



Hazel Pearse nee White of Batworthy, Moretonhampstead

The subject of the shepherds of Dartmoor cannot be left without the addition of information about one of the oldest families. Hazel Pearse keeps a small flock of Whiteface Dartmoor sheep which she enjoys showing with her two grandsons. She also has a herd of Dartmoor ponies that roam the Moor.

Hazel is the wife of Colin Pearse of White faced Dartmoor sheep fame. She is the sole remaining member of the White family and gave up her family name when she married Colin. This is Hazel's story:

“My family and I moved to Barramoor Farm in 1952 when I was six years old having previously lived at Yardworthy Farm with my mother's sister who had married into the Hutchings family. Ken Hutchings is her cousin. Both sides of my family can be traced back to the early 1800's - in fact I think the earliest document is dated 1790. Mum came from a farm near Chagford. All of my family, on both sides, have been on Dartmoor - all over it. The Whites were mainly from the Widecombe area and the Wonnacotts from Chagford. Sometimes second cousins married second cousins”.

Hazel explained that the families of Dartmoor intermarried, but not too closely, meaning that family lines sometimes got lost in the mist. Each farm was about 50 acres and sustained quite large families for several generations. All these farms had Commoners' rights which enlarged the actual grazing capability of each farm. She continues her story:

“Barramoor, that I inherited from my parents, was only 40 acres when we moved there in the early 50's and is now about 180 acres; still a comparatively small farm by modern standards. Together with this farm, Batworthy, we farm about 350 acres now. This figure is still not large and has to support two families. We have 'Moor Rights' on top of those home acres. The moor ground can be used for cattle, sheep or ponies but not all three. What we do is get together with the other farmers on our piece of common and we share the rights between us. For us on North Bovey common, we are allowed to graze 20 ponies. I was paid to put my pedigree Dartmoor ponies on the common and would go to the moor each day with a bucket or two of pony nuts in order to 'lair' them; i.e. teach them to stay within a certain area.

“Back along, this distribution of commoners' rights was written within the farm deeds and registered with the parish. When we had the 40 acres at Barramoor, it was 7 ponies, 4 cows and 30 sheep. This was in 1952. So when Dad bought another 40 acres then more rights came with the deeds. The ponies were all branded and were gathered in a pony drift in October before the sales. More money was made in those days than is the case now. The administration of the commons is a more serious job than before and you can get fined if your animals stray onto ground that is not HLS supported. Animals must not stray from the 680 odd acres of North Bovey moor to the Widecombe moor.

“The swaling of the moor, which is the burning of gorse to allow new grass growth, was always practised, as it sweetens the ground and the animals love the taste of the new growth. The burn could last for a week. We are not allowed to do it in one fell swoop, as

Courtesy of the ISDS Sheepdog Archive/HLF Project,

Written by Caroline Woolley

Photos courtesy of Colin Pearse (see other article)

Copyright owned by the ISDS Sheepdog Archive and Colin Pearse



before, as we are restricted to 5 hectares a year (about 12.5 acres). We cannot rise up against these restrictions as we all need the HLS payment. This is all monitored annually. Currently, because of the Brexit concerns, government will only guarantee 2 years of the next 10 years of payment.

“When did the first White appear on Dartmoor? Possibly in the late 1700’s? Many of the family are buried in Widecombe churchyard. You could call them the Whites of Widecombe. My Dad was born on a remote farm outside Widecombe, and moved a couple of times to Langworthy, where he and his brother, Owen, would ride one pony the five miles over the moor to school in Widecombe. The pony knew the way so the children were completely safe even in the wintertime.

“The family moved to Batworthy in 1921. The property cost £2000 at the time. Dad was eight and Joe was one year old, and he was pushed in the pram from Langworthy to Batworthy. There were four horse and carts bringing the family chattels and the pram followed on behind. Joe, my uncle, was the family member who never married and he left the farm to me. I was the only child of that generation and the last of the Whites. Granny White died quite young. She used to make butter that was stored in tubs and placed in the butter well up the lane.

“Travelling by pony and trap with this produce, she would put it on the train at Moretonhampstead for Newton Abbot. She would then carry the butter to the market at the top of the town. She would also take cream, rabbits and pigeons to help the family exchequer. There were two farm workmen that lived here as well. By the 30’s and 40’s, the farm here was about 100 acres and therefore needed at least 3 men to work it. Dad went to live with Mum’s family at Shapley Farm, Chagford, in 1945, and got himself a job near Chagford. All my cousins were boys so I was a bit of a tomboy. I had my own Dartmoor pony that Father Christmas brought one year. It had come from Scotts at Holne. I used to ride with Dad and play with my Wonnacott cousins while Dad was working. There were no other Whites and I am the last of them. It’s a shame. White could be put in with my grandson’s names but my son does not have the same feel about family as my generation.

“When ‘Granfer’ White lived here by himself, he had the devil of a job to keep the place warm. Right at the far end the ceilings were down and it was very cold in the middle where he lived.

“When I left school, I wanted to be a hairdresser but Dad insisted I come home to work. I used to go to school in Chagford. There was a hairdressers’ shop in the Square where they were advertising for an apprentice but Dad said ‘no, you don’t want to do that, I need you at home’. He bought me a tractor when I was seventeen, so I could work here, and a shearing set. He threw me the keys and said ‘here you are maid, get on with it’. Dad was desperate for a son but didn’t get one. I was always treated like one and there were no such words as ‘I can’t do that’. ‘No such word as ‘can’t’, he always used to say. It used to frighten me to death really. Although quite tiny I was always very strong and wiry. In the bad winter of 1963, we had to carry small bales up to sheep over in the quarry field, and it took three quarters of an hour to get these two bales of hay up a steep slope to 60 odd sheep. He carried one and I carried the other before walking back.



I was so tired at the end of the working day that I would be in bed by 8pm. Dad brought a big fir tree from the copse of all the trees and hedges and cut it up in the middle of the yard for the Rayburn. Every day we carried fresh cut wood to the house from the yard.

“Did I tell you about Uncle Pete Hutchings out at Lakeland which was 6 miles away on the moor? He rang up and he had sheep really hungry for hay but we could not get up there for three or four weeks, and then only with the tractor and link box. There was no road over the moor to take the width of a trailer so I think it was about 12 bales we could manage on the link box and we saw many dead sheep up there. I also remember telling Dad to stop one day as there was a pony ahead. I walked up to it only to find it was frozen to death and still standing up. There was a robin on its mane and it flew off. That scene has always stuck in my mind.

“Dad used to take a lot of keep at Chagford and the owners would come to Barramoor for cream and eggs, which is how we got to know them. Anyway, Dad rented a lot of grass keep and I had to walk the sheep and cattle to the fields with a dog called Sharp. It was quite a distance. Sharp knew the way and followed my hand commands. When I was getting near a turning for North Bovey or Bovey Tracey all I had to do was to put out my left hand for ‘left’ and my right to turn ‘right’. I don’t know how we would have managed without these good working dogs. I always had a dog, never two, for working. I used to train up a new one to replace the old one. But then flocks were never big; I think the most he had was 86 sheep. We have got 44 here now. All the old boys would have just the one dog working to hand signals or a ‘get in behind’, command; nothing like today. If you were right on the moor you might have two with probably more sheep also.

“The ponies all have to have passports, and there is lots of paperwork but many of the old ones and colt foals end up at Paignton Zoo for the lions. Stallions have to be registered by one of the farmers with rights, and they have to go through the Commoners’ Council to be marked as a stallion. I cannot keep the foals born to my mares because I cannot prove the sire. Usually a coloured foal will make more at Chagford market than a bay filly. My best two pedigree mares I do not turn out on the moor, as I like to do a bit of showing and keep the quality. They go to in-bye land owned by Roger Winzer. Money from the Duchy will pay expenses to ensure the mares are covered by the correct stallion. The scheme I belong to will not take the mares until they are three years of age. A four year old of mine has been covered and hopefully will produce a filly foal for me. The others are ‘on the pill’. Last year was a good one and we sold all the foals”.