Dartmoor and Shepherding Dogs.

The context needs to be borne in mind when writing about shepherding families, their dogs and their sheep. Methods of farming sheep are vastly different throughout the United Kingdom. Sheep have evolved to suit the terrain and climate of the area in which they live and the purpose for which they are farmed. In the West Country there are three moorland areas, each with their own distinctive atmosphere and methods of farming. Similarly, shepherding dogs used to work these sheep have also evolved to suit their terrain. An example would be that of the soft lowland shepherding dog, which would find the hills and fells of the north and of Wales and Scotland difficult. Conversely, the more hardily bred northern dogs would find many (not all) southern acres not to their taste.

In order to establish some of these parameters, this narrative is about the character of Dartmoor; one of the National Parks of Great Britain, and its sheep, shepherds and sheepdogs. In order to get a feel for this moor it is necessary to talk about the land profile and its administration.

Dartmoor National Park covers 368 square miles and is the largest and wildest area of open country in the south of England. Common land forms some 38% of the Park's 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 is particularly worthy of 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. Almost 50,000 acres is common land.

As a National Park is a living entity with people who live and work there, it is the responsibility of the National Parks' authorities to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage, whilst also promoting the general public's 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. The governance of hill farming now seems to be something of a threat to the balance that nature has always provided in this wild place. This will place further responsibility on the National Parks in their bid to continue fostering the economic and social well-being of local communities on the moor.

The climate is dominated by the south west winds making it cool and wet. On the high moorlands, where the altitude is over 1500feet (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 regarding 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. This edict caused no end of husbandry problems for all concerned and reference to this is made further into this narrative.

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, (very hard rock), and it is this which underlies the contrast between Dartmoor and the surrounding countryside.

The weathering of the granite for over 10 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 sub-tropical 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 much human activity on the moor for thousands of years. There are many examples of burial chambers, standing stones or menhirs closely placed together and the 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.

In the middle of the moor is an area of 'blanket bog'. It is mostly about 50cm (19 inches) thick but in parts it is over seven metres (about 22 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 with reference to blanket bogs, upland heaths, upland oak woods and cave systems; these on the southern side of the moor in a limestone area. The moor is host to a wide range of non-domestic animals such as fox, roe deer, woodmice, dormice, 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 attracts 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. The domestic cattle and ponies are as key a feature as the sheep mentioned earlier.

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

Historically, all people in the county had the right to graze the commons except 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, harvest domestic firewood, gather bracken for bedding and also, for repairs, to take stone or gravel. It was also possible to take fish and to feed the pigs acorn or beechmast. All of these aforementioned items were for domestic use only.