



Layland Branfield from Dartmoor

Moving to a different part of the moor, and focusing on hill farming in particular, we talk with Layland Branfield; a comparative newcomer to Dartmoor having decamped from his traditional home on Exmoor and taking up the tenancy of his Duchy farm at Michaelmas 1987 arriving in October.

Moorland Farm is ring fenced; a little island on its own. Twenty five acres of 'cuttable' land and 200 acres of rough ground all owned by the Duchy of Cornwall.



Layland told me his story “Father thought I was mad because he could not work out how I was going to utilize the rough ground but, as I had been educated in Cumbria and had shepherded there for two or three years, as well as in 1981, I had a fair idea of how it was done. All I did was copy the system we had in Cumbria. After all, they have wet hill land just like here.

“I cut my teeth on hill farming after a stint as a student at Kirkley Hall Agricultural College in Northumberland, where a hill farming focus prevailed. There was also a sheepdog training course too. For a while I acted as shepherd at the college as the incumbent was ill. There was no remuneration attached to this role but I got loads of experience. Also I bought a dog pup from Ron Bailey, the shepherd. It was by Tully’s Glen (whose father was Wiston Cap) and out of Ron’s Fleece, so when I started a job in Cumbria I took him and also the dog I had been given on Exmoor by a retiring shepherd.



“My first job after college, and after a trip to the USA, was on the estate of Lord Inglewood, where I was under shepherd working with 1600 Swales. I was responsible for half of them. This job turned up when I was in the middle of persuading dad to move from Cheviots to Swales, and I went to the Swale ewe sale at Middleton when I went for the job interview. Dad bought some Blue faced Leicesters and it happened that 800 of the 1600 Swale ewes, at my new job, were put to a Blue faced Leicester to produce mules. The other 800 were put to Swale tups. Therefore I was taught how to pick good tups and how to dress mule ewe lambs for Lazonby Show and Sale. I learned a great deal about upland sheep which has stood me in good stead for my farming years here on Dartmoor.

“So I had my two dogs and then I bought a pup from Brian Hall that was by Bobby Dalziel’s Joe. Gem was nice bitch but she had to be told what to do. She would have been perfect otherwise. She doubted her own ability in decision making ‘what the hell do you want me to do here?’

“I also ran old Ben in trials and Belle and Gem too. Used to run in the nurseries and sat on several committees. My friend in the north, Eddie Wills, who is keen on trialling and has run in the National, retired recently and sold me one of his dogs, Glen. Eddie ran Gael when the National was at York and was reserve for the team. I bought a bitch pup, named Belle, from Northumberland who was by Rogerson’s Spot from Cottonshope.

“In Cumbria, where ewes are sometimes right back on the fells, they cannot always get to the sheep. So they use a barky dog that would only bear a passing resemblance to a border collie. It is hard ground to work. Shepherding is what needs doing and it’s not about what sort of dog is helping. They developed a dog to do the job and this is called the cur dog. Hard dogs, hard sheep and hard men.

“My old Ben was tricoloured and rough coated. Gem was a tricolour bare-skinned (short coated) and Zac, their son, also ‘bare skin with a ‘wall eye’. When I was at home shepherding on Exmoor, I could trial because someone could do my jobs. But when I came here I had to slow up a bit. I would enter a whole lot of trials but something always cropped up. I was full of good intentions. I know that Glen can trial and who knows!

“All my dogs are out of registered stock and I always tried to buy something from a proven line. I am a Life Member of the ISDS and used to register the pups too. Most of what I have used are home bred. But the current Glen is one that I bought. He is the first bought-in dog in 20 years. Sometimes I have used dogs purely because I like them irrespective of their pedigree. Working with my brother Julian, who farms on Exmoor, I have developed a line.



“I like to use Watson dogs from time to time. Tan went to Kenny’s Roy and Fly; Tan’s daughter went to Matt. All I focus on now is something that will work on sheep, cattle and ponies. I have not taken part in trialling for about ten years although last year I judged at our local August Bank Holiday Trial at Sampford Spiney. I have got dogs out there that are as hard as they can be and have to screw them down to work k effectively. The 225 acres that comprised the original farm has grown. In September 1993, I rented the farm next door, Prince Hall, thereby adding 347 acres and ran them as one holding of 572 acres. There are common rights for 350 sheep and 175 cattle on the common that is next door. When we were first here, I used to scan sheep from the middle of December to the end of February and then organise my own sheep. I would then shear commercially from May in the Exeter area, at the same time as calving until July on the moor. Then I took on dipping from the middle of June to the middle of October.

“When I took on the farm next door, I let my brother Julian use the dip, with the proviso that dipping my sheep would be the payment. In the last year of dipping I did 10,000 sheep! When he took on the dip he did 100,000! The dip is still in use and he already has 5,000 lined up for this week (first week in February). He has a dim view of farmers that waste their money on ‘injectables’ and ‘pour ons’ and the like. Dipping is the only

totally effective method of eradicating ectoparasites. Doing the contracting enabled us to farm here but then I reduced the shearing a bit to get the new farm up and running. This year is the first year in 32 winters that I have not done any scanning ; my shoulders are giving way. I am happier now that I do not have to be elsewhere during my farming day.



“Gem’s grandfather was John Thomas’s Don. Went scanning in Scotland years ago when we were still on Exmoor and the first farm was Minavey; Willie Welsh’s place. He had the father of Don, also called Don. The brown nose went down the generations and the brown came right out nearly to the end of the nose. I can look at a tricolour and trace them right back to the original Don. Same with Jim Lothian’s Drift that had a half white tail and that keeps coming through the generations. If you see any dog with a half white tail you can trace



it back to Drift. Glen's great aunties were pictured with me in 2001; he has Stobart's Floyd and Dalziel's Wisp behind him.

"Having lost the majority of my sheep in the FMD outbreak in 2001 I have gradually built up to 450 head of Swale ewes mostly put to a Swale ram. Building up the flock has been hampered by the Environment scheme that came in which restricted the numbers on the commons. Had 60 ewes stolen from the common last year.

"I returned to Cocker mouth ewe sales to get replacements and bought from folk I know. I usually buy 50 to 90 each year from Cumbria. I know all the guys in Cumbria from having run dogs with them. Trialling started for me in 1981 and on most weekends we trialled right through the winter. These were the North Westmorland Nursery trials and I read the reports in the Farmers' Guardian.

"The memory of the 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak is still within the hearts and minds of the Dartmoor shepherds. They suffered deeply, not just from the loss of income, and the difficulties of processing and following all the regulations but particularly from their loss of stock; some with old breeding lines that could not be replicated. I think what got to me was that, besides the dreadful loss of stock, it was the incompetence, sheer idiocy and lack of commonsense that abounded. Pray we never have another outbreak of this devastating disease.

"Currently, besides the 450 Swale ewes, there are 20 grey faced Dartmoor, 20 blue faced Leicester, 60 Texel ewes and 30 Herdwicks plus some odd mules. We are members of the Swaledale Society; the Grey faced Dartmoor Society and the Blue faced Leicester Society. I expect one day we will belong to the Herdwick Society!"