can see the problem!

The problem with getting DEFRA to reset the stocking rate is that the majority of land is now governed by the rules of the ESA – the criteria for which are more or less set in stone. The ESA was brought in as a voluntary arrangement but it soon altered and people were faced with not having any payment at all if their land was not part of the scheme!

Under grazing has long term effects when gathering in the sheep. 'Dugs' (dogs) cannot see the sheep in the long grass and higher gorse, or if they can see them, cannot reach them



Ancient and modern



Four dogs - somewhere



Wild grass - dogs can vanish



Coffee break

and the possibility that sheep are not being gathered becomes apparent. Subsequently the whole operation of the Clear Days gather then becomes null and void if not all stock are taken from the moor.

The soils that have created the vegetation, farming, buildings and industries of Dartmoor have been influenced in part by the geology of the area. Most of the rock is exposed granite - a very hard rock - and it is this which underlies the contrast between Dartmoor and the surrounding countryside.

The weathering of the granite for over ten million years has formed the interestingly shaped and historic tors. They are remnants of former landscape surfaces and are always on the horizon, giving Dartmoor its distinctive stark atmosphere. There has been much debate about how these tors were weathered and by what. You see, the entire area was covered in tropical and subtropical forests millions of years ago. And we are worrying about global warming! Been here before!

Dartmoor contains the largest concentration of Bronze Age remains in the country. This is mostly to do with the hard granite from which many of them are constructed and of course there has not been so much human activity on the Moor for thousands of years. There are many examples of burial chambers; standing stones or menhirs closely placed by stone rows and remains of round houses. The later Iron Age produced some Hill Forts to protect settlements and animals from marauders - there are about a dozen of these at various locations on the Moor.

Right in the middle of the Moor is an area of blanket bog. It is mostly about 50cm (15ins) thick but in parts it is over seven metres (about 25 feet) in depth. The bog is no longer accumulating or growing and its presence forms an important water holding resource for all of the county of Devon.

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 oakwoods and cave systems - these, on the southern side of the moor in a limestone area. The moor is host to wide range of non domestic animals - fox, roe deer, woodmouse, dormouse, grey squirrel and badger. Birds include snipe, reed bunting, yellowhammer, owl, house martin and swallow. Horseshoe bats live near Buckfastleigh on the south eastern side of the Moor. Each species has its own habitat area - the wild high moor attracting buzzard, ring ouzel, peregrine falcon and wheatear. The rivers host trout and salmon and attract cormorants and wintering wild duck.

So one can appreciate that there is a delicate balance of management required for the Moor and the domestic cattle and ponies are as key a feature as are the sheep.

The predominant breed of cattle that live on the common moorland is the Galloway breed - including the belted variety - but there are also South Devon and Highland cattle.

All the ponies on the Moor are privately owned but before going onto the commons they are marked or branded. Every year in late September or early October they are 'drifted' or gathered to a central point so that the owners can sort them out for a health check - the old, the sick and the infirm will be sold and the remainder returned to the moor. Currently there are about 3000 ponies on the Moor.

Historically, all people in the county had the right to graze the commons - except the burghers of Barnstaple and Totnes and many did so until the middle 1920s. 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, firewood for burning, bracken for bedding and, also for repairs, to take stone or gravel. It was also possible to take fish and to feed to pigs acorn or beechmast. All of these aforementioned items were for domestic use only.

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 dependant 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 fewer 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."

So how do the commons work? The booklet tells me that the Moor is divided into four sections, with Dartmoor Forest in the middle. Each quarter has four Council members. 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!

It seemed appropriate to get a more personal view of the people who work the moor and I also wanted to know how they view their working dogs (dogs), I first went to see Fred Penwill of Mary Tavy.

Fred is a first generation Dartmoor hill farmer and currently has sheep on the commons together with a number of Shetland ponies. He used to have a lot more sheep but the restrictions of the ESA arrangements has meant that he concentrates more on the successful riding school that his daughters run and he fetches in his sheep with his land rover whereas he used to take the horse and make a time of it. We had a bit of a chat around his kitchen table:

CW Dartmoor common land? What is a common?

FP Common land is the Moor that is in a parish that farmers like to graze with ancient rights.

CW Ancient rights - how far back do these go then?

FP Early 1900's after an Enclosure Act. I am the first generation actually farming on our own and I got the Commoners' rights by buying the property: they are attached to the land that I bought.

CW Does that mean you can graze a certain amount of Moor or have you got access to all of it?

FP We have access to all the common land in our parish, but we are limited to what we can stock on the common. The old rights used to be five sheep or one cow or one pony per acre but now it is a lot less.

CW Is that five sheep per acre available on the Moor or is it per acre of what you have got on your farm?

FP It is the Parish land, so with the reduction to our carrying capacity it makes the Moor carry less too.

CW Does that make life difficult? And if so in what way?

FP Not enough stock on the common has resulted in a lot more gorse.

CW Does DEFRA do anything at all to help you?

FP Well no, but we do get an ESA payment. We were told that it was voluntary and we didn't have to join it originally, but economics have forced us down that road.

CW You said that you are the first generation. Did you come here as a sheep farmer?

FP Yes, I had a few sheep.

CW How many sheep have you on the Moor at the moment?

FP About 150 – less than I would like. I go up and fetch them in every now and then for welfare reasons – tupping – putting the rams on – lambing and shearing.

CW Now about these Close days – this happens to coincide with tupping doesn't it?

FP More or less, the hill sheep go to the ram later as we don't want them to lamb too early as the winters are hard up here.

CW So we are talking about November for the gather. How do you choose the day you are going fetch them?

FP Depends on the weather – can't gather if it is misty and it is misty a lot here. We like to put the rams on by 5th November. When they come in we see to their feet tidy up the back ends and make them fit for the ram. By this time our in-bye flock are almost at the end of tupping – they lamb early March. So my management system can cater for the two flocks.

We also bring the hill sheep in at the end of January for scanning and keep the doubles in, the singles return to the Moor to lamb.

The Clear Days were introduced when they first had sheep scab on Dartmoor. A decision taken by the commoners to close the Moor for at least two weeks to all stock in order for the scab mite to die for not having a host to live on. We treat them for parasites with an injection although some farmers dip their sheep. With so many regulations around and the disposal of the dip it is easier to inject – seems to work for us anyway.

On this part of the Moor my sheep are usually the last to be gathered. By this time other sheep will have been already gathered and mine, – sheep not being as daft as people think – realise they are a long way off so are likely to be part way here by the time I go to fetch them in? Very cooperative, my sheep!

Part of our Common is fenced where the main road goes through to Okehampton – fenced it 10 years ago. On this side here, it is not enclosed so the sheep are hefted in common with all hill sheep. Mine are Blackface traditional hill sheep.

CW Some people gather without dogs don't they?

FP If you have a Quad you won't have good sheepdogs! Quads have definitely interfered with good sheepdog work and training. Some people haven't got the knack or the patience to work a dog anyway so I suppose the Quad is helpful for them otherwise they would not get any gathering done.

I like to have them as puppies and once they start looking to work I'll start taking them out with me. I generally let them run out round with the others but take them in hand to give them close training as they get their confidence. No sheepdog is perfect but a puppy will pick up on the faults of the older dogs, so I like to train them on their own so that I can get them to go left and right and stop which is the most important. We get the occasional dud – one didn't work sheep for three years. One I had was never interested at all. She would play with the lambs. Had to find a good pet home for her!

Fred has changed his sheep keeping policy from mostly hill farming to lowland as a result of the lower stocking rates on the common but with his riding school now providing the larger part of his income, keeping the hill sheep is a means of keeping his common land rights alive.

To add to my understanding, I went to see Colin Abel who with his family looks after a considerable amount of Dartmoor land. They have several in-bye farms and the resultant amount of common land acreage roamed by their stock amounts to about 14,000. Colin is Chairman of the Dartmoor Forest Common. Some of the subjects that Fred and I talked about were confirmed by Colin. This is some of the conversation that Colin and I enjoyed:

CW Colin, I understand that you have a position here with these Commoners? Would this have anything to do with your

family having farmed Dartmoor for many generations?

CA 1888 is when the Abels bought Lower Godsworthy and moved from a lowland farm just the other side of Tavistock. They bought from here up to the end of the valley. There were two brothers but one decided that it was not for him and after a few years so sold his share and we have been here ever since. I think it is five generations.

CW How different is the Moor now from back then?

CA Mechanisation! What was done with horses is now done with Quad bikes but other than that very little has changed. The weather is always a challenge as it ever has been and the type of stock we keep is pretty much the same as well.

Things change depending on the sort of subsidies that we got – this would then be reflected into how many stock we kept but numbers are coming down now.

CW Your Commoners rights go with the amount of in-bye land you have got?

CA Prior to 1965 when Commoners rights had to be registered, Commoners had Parish Common Rights and dues had to be paid to the Duchy of Cornwall, and the Parish Council would pay for this – especially for horse grazing. Then in 1965, people registered their own right to graze the Forest and also their home Commons and the fees stopped going to the Duchy.

The late autumn Gather has operated for at least 20 years as a result of a decision taken by the Commoners Council that was formed in 1985 to control sheep scab.

CW What breeds of sheep do you run on the commons?

CA The hardest sheep in the centre of the moor are Scotch Blackface, being stockier sheep than Swales. We also have Welsh Mountain but they live better on the edge of the Moor on the home commons. Back in the 80s it would have been Scotch Blackface.

CW What about the White and Greyface Dartmoor breeds?

CA Some would say that the Moor was only ever used for summer grazing but my family would argue that our stock is bred to graze all the year round. My brother keeps a pedigree flock of Whiteface Dartmoor and the improvements to the breed over the years would mean that it could not survive a winter out on the Moor. Years ago it might have done. In those days the wethers were kept for the wool but not now.

CW Would you talk to me about the dogs you use? Is there a particular type of dog that is better suited to the high Moorland?

CA These ones that we use are not your stylish collie and trialling type dog. These are used to running long distances for anything up to eight or nine hours at a time. Back along I guess they would not have had to run quite so fast as they now have to to keep up with the bikes. They are used to working away for many miles and gathering small groups.

CW This is a pure modern working dog situation, so have your dogs changed in their conformity since granddad's day?

CA Yes, they have got smaller; they are tough and not so rangy as before. We must do 60 or 70 miles in a day and the dogs do twice as much as that. We mostly breed our own replacements, brother keeps dogs and I always keep bitches and at the moment most of our offspring is coming from brother's best dog. Sometimes we will hear of a dog that is ideal for what we want so to introduce a new strain we will go outside. We will only use dogs from around the Moor as lowland dogs would not have the stamina. We see them out working and can make a judgement to keep a puppy from the next litter after mating with one of my bitches. Years ago my parents bought some sheep from Wales and came with a couple of puppies, but they never seemed to be able to cope with the Moor so well as the ones father bred himself.

I've got five dogs, one brother has seven and my other brother has about three. All three of us are out on a gather, and there are two lads that help. Probably about 20 dogs altogether if it



Ready for home

is a big a gather.

We will start gathering at the beginning of November and it will take anything up to two or three weeks to get them all in. We go from Princetown all the way to Okehampton. We do it in stages. It can take about ¾ hour on the bikes to get to the other side of our common ground.

There are patches on Dartmoor that have sheep scab so it is important that all stock is treated before they go into the in-bye fields. We will dip them all so that when they go back out in January they are free from lice and scab.

CW Do you advocate dipping, then?

CA Yes, pour ons are all right and so are injectables but it is easy to miss one, you might think the needle has gone in but it has not. So if you have got scab you have wasted time and money as the sheep will be reinfected from just one missed sheep. Father says he likes to give them a wash anyway!

After they have been dipped you can see how much grit has been on them. Granite rock on the moor! Washing the sheep gives them a bit of a lift.

We work in a big sweep, have one man in the middle and he pushes everything to the man beside him and then there is me and my brother on the outside, my brother does the widest circuit and he keeps pushing them to me so that they are always following the contour.

It is a whole day gather. Father used to leave in the dark to get across as it is a good half days ride out around. We leave at a more sensible time of about 7.30 am but are not back until almost dark. We can just about see the farm as we approach it.

We are not just picking up our sheep but lots of other people's as well. Whatever sheep are on the Common, we bring them in.

CW How do you separate them out?

CA Baggator Farm is set up for sorting them out. There are four sets of pens with a race and dividing gates and so different people's sheep can be raced through easily. Over the years the number we have to sort out has reduced as less people graze the Forest. I think there are probably three of us flockmasters working the Forest whereas there would have been double figures in the past.

We will probably gather about 1500 ewes on the Forest part of the Moor on this particular gather. Above Mary Tavy about five or six hundred. Then another four to five hundred on the Western quarter. We've got about 3000 Moorland sheep and another 2000 in-bye. These are all dotted around Peter Tavy and Tavistock.

Because we gather so far north of the Forest we pick up some of the sheep belonging to people on that side of the Moor and likewise when they gather they'll pick up some of ours.

Of course all Ministry regulations have to be abided by, but during the last Foot and Mouth business we had to gather for shearing and so we sheared the extra sheep we gathered because, of course, all movements were stopped and people could not collect their animals, and they did the same for us. Otherwise we would have had a 21 day Stand Down period to deal with.

CW What do you think will happen with the erratic weather patterns that we are now getting and the undergrazing on the moor?

CA Stock are finding it harder then ever to find areas that are worth eating that is palatable. It is also harder for us to move stock in the directions that we are used to because the vegetation is over grown and the sheep cannot get through. The dogs are finding it harder to get in front of the sheep as the paths the sheep are using are that much narrower and there is no separate path for the dogs to use to get ahead. You look around for your dog and he's trying to bounce through the gorse and causing problems with his feet – sore pads. Also it makes it harder to make sure that the sheep have all been gathered in – you only have to leave one scab infected sheep out there for the whole moor to be reinfected.

CW So those are a couple more welfare issues then – re-infection and dogs who cannot work because their feet are torn to pieces from the gorse and rough grass?

CA The dog can usually travel a lot quicker than the bike but with the increase in rough grass and gorse, the bikes are getting to the point that they are quicker than the dogs!

CW Tell me about how you negotiate the bog.

CA The Dartmoor peat bogs – blanket bogs – are right in the middle of the moor and animals have disappeared into them! Father and his horses would have to negotiate them carefully but you can take the Quads anywhere within reason. Father would also have relied more on his dogs than we do.

The relationship between us and our dogs is different from that which father and his generation enjoyed. I guess that the dog itself has evolved to suit the difference.

CW Is it still possible – given that you haven't the time anyway – to gather the moor by horse?

CA Yes it is, although the peat tracks through the blanket bogs have caved in – it would still be possible to gather. There



A way to go

is still one man who gathers by horse, but he does not go out into the centre because he knows that the Quads can cover the ground for him. We will see his chap gathering on the bike and he will come out later in the day to pick them up on horseback.

One of the things that we find difficult is when the sheep go out of sight. We think we have gathered their hefted area only to find that the blighters have gone over a hill that is outside their area and we miss them. All the sheep on the Moors and commons are hefted – mother passes on the knowledge to daughter and so on.

CW What about your stamina? It must take it out of you doing it every three or four months

CA Yes, the body does suffer. Aches and pains – but it is part of the job!

CW What about the dogs? Do you feed them any differently when they are on a gather?

CA No, although we do realise that they cannot keep going day in and day out, so we add that into the structure of the gather, so that the dogs can have a rest – not to mention ourselves! We try to put a day between gathers for the dogs to have a 24 hour rest - we might use some older dogs who do not go out on the gather to work the yard.

CW And this would be one of the reasons why you would take a fortnight to conduct the full gather rather than cram it all into one week? The largest mob takes about three to four days to process from fetching in to final sheep through the dipper.

CA Father comes as well, so you could go with him in his Mule which we call the ambulance – he picks up the casualties! About 20th Nov, after we have put the rams on, we go out to do a sweep. My older brother goes out and sends them into me and I'll walk them home steady – we go in pairs. Not an easy job as there are so few to gather – more difficult than a mob. Got to keep them moving in the right direction otherwise you'll lose them again. Need a good few dogs. The sheep are usually the very slow ones, so you need a dog with a steady pace to just keep them moving along at their own pace.

The 20 dogs I mentioned would be from the old ones who likely have had their day to the puppies who are learning the job. Having a big mob of dogs means that all eventualities can be covered. The young keen dog is ideal for moving a mob along quickly while the old steady ones can bring up the rear.

In the horse days there would have been more flocks involved and more sheep. More horse riders and dogs would have been involved.



Almost there

We left the conversation at that point and the notion of horses and dogs was resumed several days later with Cyril, Colin's dad during our trip to the gathering area. Joining Cyril and me on board the Mule, was Chris Chapman, West County photographer and film maker. Chris is making a film of life on Dartmoor over twelve months which he started last July. He joined us to take photographs of the boys at work, but especially of Cyril who has been working the moor for almost 70 years and is a well known raconteur and whom Chris will make a feature of his film.

We left Lower Godsworthy Farm above Peter Tavy, Tavistock after some coffee – the boys had gone early and Cyril was to take out the 'Mule' with a small trailer so that the 'casualties' could be picked up. At this stage I could not ascertain whether these would be sheep, dog or human!

This 'mule' vehicle is remarkable – I suppose it is based on a Quad bike but looks like a golf buggy. But this is a buggy with teeth. Very big ones! The terrain it took us over and through, wrestled by Cyril, was challenging.

Leaving the farm with Wedlake to our right we headed for Peter Tavy Great Common and Langstone Moor. Part of our route was an old MOD track and we passed evidence of settlements at White Tor and a standing stone and stone row nearby as we travelled towards Maiden Hill which was our destination. As there was not enough room in the front for us all and the camera equipment, Chris chose to sit in the back of the Mule – he had a bumpy ride.

CW Sheep ahead of us just coming over the top of the brow there. Sheep pouring over the hill like so many freckles on the landscape. I have waited all year to sit here and experience this. For me this is like being part of a continuum. Leaving out the modern quad bike and the vehicle we have used to get here, we could be many hundreds of years ago. The Tors are pretty much the same, the bog has been here for ever, those buzzards have always called, loud and mournful. Deeply satisfying!

CC You know, a day like today, so long as it doesn't rain is a real Dartmoor Day. If you can't see Fur Tor you should get worried or really worried if you can't see Cyril!

CW How far away from the farm are we here, Cyril?

Cyril Difficult to say, but several years ago there was a fire out here and I drove out in the land rover and came through where we've been but the track was lot better then, when I got back home I'd done 11 miles!

You know, I learnt to ride on the



Last ones in bye

pony that my mother had learned to ride on. He would have been about 36 by the time I got to him. Used to come up here from about four years of age. The sort of pony that would stop and let you climb back on if you fell off. Before that my father used to take me on his horse in front of him.

CW There is a bike coming from Fur Tor on the left down the valley. There's another bike on our right and the other one has gone into that fold over the hill. I guess they have all got their dogs with them, how many?

Cyril Colin would have three, Nick three, Phil maybe two. Trevor will have two dogs. But where the gorse is so high the dogs will have a difficulty getting through.

CW It's an ancient thing – bringing the sheep off the Moor – was it always the case?

Cyril Oh yes, for the breeding, the Clear Days now, but always for shearing anyway.

CW It looks as if the ewes have a rough idea as to where they are expected to travel. There they are, congregating and waiting. They look very white, have they been shorn this year?

Cyril Yes, we would bring them in, in July to shear them and again in September to wean them and they would be on the

farm for three weeks then we return the replacement lambs to the Moor where the ewes help 'lear' (left) them. Now they will stay off the Moor in-bye until about February.

CW Do you bring them in for lambing?

Cyril Yes, but quite often we will walk them back but if it is a reasonable spring we will leave them there to lamb.

Now, I think us'll drive down the bottom they'll be across before long for their coffee And this is where we began!

The trip back to the farm was less hazardous than the one out as Colin moved the sheep ahead of us by a different route. We picked up about five or six exhausted animals – mostly lambs. The boys carried some smaller lambs on their bikes. We sighted some 'spare' sheep away to our left at one point but Cyril confidently said that these were not theirs! How the dickens he could predict this at several hundred yards only a Dartmoor man can tell. They are long in sight as well as in experience!

Silly as it sounds, it was as if I had gathered in those sheep myself as the gate was shut on the tail enders – a viddy (good) day! Next year's late gather had better drashon (get a move on)!



Job done: Abel men (from left of photo) Colin, Nick, Phil and Cyril