

# Farming on Dartmoor

## Dartmoor Factsheet



### Prehistoric times to the present day

For over 5,000 years farming has been the main land use on Dartmoor. Working and re-working the land, farmers have created and maintained a large part of the Dartmoor landscape. Today over 90% of the land within the National Park boundary is used for farming. Much of this area is both open and enclosed moorland where livestock is grazed, and the remainder is made up of fringe enclosed farmland which mainly comprises improved grassland. In addition, woods, shelterbelts, wetlands, rough pasture, traditional buildings and archaeological features all contribute to the character of the farmed land.

The well-being of the hill farming community is fundamental to the future of Dartmoor as a National Park in landscape, cultural, ecological and enjoyment terms and for the viability and sustainability of the local rural community. Employment, care for the landscape and the environment, tourism, family structure and life, tradition, rural services and businesses are all inter-related. All these elements come together to give us the Dartmoor we know today.

## Farming History

### Prehistory

More than 8,000 years ago, when most of Dartmoor was covered with trees, people hunted wild animals. By about 2000 to 1500 BC most of the tree cover had been cleared and Dartmoor had become an important area for the grazing of sheep and cattle. People lived either permanently or seasonally in circular stone huts called *round houses*. Hut circles, which are the remains of these buildings, can be seen on many parts of the moor. Some are arranged in groups, some are associated with small, irregular fields, some lie within stone wall enclosures and others are in amongst large areas of rectangular fields known as *reave systems*.

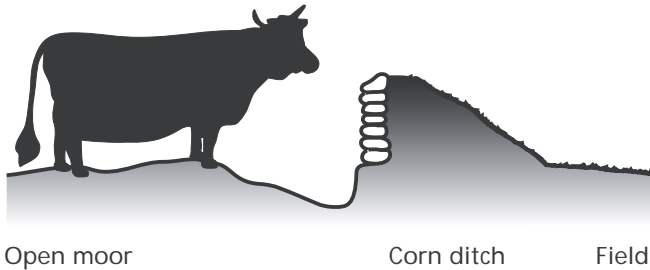
Reaves are low, stony, earth covered banks which were built around 1200 BC to divide all but the highest parts of Dartmoor, first into territories (a little like our present day parishes), and within those into long, narrow, parallel fields. Their main function was probably to control the movement of stock, but there is some evidence that prehistoric people were also growing cereals here. A climatic deterioration and the spread of peat during the first millennium BC (1000 - 1 BC), both resulting in poorer grazing vegetation, contributed to the abandonment of the higher part of Dartmoor during the later prehistoric period.

### The Medieval Period

Improvement of the climate in medieval times allowed the re-occupation of the moorland fringes and river valleys. When this process began is unclear, but it is known that by the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD new fields were being created from the waste in places such as Holne Moor, and new settlements were being established. In many cases large fields nearest the settlement, known as *infields*, were cultivated collectively by groups of farmers growing mainly oats and rye. The infields were often divided into narrow strips. On sloping ground these strips would appear as terraces, or *strip lynchets*. Each farmer would work a number of dispersed individual strips within the field. Beyond the infields lay the *outfields*, where the land was usually under pasture but cultivated periodically. This system of collective farming gradually died out towards the end of the medieval period. Strips, or groups of strips, became enclosed by hedgebanks and were held in single occupancy.

Most of the central part of the moor was unenclosed grazing land. At its core lay the Forest of Dartmoor, not actually a forest but an area reserved first for the Kings of England, and later for the Duchy of Cornwall,

for hunting deer and other game. By the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century a number of farms, now known as ancient tenements, had been established within the Forest. The tenants of these farms had grazing rights over the Forest. Between the Forest and the enclosed lands on the moorland fringes lay the *commons*. The commons provided grazing for farms within the neighbouring parishes. Areas of common grazing were separated from enclosed lands by corn ditches comprising a ditch and a vertical stone-faced bank which discouraged stock from entering fields from the moor.



Open moor

Corn ditch

Field

Sheep were probably the most numerous domestic animals in medieval times. The wool industry of Devon was a source of great wealth in the county. Dartmoor, particularly those areas owned by the great monasteries of Buckfast, Buckland and Tavistock, was an important provider of the raw material. In 1789 it was recorded that Dartmoor yielded pasture every summer to about 100,000 sheep. Cattle were also kept by medieval farmers. From the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century the typical Dartmoor farmhouse was the longhouse, where people and animals lived under a common roof.

A large number of medieval farms on the higher slopes of the moor were abandoned in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. This was due to a number of factors: first, a worsening in the weather around this time made farming on the higher land a hard business; second, the ravages of the Black Death in 1347-8, which reduced the population of Devon by as much as two-thirds, provided a chance for farmers to move away from the harsher climate of the moor to farm more favourable land lower down.

## Late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century farming

During the medieval period, tenants of the Duchy of Cornwall (the largest landowner on Dartmoor) had been allowed, at the change of tenancy, to enclose an area of up to 3.2 hectares (8 acres) of the Forest of Dartmoor for private use. These areas were known as newtakes and were often larger than 8 acres because such enclosing was made exclusive of bog and rock. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century a new type of newtake emerged. At this time and on into the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a strong movement towards enclosing very large areas of central Dartmoor in order to 'improve' rough moorland to rich pasture. Between 1820 and 1898 it was estimated that more than 6,070 hectares (15,000 acres) on Dartmoor had become newtakes. The experiment was, on the whole, a failure. Many of these large newtakes, bounded by distinctive granite dry stone walls, are today indistinguishable by their vegetation from the open moor.

## Farming today

Agriculture is just as important today in shaping the Dartmoor landscape as it has been in the past. Dartmoor is a marginal upland farming area. This means that profits are low and, sometimes, non-existent. The physical characteristics of this area - heavy rain, low temperature, exposure to winds, and poor soil - mean that production of animals per hectare is low. Some activities, such as horticulture, arable farming and dairy farming, are impossible or very restricted on much of Dartmoor.

The growing season for grass is shorter on Dartmoor than in the rest of lowland Devon. This means that there is less grass, silage and hay produced for stock to eat. Farmers often have to buy additional forage from farms off the moor, and some farmers move some of their livestock to lower land.

## Types of farming on Dartmoor

Farming on Dartmoor is almost exclusively livestock breeding based on grass production. Some cattle and sheep are sold to go to milder areas for fattening. On the fertile fringes of the National Park there is some dairy and arable farming.

## There are three main types of farmland on Dartmoor:

**Moorland** areas of the National Park comprise heather and rough grassland. Moorland forms the heart of the National Park covering 50% of the total area (approximately 46,000 hectares). These areas are very exposed and cold in winter and have for centuries been used as an extensive grazing ground for farm stock - cattle, sheep and ponies. Only sheep and tough Dartmoor ponies can survive there without additional winter feeding. The open moors are divided into separate areas called commons where certain local farmers, as commoners, have rights to graze their animals. The rights are tied to the surrounding farmland.

The Dartmoor Commoners' Council, which was established in 1985 under the *Dartmoor Commons Act*, governs the exercise of rights, animal husbandry and vegetation management on the commons. Moorland grazing rights are an essential part of many hill farm enterprises. All farming is strongly influenced by the regime of grants and subsidies set within the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

**Newtakes** are enclosed areas of moorland on the edge of common land. Each newtake is part of one farm and is not used for shared grazing. Some of these areas have been improved.

**Inbye land** is a patchwork of fields and woodland. Most of these fields have been 'improved' by re-seeding and fertilising so that they can grow more grass for making hay or silage. Inbye land provides more food and shelter for stock than moorland. Some sheep and cattle are kept on the farm during lambing and calving so that help is at hand if problems arise, and so that their new-born lambs and calves are not exposed to the cold and wet of the moors.

**The enclosed farmed landscape** of Dartmoor stretches from the edge of the moorland to the borders of the National Park covering some 48,500 hectares. This area is characterised by fields, wet valleys and small woods bounded by hedgerows and stone walls. The whole network forms an attractive, distinctive and often ancient landscape pattern, which provides a contrast to the wild upland above. Within this detail are areas of great wildlife value.

The hedgerows, small woods and rough valley bottoms form wildlife corridors connecting biodiversity 'hotspots'. Amongst these are Dartmoor's 1,100 hectares of Rhôs pasture - species rich, wet, often heathy, grazing pasture (representing 20% of the English resource of this fast declining habitat) - and around 20 hectares of nationally important upland hay meadows. However, it is the intimate mix of habitats that makes this landscape so rich for wildlife.

## There are also three types of farm:

**High moorland farms** (mostly owned by the Duchy of Cornwall). These farms have newtakes and relatively poor inbye fields, and there are common rights attached to each farm. The land usually has thinner, poorer soils and colder weather than at lower altitude. These farms are divided by stone walls.

**Mid moor farms** have common rights but no newtakes. Their inbye land is more productive.

**Farms on the fringes of the National Park** usually do not have common rights and they have no newtakes. Their inbye land is even more productive, being at lower altitude and having better soils. These farms are divided mainly by hedges.

The three types of farms vary in their farming systems depending on their land resources and environmental conditions.

## The Animals

All livestock on the open moor is owned by individual commoners and each animal bears its owner's tag or brand.

### Sheep

The Scottish Blackface sheep, bred to withstand rigorous winters, was introduced to Dartmoor in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Exmoor Horn, Cheviot and their crosses can also be seen. Unlike the widely-roaming ponies, sheep seldom stray far from the area, or *lear*, to which they have been introduced. Their lambs are sold in early autumn for fattening on lowland pastures.

### Cattle

Most of the cattle are hardy black or dun-coloured Galloways. Their calves are mainly pure bred or Hereford crosses.

Belted Galloways, with a distinctive white band round their middles, and Aberdeen Angus can be seen all the year round and in summer South Devon cattle are also turned out. The Galloways produce good beef calves which, after summering on the moor, are weaned in autumn and sold for fattening.

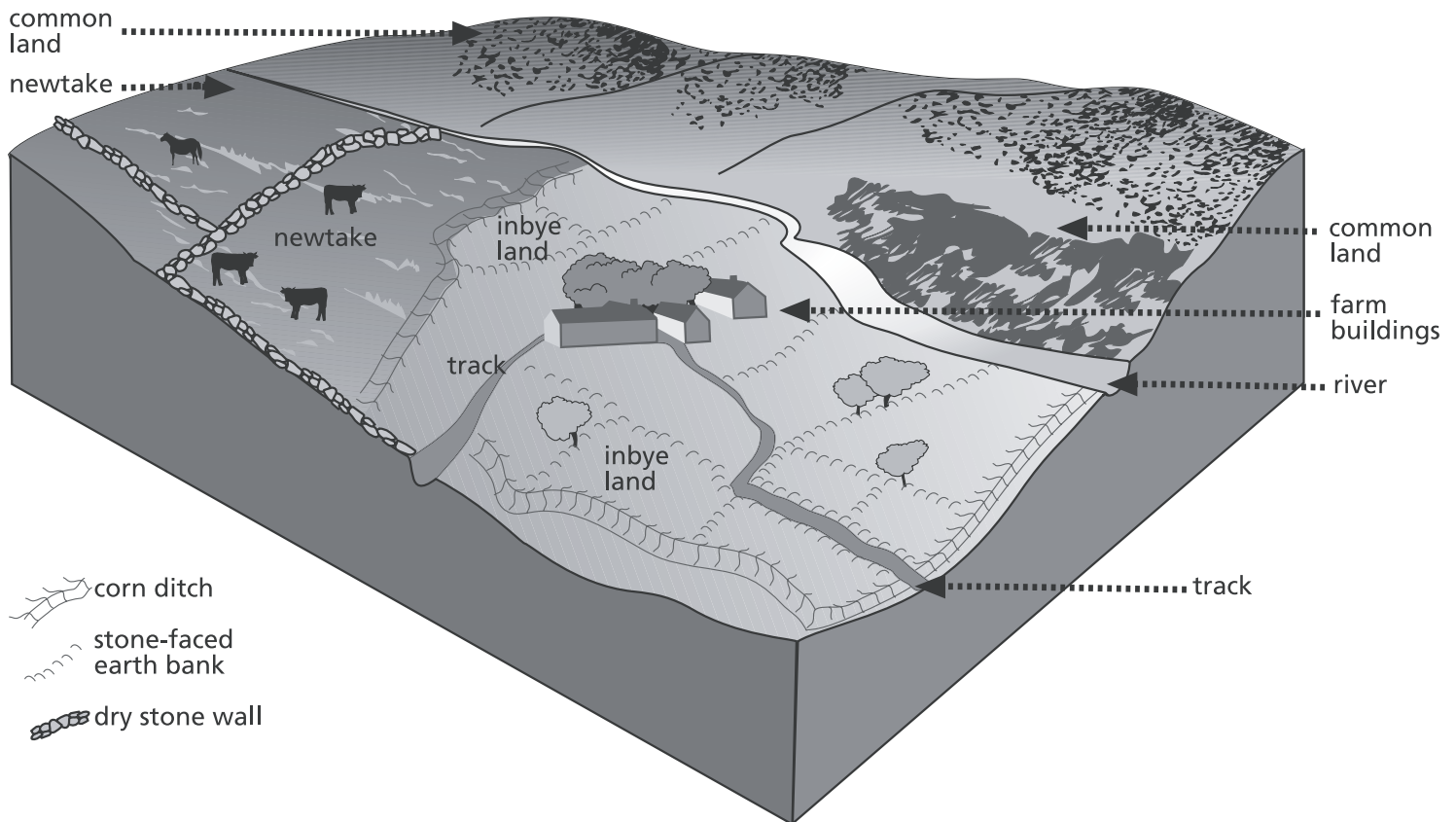
### Ponies

The ponies roaming apparently freely on the open moor all belong to different farmers. The foals are born in the spring and early summer. The herds stay on the moor all the year round, but in autumn they are rounded up, the young to be identified and marked by their owners. Many are then sold at the pony markets. The first written record of the sturdy Dartmoor breed was in AD 1012. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Dartmoor ponies were crossed with other breeds to make them more suitable for work in mines and for other purposes, so many of those seen on the moor are not traditional Dartmoors. More recently, schemes have been introduced to encourage farmers to breed traditional-type Dartmoor ponies.

## A High Dartmoor Farm

The farm lies within the boundary of the Forest of Dartmoor. It is an ancient tenement founded before the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The oldest surviving field boundaries are the hedgebanks. Down the centuries the farm would have slowly expanded on to the open common land. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century large areas of surrounding common land were enclosed to form newtakes, and most of the dry stone walls date to this time. Attached to the property are common rights whereby the occupier may use the surrounding common land to graze a fixed number of livestock.

*A High Dartmoor Farm*





## The importance of farming in the National Park today

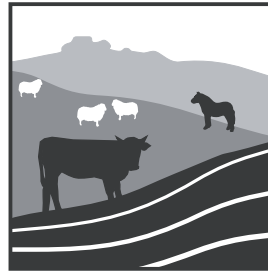
Against a background of changing market requirements and structures in the food sector, declining profitability in agriculture, international pressures to reform farm support policy and developing public perceptions of the role of farming (which is increasingly seen as providing environmental 'goods' in addition to high quality food) hill farming faces a period of considerable uncertainty and change. The recent epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease (2001) caused further damage to struggling farm and tourism businesses.

Dartmoor's farming economy provides not only traditional food and wool resources, and income for farmers, but also a wide range of other public goods and services for society as a whole. These include:

- agricultural and other employment
- food, some distinctive to Dartmoor
- contributions to the local economy and to the social fabric of rural communities
- the aesthetic value of the built environment and landscape
- recreation and amenity
- wildlife and biodiversity
- water accumulation and supply
- nutrient recycling and fixation
- soil formation
- storm protection and flood control
- carbon fixing by trees and soils.

Thus, in addition to the commercial commodities produced by Dartmoor farmers for established markets, principally store (and some finished) livestock, hill farming systems have a key role in maintaining the physical, biological, social and recreational environment of the moor. Government policy development is increasingly directed towards providing the necessary economic incentives to ensure these public goods are provided.

The Dartmoor National Park Authority maintains close dialogue with the farming community and with relevant Government agencies and departments. The Authority favours agri-environmental measures which it believes will benefit both farm incomes and the fabric of the farmed landscape, as well as helping to sustain the farming culture. Dartmoor National Park Authority recognises the role of farmers in shaping the landscape and understands the pressures they are under when faced with considerable change in the industry. Through National Park Authority grants, advice about other schemes, practical advice and assistance, the Ranger Service, and lobbying power, it continues to work together with farmers for the benefit of the Dartmoor landscape and the community.



## Dartmoor Hill Farm Project

## The Dartmoor Hill Farm Project

The Dartmoor Hill Farm Project was set up in November 2003. It is one of the outcomes of the *State of Farming on Dartmoor 2002*. This research report was commissioned by the

Dartmoor National Park Authority and undertaken by the Centre for Rural Research at the University of Exeter and it examined the current state, future needs and prospects for farming in the National Park. The Project will implement practical initiatives to help Dartmoor farmers, such as providing information on access to funding and marketing opportunities, and facilitating training. Through co-ordination, enabling and partnership, the primary purpose of this new initiative is to contribute to the development of a sustainable future for Dartmoor hill farming. Its emphasis is on helping farmers with advice, guidance, collaborative activities, communication and funding, all through focused support.

### What is it?

A project to help Dartmoor farmers, through a variety of methods from focus groups to helping get collaborative work off the ground. It can help **farmers and their businesses** by:

- providing information on grants and funding opportunities
- developing group activity from marketing initiatives to machinery rings
- providing information on training providers and costs
- developing ideas to help ensure a future for Dartmoor farmers.

The project has got involved with existing organisations and groups, taking forward and facilitating ideas from individuals and groups - helping farmers to help themselves.

### Who to contact

Dartmoor Hill Farm Project,  
High Moorland Business Centre, Princetown  
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# Dartmoor National Park Agricultural Statistics 1, June 2000

Table reproduced from: The State of Farming on Dartmoor, Centre for Rural Research, Exeter University/Dartmoor National Park Authority (2002).

	No. of holdings	Hectares
<b>Land use</b>		
Land rented	280	17157
Land owned	1031	29502
Total crops and fallow (tillage)	217	2523
Recent and temporary grassland (< 5 years)	216	3341
Permanent grassland (> 5 years)	929	26345
Rough grazing (sole rights)	282	11622
Woodland	362	1622
Set-Aside	34	30
All other land	452	687
<b>Cereals</b>		
Wheat	27	586
Spring barley	39	329
Winter barley	43	440
Oats	31	129
Other cereals (excluding maize)	9	44
<b>Total cereals (excluding maize)</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>1529</b>
<b>Arable</b>		
Potatoes (early and maincrop)	22	32
Sugar beet (not stockfeed)	0	0
Hops and other arable		
Turnips, Swedes, kale, cabbage, savoy	6	44
Kohl rabi and rape	55	148
Fodder beet, mangolds and other crops	30	47
Horticultural crops	78	77
Field beans	***	***
Peas for harvesting		
dry	9	59
Maize	18	121
Oilseed rape	***	***
Linseed	13	229
Bare fallow	14	119

	No. of holdings	Hectares
<b>Horticulture</b>		
Peas and beans	***	***
All other veg and salad	***	***
<b>Total vegetables grown in the open</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>16</b>
Area under glass or plastic	11	1
Top fruit	49	31
Small fruit	9	1
<b>Total fruit</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>33</b>
Hardy nursery stock	14	28
Bulbs and flowers grown in the open	***	***
<b>Holdings by tillage and grass area</b>		
area		
0 < 5 hectares		404
5 < 20 hectares		298
20 < 50 hectares		223
50 < 100 hectares		132
100+ hectares		78
<b>Cattle</b>		
Dairy herd	56	3173
Beef herd	444	18192
Breeding herd replacements (cows and heifers over 1 year for breeding)	409	6936
Other cattle over 1 year	442	9202
Cattle and calves under 1 year	468	15396
<b>Total cattle and calves</b>	<b>547</b>	<b>52899</b>
<b>Pigs</b>		
Breeding sows and gilts in pig (breeding herd)	31	336
All other pigs	53	3009
<b>Total pigs</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>3345</b>

	No. of holdings	Hectares
<b>Sheep</b>		
Breeding ewes (breeding flock)	460	125947
Lambs under 1 year	437	108766
Other sheep	400	5217
<b>Total sheep</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>239930</b>
<b>Goats</b>		
All goats	46	400
<b>Labour force</b>		
Farmers, spouses, partners and directors (full-time)	475	657
Farmers, spouses, partners and directors (part-time)	567	779
Salaried managers (full-time)	***	***
Salaried managers (part-time)	***	***
Male employees (full-time)	67	113
Male employees (part-time)	75	91
Female employees (full-time)	14	16
Female employees (part-time)	35	46
Casual workers	106	163
<b>Total labour</b>	<b>874</b>	<b>1880</b>
<b>Holdings by EC farm type</b>		
(Based on Standard Gross Margins)		
Cereals		***
General cropping		***
Horticulture		38
Pigs and Poultry		28
Dairy		41
Cattle and Sheep (LFA)		393
Cattle and Sheep (lowland)		168
Mixed		38
Other types		412

To prevent disclosure of information about individual holdings the number of holdings has been suppressed and the data averaged over a wider area.  
<sup>1</sup> Excluding minor holdings. Source: *Agricultural and Horticultural Census*, Defra

## Useful web links for further information:

- Other factsheets:**
- Dartmoor Commons
  - Prehistoric Archaeology
  - The Dartmoor ponies
  - Land Use Issues
- <http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/factfile/homepage.html>
- Other publications:**
- The State of Farming on Dartmoor  
Centre for Rural Research, Exeter University/Dartmoor National Park Authority (2002).  
This summary report was commissioned by the Dartmoor National Park Authority to provide base-line information on the state of farming on Dartmoor in the year 2000 to inform policy and decision making, and to recommend future action and underpin resource bids to improve the local hill farming economy.
  - Dartmoor National Park Management Plan (2001)  
<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/planning/mplan.html>
  - Dartmoor National Park Local Plan First Review 1995 - 2011 (Adopted Version)  
<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/planning/lplan/localplan2.html>
  - Action for Wildlife: The Dartmoor Biodiversity Action Plan  
<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/pubs/bap.html>
  - Swaling Checklist  
<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/dnp/swaling.html>

For further information, and a list of other Fact Sheets available, contact the:

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