Our Common Cause

Social Cohesion Report

Harriet & Rob Fraser

July 2019

Gathering Views

The ground is crisp with frost, every blade of grass and every face of limestone is white with cold. Above us, the single blue sky brightens by the minute as the sun rises. We stand for a while with the Ingleborough commoners, and from the wide summit of Ingleborough take in the expansive views (the image on the front cover of this report captures the moment). Using their crooks to point, the farmers talk us through the hefts that different flocks of sheep stick to, they trace the boundaries of farms, locate villages, talk about the type of ground – boggy here, rocky there – and the way the flocks behave.

It's tradition to meet on the summit of Ingleborough at a given time for the October gather; and again in the summer. It's an opportunity for all the commoners to come together and to bring their ewes down to the lower land ready for tupping: sheep are gathered from this wide high fell, brought together in clusters, and coaxed downhill. The farmers spread out, communicating with one another, first by chatting, then by calling into the still air, and as they lose sight of one another, using mobile phones, each with their own dogs to guide the sheep. The flocks are driven towards different fell gates, and eventually gathered into yards where they are sorted, each identified by the coloured mark on its fleece. As we descend, there is time to talk, to find out more about the land we're going to be getting to know and the people who work here. It is the first meeting of the project, and we feel fortunate to begin with an overview that brings landscape and people together in this way.

Later in the autumn, on a Dartmoor farm, we're told we're lucky to visit on a day that's wet and murky - to see the farm in its 'typical state'. We've arrived for an interview but before going inside we're taken up through some fields to push a hundred ewes into the newtakes. We're in the kind of rain that comes from all angles: our faces are moist and it's not long until the ends of our sleeves soak up water. But it's not cold, and we're all enjoying the misty

feel of the moor, and the smooth movements of the young dog who responds quickly to whistles and brings her own intelligence to the job. If it was a clear day, we're told we'd be able to see a beacon here, and the coast there, and, beyond the old Devon bank defining the edge of the field, the open common. Another day, when it is sunny and we're meeting a National Park ranger, we can see across a wide landscape and appreciate its variety as we're told about habitats that support particular species of butterflies and birds, traces of ancient monuments and field systems, and the complexities around burning or swaling on vast expanses of moorland.

Most of our formal interviews took place in kitchens and offices, but being taken out by the people we met underlined for us what is at the heart of farming, culture, conservation and management in the uplands, and to consider what is, quite literally the common ground: the landscape, with its range of habitats, the animals, both wild and farmed, the weather and the seasons.

Of course, it is people who have control over what happens in the uplands, both through the decisions they make at a local level, and the actions they take in response to policies. Discovering how those who are involved wish to move forward, and what helps or hinders progress that's good for people and for the land, has been one of the key aims of this work. We are enormously grateful to all who welcomed us in and took time, on rainy days and sunny days, to share their views. This report brings together what we have heard, draws out salient points and common themes, and poses suggestions for actions in the future.

Harriet and Rob Fraser, July 2019

‘It’s open space. It’s got a tradition of people using land that doesn’t belong to them. It’s an amazing thing, a public good that’s better for the whole of society, that is being looked after for everybody’s benefit.’

Naomi Oakley, Challacombe Farm, Postbridge

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This report has been compiled by Harriet and Rob Fraser following interviews, field work and research in 2018-2019. The Frasers work together as 'somewhere-nowhere', a collaborative practice through which they explore issues surrounding the nature and culture of place, with a focus on rural and upland areas. More about their work at www.somewhere-nowhere.com.

The study has been a part of *Our Common Cause*, convened by the Foundation for Common Land working with 23 partner organisations. It aims to encourage collaborative working to improve outcomes from common land, to increase public understanding of commons and commoning, and to safeguard the heritage of commons. Our Common Cause is working in Darmoor, the YOrkshire Dales, the Lake District and the Shropshire Hills, so that bridges of learning can be built between different areas.

Introduction

'We get quite a lot of people on The Dales Way and tourists staying at the holiday cottage, and they are very interested in what goes on, genuinely interested when I tell them. It is an insight into how we manage the fells and how the sheep are heafed. But it is quite interesting to know how little people do know of hill farming. I don't think it is getting any better.'

Upland Commons Today

Upland commons account for much of England's most cherished landscapes, and 37% of land above the moorland line is common. Common land is owned by one or more individuals and/or organisations, and used by other people who have legal rights to use specified areas, primarily for grazing animals. Most common land is public access land, and the vast majority of upland commons are also recognised for special environmental value.

Commons provide grazing land for sheep, cattle and horses, a range of public benefits including access, biodiversity, the preservation of archaeological sites, water storage and management and carbon sequestration, and the continuation of a farming culture which is an important element of England's historical and living heritage.

Management of each common is decided in an often complex process of agreement between those with rights to graze, land owners, and organisations. Agreements for individual commons are outlined by government schemes, with payments made to support management of land for grazing as well as for environmental benefits. Schemes have altered over the past four decades, and methods for measuring, protecting and managing a diverse landscape have also changed.

Now is a time of great uncertainty, however: the natural and cultural heritage of the uplands has declined in the last 50-60 years and we are now faced with political upheaval, unpredictable impacts from a changing climate, and a pressing need to mitigate against further climate change and biodiversity decline. In the midst of this change, there is a need for the development of effective policies that support the continuation of a rich farming culture and the other public benefits the commons provide, with resilience and improvement of natural and cultural heritage as shared goals.

There are many voices to be heard. Those who have the closest contact with the land, and know particular areas intimately, often with knowledge gained over several generations, are the farmers. Other views come from land owners, some of whom have also been attached to areas of land for generations, from people who have specific ecological or environmental knowledge, from organisations such as the National Park Authorities, and from the general public. Inevitably, it can be difficult to reach agreement, and there can be conflicts. An honest acceptance of areas of conflict is useful, as is an evaluation of relationships and the voices and processes that influence decision making. Assessing social cohesion, and using this assessment to consider ways to build stronger and more resilient relationships, is part of this.

Relationships and communities: a point in time

This report is a reflection on work done during 2018 and 2019 to assess markers of social cohesion in selected upland areas of common land in England. As a pilot study it is not exhaustive; the results are illustrative of a wider situation. They can, however, be taken to inform a broad picture of relationships within commoning communities and between commoners and other stakeholders in the uplands, a catalogue of perceived changes in farm practices, social structures, and environmental state of specific upland areas over time, and considerations, wishes and concerns for the future. Findings from this study will be available as markers for future research into this area.

There are challenges of complexity in land ownership and management and around policy decisions that are specific to the uplands, and some of these are directly related to relationships, as Dr Lois Mansfield, Professor of Upland Landscapes, summarises in 'Managing the uplands: the need for a fresh approach' in The Ecologist, May 17, 2018:

'… at their core, upland land users share resources for multiple purposes. This brings different land users in direct conflict with others who want something else, as well as often not understanding where each is coming from.'

'... land ownership patterns are complex. In a single valley there can be over forty land owners; divided between public, private and in many instances commoners, who have rights of management which supersede the landowner.

'... there are resources in uplands which have complex property rights. Some relate to right of common ... others in relation to simple public access along a footpath; or even connected to management, say, of water quality in a reservoir, but the surrounding land may not be under the same ownership. This creates different, complex webs of stakeholders for every single challenge.

'... there is silo management, whereby a single user manages a single land function and thus they do not recognise their effect on other resource users.'

Recognising these and other issues, this *Our Common Cause* social cohesion study assessed a range of views about the broad context of farming in the uplands, ranging from environmental condition and agri-environment agreements to public perception of commoning and issues of trust. Our conversations have revealed however, that what lies at the heart of the system, and its success or otherwise, is the quality of relationships. This is why social cohesion is of utmost importance; and this is the key focus of this study.

Social structures have a huge influence on what happens in the uplands: they may be inherited, they evolve over time, and may break down and need repairing. The set of principles for rural landscapes as heritage places defined by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) {1} places the human element at the heart of the value of rural landscapes:

'Rural landscapes are a vital component of the heritage of humanity. They are also one of the most common types of continuing cultural landscapes. There is a great diversity of rural landscapes around the world that represent cultures and cultural traditions. They provide multiple economic and social benefits, multi-functionality, cultural support and ecosystem services for human societies.'

The ICOMOS report reflects further on social structures:

'Rural landscapes as heritage are expressions of social structures and functional organizations, realizing, using and transforming them, in the past and in the present. Rural landscape as heritage encompasses cultural, spiritual, and natural attributes that contribute to the continuation of biocultural diversity.'

A continuation of 'biocultural diversity' and a recognition that rural landscapes are 'expressions of social structures and functional organisations' is one way of stating the importance of social cohesion.

{1} ICOMOS-IFLA *Principles Concerning Rural Landscapes as Heritage*, July 30 2017.

The notion of 'social cohesion' has been outlined by The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) {2} as a cohesive society that works towards the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility. The three key elements of social cohesion are recognised as social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility.

In the context of *Our Common Cause*, social capital – the economic, cultural, tangible and intangible resources that result from people cooperating together towards common ends – is key, given the historical and practical necessity of cooperation on common land, both in terms of practical farming and land management tasks, and in terms of decision making.

People and place: It goes both ways

It is important to stress that social cohesion involves a two-way flow between people and place. People and their behaviour affect the implementation and development of practice, while what happens on the ground and day-to-day practice, including environment, farming and management of systems, have an impact on people and their behaviour. This study therefore shares comments from interviewees about multiple elements of commoning.

As a natural extension of the inseparability of people and place, particularly where a strong culture has evolved in response to a specific landscape, we consider the concept of wellbeing to apply to individuals and communities, as well as to livestock, and the environment. This study gauged opinions about conditions of habitats, some of which are classified as specialised or vulnerable, and the need to consider both human and environmental resilience in upland communities in a time of political upheaval and a changing climate. As the ICOMOS report recognises:

'Rural landscapes are dynamic, living systems encompassing places produced and managed through traditional methods, techniques, accumulated knowledge, and cultural practices, as well as those places where traditional approaches to production have been changed. Rural landscape systems encompass rural elements and functional, productive, spatial, visual, symbolic, environmental relationships among them and with a wider context.'

{2} *Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World* OECD report referenced at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/persp_glob_dev-2012-en

Social Cohesion: relationships and communities

We have referred above to the OECD definition of social cohesion but it is our understanding that definitions have been refined over time, and are likely to continue doing so. According to Stephan Vopel, writing in the *Social Cohesion Radar* in 2016 {3}, since 2001 when the term social cohesion was introduced:

'OECD reports have offered a constantly changing set of indicators which tapped into causes or consequences of cohesion - such as work accidents, suicides, and life satisfaction - rather than cohesion per se. In a nutshell, it is fair to say that a coherent reporting system devoted to social cohesion is lacking.'

A more useful way of understanding social cohesion may be with the following three concepts outlined in the S*ocial Cohesion Radar* by Dragolov et al (2016):

• First, in resilient social relationships—that is, in the horizontal network spanning the individual members and groups in a society;
• Second, in the positive emotional ties between individuals and their community and its institutions;
• Third, in a focus on the common good—that is, the actions and attitudes of the members of society that demonstrate responsibility for others and for the community as a whole.

In this context we propose that social cohesion in the uplands hinges around the following:

•sense of belonging,
•a feeling of inclusion in social and cultural activities,
•participation in decision making about the local community and environment,
•wellbeing.

Negative impacts of strong social groups

The authors of the *Social Cohesion Radar* point out that 'greater inequality within a society goes hand-in-hand with weaker cohesion.' This is an important point: positive relationships in a wider context are likely to underpin effective management in upland common areas and this is a central aim of Our Common Cause. The quality of relationships is important however, and there are occasions where 'strong' relationships can in fact undermine cohesion.

'Interestingly, the ability to form tight cooperative social bonds is also one of the forces that causes groups to break apart. When cooperative social bonds become tighter within a subgroup of a larger group, the corresponding bonds between the subgroup and members of the larger group naturally tend to weaken or become neglected. These bonds thus create and foster within-group cohesion while simultaneously weakening or destroying the cohesion of the whole group.'

This observation from Dragolov and his co-authors can be directly applied to the complexity of relationships in the uplands commons, where small sub-groups can become very tight-knit with the consequence that other relationships break down through reluctance to listen to different points of view, through defensiveness, or through bullying-type behaviour. Our research has shown that this can apply to any subgroups: e.g. groups of farmers on a particular common or area of common; individual farming families (with attitudes sometimes persisting through generations); or people who work with organisations that have developed a specific culture of communication and a firm belief system that is slow to change. In the context of this issue, we explore the importance of education in its broadest sense, to include knowledge sharing and facilitated learning opportunities.

Building a picture of social cohesion in upland commons

To increase our understanding of social cohesion in connection with the way upland commons are managed, particularly concerning the role of hill farming, we were tasked with finding out more about the perceived value of common land, the relationships between people involved in management of shared areas of common land, what has changed in the last few generations, and visions for the future. We also explored the interconnectivity between commoning and local communities, including the part that active commoning plays in the wider community, and the relationships between farmers and non-farmers in these communities.

Over a period of seven months we visited farmers, landowners, and members of organisations connected with land management and policy decisions, and talked to members of the public who were not connected to farming through their family or work. In line with the initial brief, the focus on attention was on the views of active graziers; conversations with farmers, therefore, form the largest part of our study.

One-to-one meetings, rather than using a focus-group model, created time for conversations to develop and some powerful feelings and viewpoints were shared. These conversations offer specific opinions and feelings that can be woven into discussions about decisions going forwards: measures to protect and enhance the upland communities and environments under new agri-environmental schemes must necessarily acknowledge the opinions of people at the heart of the landscape.

{3} *Social Cohesion in the Western World: what holds societies together, insights from the Social Cohesion Radar* (Dragolov, Ignacz, Lorenz, Delhey, Boehnke and Unzicker, 2016. Springer: Switzerland).

This report

This report shares some of the reflections and opinions that we have heard and, using our interviews as a basis for our conclusions, sets out areas where further work could help towards achieving *Our Common Cause*'s vision for a collaborative process of decision making and an effective system of support, monitoring and documentation that is in the interests of a positive future for the uplands environment and for farming systems, individual farmers, and wider communities that are closely linked to the commons.

This report also includes suggestions for baseline indicators of social cohesion specifically within the context of England's upland commons. These are included on pages 38-41 and may be used going forwards to assess change in key areas.

Looking back, looking forward

In the two national parks where this pilot project took place, heritage is important; history informs what happens in the present and the future, and there is pride in the local heritage connected with commoning. What has happened in the past and how things have changed in recent years are both important considerations. The reflections and recommendations in this report should also be considered in the wider context of climate change and biodiversity decline on a local and global level.

Trust

Trust is a hugely important element in collaborative working, as well as in a personal sense of wellbeing. This study has highlighted areas indicating that sensitive intervention and support may help trust to arise and encourage bridge-building where trust has been damaged or lost.

While there is a great deal of discussion about issues, policies and plans, ultimately what it all comes down to is people: and while *what* is done is important, *how* something is done is crucial in the way trust is built, persists, and/or can be lost. An appreciation of this has arisen from the interviews in this study, and is also embedded in the new Commons Charter developed through *Our Common Cause*.

Overview

The project findings

1 Uplands Commons matter. There is widespread care and commitment to commons and commoning, to the environment and to the cultural practices that have shaped the landscape.

2 People matter. The importance of relationships and communication must not be overlooked: this comes into every area of commons management, and into the community relationships between commoners and non-commoners. The ideal is a set of relationships where people feel comfortable and happy, feel they belong, are included in social groups, and have an equal right to a voice in discussions. Where relationships are difficult, with conflict, discrimination or bullying, there is a need to address them.

3 Changes have not always been good. There have been changes in upland farming practice, and the upland environment, in the last 50-60 years, some of which threaten environmental resilience and the continuation of the upland farming system.

4 Agri-environment payment schemes for farmers require close attention. There are issues with agreeing and administering agri-environment schemes which provide funding for farming at an individual and a commons level, and are currently under review; some social cohesion has been lost because of schemes (either working poorly or no agreement being reached); schemes must be balanced with proper monitoring.

5 There's a need for raised awareness. A need for education and understanding about different elements of managing upland commons among stakeholders, and raised awareness among the wider public.

6 A greater balance of voices is needed. There's a wish among farmers and others for a stronger voice for hill farmers in debates and in public-facing media, and a need for new approaches to collaborative working.

7 Optimism about the future is low. Sad but true. Without sorting out issues, through facilitating improved relationships, there is a perception that the future looks bleak for the continuation of an inter-connected system of land management that supports farming and improved environment and biodiversity in the upland commons.

Areas to focus on going forwards

1 Relationships There is a need for improvement at every level. This may include revisiting previous projects that have had positive results, with a strategy for avoiding short-term fixes; mediation when there are problems between commoners and/or stakeholders; opportunities for commoners to come together and get to know one another better; opportunities for knowledge sharing between different users etc.

2 Equality There is a need to work towards equality and the resolution of imbalance of power through establishing systems that support the expression of multiple viewpoints, and resist a 'top down' approach to decision making.

3 Education There is a need to improve awareness and understanding at every level. This includes knowledge sharing between specialisms (e.g. farming, ecology, peatland expertise, policy); training opportunities; and an increase in opportunities for the 'general public' to learn more about what farmers do and what's involved in commoning (which in turn helps to explain the provision of 'public goods' and the role of farming within that).

These above three points relate most closely to the recommendations that this study will make; actions and suggestions based on these are made in conclusion on page 33. The following points fall within the wider scope of the Our Common Cause project.

4 Monitoring: Improving environmental monitoring and assessment of outcomes.

5 Financial resilience: Improvement to design and delivery of payment system.

6 Clear boundaries: Addressing issues of land registration, fencing, farm sizes.

7 Sufficient and properly remunerated labour and financial provision for training: Training/Financing to allow for freelance shepherds/workers; and to acknowledge time spent by farmers at meetings with stakeholders.

‘Hopefully this project will be successful in obtaining the funding, but equally important is telling that story so people understand what it’s all about.’

Phil Richards, Area Ranger, Wharfedale & Littondale, Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

Methodology

This study took part in two National Parks and focused on three commons in each region.

Our work began with consideration of the features of each National Park and the individual commons. Each common has its own characteristics: numbers of active graziers, vegetation, archaeological sites, popularity with visitors, designation of sites for ecological value etc. These differences give rise to a specific set of opportunities and challenges in each area, and this give a unique context for each interview.

Our research built on our existing knowledge of upland farming systems, and on research into uplands management and social cohesion. We brought ourselves up to date with agri-environment schemes and the current (unpredictable) direction of policy. The area facilitators also shared insights with us to help us understand the characteristics and the histories of each area.

Identifying potential interviewees

This was followed by meetings with the area facilitators and steering group members in each pilot area to discuss the study areas and to begin to make contact with individuals for interview. Area facilitators (Tracy May and Liz Sutton) and the key people in each National Park (Adrian Shepherd and Alison Kohler) were crucial in creating links.

We were also able, in the Yorkshire Dales, to develop networks based on existing relationships we had established in previous projects. As our work continued, individuals gave us names and contact details for others we might meet. This allowed us to meet farmers who might not otherwise have come to the attention of the steering group.

The majority of interviewees were farmers, which was the initial brief and intention of the project. Interviews with non-farmers who are involved with one or more commons also featured, including landowners, National Park rangers, Natural England advisers and a gamekeeper.

Invitations to take part

Our invitations to interviewees typically began with a phone call, during which we explained the project and found out more about the person's farm, livestock and other details. The phone call is a good opportunity for conversation and we see this as the best first contact. It is the beginning of a process, with both parties able to get a sense of one another. Making first contact via email is also a possibility but is less personal, with less room for questioning, or developing a conversation, or building a relationship.

Our first contact phone calls frequently last as long as 30 minutes: this is an important part of the process and is where the building of trust begins. Occasionally we had to make the 'first' phone call two or three times as the potential interviewee was too busy to talk, was not in the house at the time of the call, or wanted to think about the proposal.

Only two people declined the invitation, one in Dartmoor and one in the Yorkshire Dales. To counter this there were others who would have liked to have taken part and would be interested to take part if an opportunity came up in future.

We aimed to interview three commoners on each study common, as well as landowners and people in other roles who are closely linked to commons. In our selection of farmers, we aimed for a range of situations: farms run by 4th or 5th generation farmers, farms with no succession, farms with young people already active, women and men. Although dairy is no longer widespread on the upland commons, we also ensured we interviewed a small-scale dairy farmer.

This study involved meetings with individuals and, where relevant because a farm is run by a family rather than an individual, with family members. Thus although our interviews took place on 19 farms, in total we interviewed 32 commoners.

Rigour of interviews: formal set of questions and inclusion of flexibility

Before beginning the interview process we devised a set of questions we would cover in each interview. These were designed to meet the initial brief and were reviewed in consultation with the area facilitators.

In practice, our approach is not to work through the interview questions in a specific order. Our interviews are conversational and we allow them to flow organically, gently steering to ensure we cover the subject areas we have identified through our questions. As would be expected, the interviews typically reveal more information than the identified questions on their own might elicit. The format of an interview allows for this richness and the possibility of gaining information that might be unexpected but is valuable.

Location of interviews

In the case of every farmer or farming family, we went to their farm to conduct the interview. In this way we were stepping into their space, meeting them on their terms and listening to what they have to say in the context of their life, rather than in a neutral space or in a space owned or overseen by an organisation. This is a significant part of a process that includes respect for the individual and is about relationship building as well as about gathering information.

It also allowed us to be shown aspects of the land, including the farm and the common, by the farmer. It is often when the audio-recorder is turned off and we begin to walk around together that some of the most heart-felt information is shared. The words spoken do not come into the formal report, but these conversations have helped to underpin key issues that have come to light in numerous meetings, and these unrecorded conversations and what we saw of farmers' livestock and land are an important part of the process.

The value of conversational interviews

One person who wished to remain out of the public spotlight chose to do a written questionnaire rather than a face-to-face or even a phone interview. The results of this highlighted to us that the quality of a personal interview cannot be duplicated in writing, particularly without the opportunity for an evolving conversation. In addition, the emotional element is much more likely to be lost, or at least very hard to ascertain.

Transcribing of interviews

Each interview was captured using a digital recorder, and later transcribed. Accurate recording of what is said, and the way it is said, ensures that the interviewee's voice is given value, and increases the likelihood that the interviewee will feel that what he or she has said has not only been heard, but is being fed forward into other discussions. It also minimises the risk that the researcher will re-phrase or re-interpret what has been said. This is a fundamental aspect of this methodology and is part of a system of communication where listening and feeling heard are highly valued.

The transcripts have been edited down to extract key quotes that illustrate the range of points that the questions addressed and other issues that arose in conversation. These quotes are shared in the appendices.

The key quotes have been further reduced for display alongside portrait images in public spaces so that interviewees' words, sharing personal stories and opinions, are given prominence rather than the over-reaching issues of commoning more generally.

To assist with completion of transcripts, we have had input from a trusted volunteer. With this level of work, we've been able to compile a full set of transcripts, offering the potential for detailed reflection and analysis in the future should anyone wish to undertake this task. There was a really positive impact for the volunteer who enjoyed learning more. She is also involved in other volunteer work in the park which gives her an opportunity to share what she has learnt.

Process of approval

Every interview was constructed with the understanding that key quotes would be sent to the interviewee for approval, with the opportunity to change and clarify the words, before being shared in a public space or through this report. This is a crucial element in building trust and ensuring the interviewees feel they have control of what is shared with others.

Use of Portrait photography

The use of portrait photography provides an output but the action of making an image is also part of the research process. Rob's methodology in terms of framing has only one consistent rule – that the subject looks directly into the lens. In this way the viewer of the final image has a sense of engagement with the person who has been photographed. The process of setting up the large format, real film camera is relaxed, typically with a great deal of conversation, and invites a pose that is unforced/ proud. Location for each image has been carefully chosen to convey the culture of place wherever possible.

As an output, a personal image placed alongside a quote is a powerful way of conveying stories about place and culture. The images also become a resource for archive purposes; and a hand-printed portrait is given to all the people featured.

Other meetings

In Ingleborough, we joined the autumn gather where all the commoners were present. This allowed us to meet them, find out more about their sheep, their hefts, the landscape and how it has changed, and their views about commoning, while walking with them and conducting a gather. This helped us to get a sense of the place and the community of graziers connected with that place.

In Dartmoor we joined a public gather that was facilitated by local farmers. Here we were again able to meet a number of farmers and talk about the landscape and the commons with them. We were also able to meet members of the public and find out more about their own levels of awareness and their enthusiasm to learn

about the commons.

Ideally, had there been time, we would have liked to have spent more time with the interviewees outside the official meeting; this could be a consideration going forward – or something to note for members of land management organisations to create time to spend on farms, on the commons etc.

Conversations with members of the public

Informally, without audio recording, we had conversations with over 30 members of the public to gauge their understanding of commons, their perception of the value of commons, and their relationship to the upland areas of the study. These interviews were not pre-arranged; we spoke to people in pubs and cafes and to walkers in both national parks, and, during presentations and workshops elsewhere outside the national parks.

In large part, the people we spoke to had a very low level of understanding about what common land is, and what is involved in its management. Thus the line of questioning was not the same as it was for those who are closely involved in living or working with common land.

The general perception of the uplands is based on an understanding of National Parks as areas that are free and open to all, and a love of landscape and walking or some other form of recreation. Personal value systems relating to wellbeing, access, protection of the natural world and topics such as conservation and rewilding also came into play. The opinions that emerged were influenced by an understanding of 'farming' as a broad concept rarely informed by direct experience or knowledge of upland farming.

These conversations revealed a range of views on the uplands rather than on commoning *per se*. They did, though, provide an opportunity for us to share some details about commons and there was a high level of interest in knowing more. 'I never knew that,' was a common phrase.

Exhibition of images and key quotes

The exhibition resulting from this work presented individuals from a number of commons in a space where each voice carried equal weight. Displaying quotes next to portraits, with the people looking directly to camera, placed both the faces and the words in a current and tangible context, and the specifics of people and place were conveyed without abstraction to general concepts. The exhibition did not draw conclusions, present themes, or suggest solutions to problems: rather it was a presentation of information for the visitor to learn from and have their own response to.

In Dartmoor the exhibition was shown in the Dartmoor National Park Visitors Centre in Princetown. Here, five images from the Yorkshire Dales were shown alongside the complete set of portraits from Dartmoor.

In the Yorkshire Dales, the exhibition was shown in outdoor settings as part of local fairs and events. Due to limitations of space no images from Dartmoor were shared here.

A set of postcards was produced in both National Parks to be handed out alongside the exhibition, and at future *Our Common Cause* events. In response to the exhibition in Dartmoor, there have been requests for a book. This is something to consider in the delivery phase of the project.

Response from interviewees

Without exception, we encountered huge generosity from the people we interviewed who freely shared their views with us, took time to talk, and were honest and open. On a number of occasions we were invited to have lunch and there was also plenty of tea, coffee and cake.

We felt an appreciation from people we interviewed that their voices were being listened to. On more than one occasion people reflected back to us that our level of understanding helped them to express what they wished to without having to explain complex details.

A number of people voiced uncertainty or scepticism that the study would be able to achieve anything beneficial. This was based on years, decades in many cases, of feeling that their voices have gone unheard or have not been taken into account as decisions have been made. There were also comments about short-term fixes through projects whose benefits only last as long as the funding is available.

Some people were reassured by the wider context of the *Our Common Cause* project, which involves more than one element. While we weren't able to make any promises about what the impact might be at policy level, we did stress that the project was an opportunity for people to make their voices heard.

Due to uncertainty in the current political climate, as well as scepticism, few people formulated firm ideas about concrete action going forward; our task, together with the wider team, has been to consider what has been shared both explicitly and implicitly, and suggest actions to address the needs that have become apparent. These are shared later in the document.

Recorded Interviews - list of interviewees

Our ambition was to interview **18** farmers, and **6** non-farmers with interests in the commons. By the end of the study we had recorded interviews at **19** farms (a total of **32** farmers); and with **10** others. Additionally, we attended the October gather on Ingleborough common where we met all Ingleborough commoners; and the public gather in Dartmoor, where we met a number of other commoners.

Yorkshire Dales:

15 farmers from 9 farms
1 gamekeeper, 1 NP Ranger, 1 Land Agent, 2 Natural England representatives

Brant Fell Common
Commoners:
Sarah Hoggarth & Frank Capstick, Birkhaw
James Postlethwaite, Brameskew
Alistair Mackie, Low Wilkinson's (requested not to be quoted)

Ingleborough Common
Commoners:
John, Judith and William Dawson, Bleak Bank
Louise and Malcolm Robinson, Scalemire Farm

Grassington Common
Commoners:
David White, High Garnshaw House (requested not to be quoted)
Robert & Joanne Stockdale, Ranelands
Gamekeeper:
George Hare, C & G Estates

Other farmers connected with separate commons
Graham Taylor, Wenningside Farm, who has rights on Clapham Common
Chris Taylor, who is a freelance shepherd working in several areas
John Metcalfe (Chair of The Federation of Yorkshire Commoners) Manor House Farm

Others related to the commons
National Park Ranger, Phil Richards
Land Agent (Ingleborough Estates), Brian Rycroft
Natural England Advisers, Pippa Merrick and Emily Thornton

Dartmoor

17 farmers on 10 farms, 2 landowners, 1 NP Ranger, 1 Land Agent, 1 Chair of Commoners' Council

Holne Common
Commoners:
Phil Cleave, Tom Cleave & Richard Gray; Mill Leat
David and Shirley Mudge; Huccaby Farm
Landowners: Kevin and Donna Cox

Bridestowe & Sourton Commons
Commoners:
Brian Lavis, Great Cranford Farm
Brian & Angela Coward, Leawood House
Tracy May, Eastdown

Harford & Ugborough Commons
Commoners:
David Cole & Corina Watson, West Peek Farm
David Sadler, Butterbrook House
Philip and Alex French, Corringdon Farm
Landowner: John Howell

The Forest of Dartmoor Commoners:
Phil & Richard Coaker, Runnage Farm
Naomi Oakley, Challacombe Farm (also works for Natural England)

Others:
National Park Ranger, Rob Steemson
Duchy of Cornwall Agent, Tom Stratton
Chair of Dartmoor Commoners' Council, John Waldon

Non-recorded conversations with wider public

Dartmoor, age range 35-75
8 people at the public gather (1 with prior knowledge, 7 new to the subject)
5 people in 2 pubs, 6 walkers, 1 B&B owner

Yorkshire Dales, age range 35-70
8 walkers, 4 people in a café

Beyond the national parks, age range 20-75
2 university students (Carlisle and London), 2 family members (London, Birmingham), 2 general public (at a presesntation in Newcastle)

Distinction between commons

This study took as its focus three specified areas of common land in Dartmoor National Park, and three in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. The specifics of these commons have been outlined along with some comments on themes arising in each area in the appendices from page 44.

For the purposes of this study we have drawn out pertinent points raised during the interviews. Although it is not possible to apply one 'truth' to all commons, many of the issues we identified did apply, at least to some degree, in more than one place, or in more than one farming situation.

The study allowed for interviews to be carried out with only a small number of people related to each common. In some areas, this number represented a small proportion of active graziers, e.g. the Forest, in Dartmoor, has more than 70 active graziers. In other areas, the number of people interviewed was significantly representative of the majority of active commoners; for instance, on Grassington Common which has only 3 active graziers.

The intention of this report is to provide information that has a bearing on the quality of relationships and social cohesion. Further recommendations for practical actions on each common will arise from meetings between commoners, stakeholders and the OCC area facilitators.

Each area of common land is distinct, depending on a number of features including:

- Geology, aspect, peat coverage, vegetation, height, exposure and weather patterns
- Size
- Contiguous commons and boundaries with other commons
- Populations of graziers, potential succession
- Types of animals (sheep, cattle, horses)
- Proximity to villages and large conurbations
- Tourism and recreational use
- Number and state of archeologically valuable sites and built heritage
- Designation & condition of SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and SAC (Special Area of Conservation) etc.
- Water provision/catchment
- Gamekeeping interests
- Burning/swaling

Findings in more detail

For all interviews the same set of questions was drawn on. This list is on page 48. To begin a reflection on our findings, the simplest questions to consider in the context of land management in the uplands are:

- What's happening now?
- What has changed?
- What do people want going forwards?

These questions can also be posed with regard to relationships, and in that context the evaluation distils to three main points:

- What is the quality of relationships between commoners on a single shared common?
- How do these commoners rate their relationships with organisations and other stakeholders?
- What is the quality of relationship between active graziers with commons rights, and other people, both local and visitors, who are not involved in the care or management of commons?

This concise list has arisen from a broad set of themes that have arisen from our conversations. These are outlined below. We have expanded on some elements to illustrate points in more depth.

There is widespread love for the uplands, and a care and commitment to commons and commoning among those who are involved

1. A love for upland areas and a feeling of privilege to be part of their management.
2. There is a passionate wish for commons to be maintained as a living and working landscape, with improved stewardship of the land.
3. A sense that people from outside the area love spending time in the landscape: numbers of tourists and recreational users of the national parks are generally on the increase.
4. General agreement that some level of grazing is important going forwards, for environmental reasons and for sustaining local communities.
5. The cultural value of farming matters in that it shapes the landscape.
6. From within the farming and commoning community there is a general acceptance of the role of farmers in delivering Public Goods and the absolute necessity of financial support to do this, alongside effective monitoring.

These findings come from our conversations during recorded interviews, and side conversations with farmers and others who are involved in the commons. Among the general public, where understanding of upland management and commoning systems are low, the appreciation is for aesthetic or recreational pleasures – the view of the public is addressed in a separate point where we consider the need for education.

'To me, in the Dales, it is that sense of history of the landscape. It's not just about 'wildness' and 'nature' it is about the history that goes with it. A lot of people will be aware of that in the back of their minds but perhaps don't really express it. It's not quite the same as being somewhere completely wild or remote, it's a different feeling. Somewhere like the top of Swaledale, you may be on top of the moor but you're still seeing a landscape that very much bears the marks of man's intervention when you look around you. I think that adds to it, rather than detracts from it.'
Natural England Adviser, Yorkshire

'It's important to acknowledge that farming and extensive grazing are part of what has created that mosaic of habitats for the species that depend on the common, especially during the breeding season. But to create that mosaic we need to leave stands of old gorse, we need more trees, we must rewet areas that have been drained and we need to create wilder areas. The common will change as it has in the past; we need to ensure that change delivers a richer environment for nature, as well as a suite of public goods. The conservation and the biodiversity of the common is, after all, what agri-environment schemes are designed to deliver. Grazing is the primary means by which the commoners implement environmental outcomes.'
Land owner, Dartmoor

'That's what keeps us all here. We're leared to our ground. It's what you feel. It's not only what you know, it's what you feel. It's no different than a sheep going back to her heft, we will do the same.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'Dartmoor, if it didn't have grazing animals on it would not be that attractive to the public as a place to visit. A lot of its archaeology would disappear under excessive vegetation. Its ecology would change, whether the public would like that, we don't know … we'd lose the open access as gorse and scrub take hold… then you get on to more delicate things like water: water coming off Dartmoor feeds two thirds of the people in Devon and Cornwall. Farmers must be paid for the public benefits they provide.'
Commoners' Council, Dartmoor

The importance of relationships and communication must not be overlooked: this comes into every area

1. Where relationships are good, things work well. There have been initiatives (past and current) that have helped to forge better relationships.
2. There is a strong desire to pull together different perspectives for the greater good.
3. When relationships break down, or are not formed well, difficulties follow.
4. It's not what is done but how it is done; language and relationships matter.
5. Ultimately, what it comes down to is people, how they get along, levels of listening, trust and respect.

Good relationships; building and maintaining networks

'We're very lucky, in the fact that it is a good community, whether it's gathering, the church, the village hall.' 'The commoners that I work with on the fell, it's them that I'd work with in the village hall, in the church. It's such a big area and you've got Brantfell, Tebay, Bowderdale, Ravenstonedale, I wouldn't necessarily know somebody in Ravenstonedale or Tebay or Bowderdale but because you get their sheep you work together – you know people on different areas because of the sheep.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'We're wonderful neighbours to each other, there isn't anyone that we don't help, that wouldn't help us. We've got that spirit all the way through, and that's the communal aspect.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

Interviews in Dartmoor revealed that the Dartmoor Commoners Council is held in high regard, and has often stepped in to help when needed. Our conversations also revealed that there have been projects that have worked well in bridging new relationships and bringing people together from different commons and different generations. There were positive reflections from farmers on the success of the *Dartmoor Hill Farming Project*, which supported young people to learn on farms for a limited period of time. This provided opportunities for training, for learning new skills, and for farmers involved in the project to get to know one another.

Farming Futures, also in Dartmoor, where it was set up by farmers with the help of John Waldon from the Dartmoor Commoners' Council, has also been working well. This has involved farmers taking the lead initiative in planning ways of working that they believe will achieve the required environmental outcomes; rather than following prescriptions delivered by environmental organisations and based on livestock numbers and grazing regimes. The opportunity has not been taken up by all but those who have become involved seem very positive about it. The scheme also requires farmers to be trained in, and carry out, vegetation monitoring.

'If you're going to take control of a scheme and deliver a better outcome than their prescription, you've got to understand what's under your feet and what you're trying to do. And from that point of view, yes, it is a benefit for commoners to do it.'
Member of Farming Futures, Dartmoor

The Dartmoor Commoners Council has played a positive role in assisting individuals and groups of commoners when difficulties arise.

'It's a farmer led initiative with the objective of commoners taking responsibility to ensure Dartmoor is managed correctly, there is a live register of rights, and only legitimate commoners who have paid to be on that register are able to exercise their rights on Dartmoor.'
Dartmoor Commoners Council

The Council also has to ensure animal welfare is good. 'Most people's animals are in extremely good condition.'

A positive initiative in the Yorkshire Dales was the *Hill Farmers Succession Group*, which was run by the Farmer Network. Among commoners, the practice on Ingleborough Common of setting dates for a communal gather works well in ensuring all the active graziers come together in summer and autumn, on the fell. There are also regular commoners' meetings. On Brant Fell common, good relationships between graziers and regular contact by phone help them to gather effectively.

Phones and social media contact have replaced the old system of shepherd's meets, and allowed more flexibility to accommodate fluctuations in weather.

The counter to positive experiences, in some places, relationships between commoners are far from good.

Poor relationships can linger based on generations of disagreement between families, or on new issues. In Dartmoor, working to address conflict is one of the roles of the Commoners' Council.

At the extreme end of the spectrum, there may be bullying. This is not widely expressed but we suspect it is a difficult thing to admit to, and we also acknowledge that our sample size was very small - hearing stories of overbearing behaviour may indicate a wider problem. There is a strong suggestion that work is needed to provide a safe space for people to talk about power imbalance, and to address issues of conflict or aggression.

'If you want cohesion, if you want to engage and get people to want to look after something, especially a public good, then you have to have a level playing field, or else some people are always feeling they are at the bottom. It's very difficult – the balance of power is so out of kilter.'

'Actually, everybody gets on because nobody pushes. Everybody's getting on as long as they behave, as long as they don't step out of line, and as long as they don't try and exercise their rights. And that is really interesting to me because on the surface it all looks OK - and these big graziers? They're OK because nobody's going to push to get on. Our nearest point of access is farmed by a farmer who is very, very keen that everybody knows that that bit of the common is his and he will push everybody else's stock off. So even if I wanted to use my nearest bit of common, I can't. And because it has happened for 30 years, it has become his piece of common. People will call it his bit of common. And he sees that as his.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'It's the big players who, if they aren't signed up, Natural England wouldn't go ahead. That's what they do on the home commons, they hold everyone to ransom. You've got on the home commons a lot of bad feeling where the big people have said if you don't give me more money, I won't sign, and if I don't sign, nobody gets anything.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

There is desire to pull together different perspectives for the greater good, and in order for this to work, trust needs to be built.

'Loss of trust. It's that word: Trust. I've always been somebody who thought we should move with the times, and - oh the ministry, they're there to do a job, you've got to see it from their point of view, you can't always see it from the farmers' point of view - but to be honest, they've lost total trust with me.' What would it take to get the trust back? 'Stability. The same people there. Spend time. And use these [points to ears].'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'You've got the bird bodies, the walkers, the farmers, and you've got them all separate, and I don't like the idea of going into a meeting where it seems like you're going to go in for a fight. Because the bird people want to just think about the birds, and the graziers want to just think about the grazing. If we could all work together on a model that could cater for everybody, that seems logical to me, that seems positive.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

A note on relationships with the general public

Most farmers we spoke to say that the majority of people walking and crossing farmland do not cause problems, but there is a widespread problem with dogs and a lack of understanding that agitating a flock can cause significant problems for the sheep and for the farmer. Without exception farmers believe that the general public have a low level of understanding, but in general are more than happy to talk to people to try and change this. Levels of understanding are explored on page 30.

'I'm quite happy for people to come and have a look. It's very important, as farmers, to engage with people. We have a footpath through the farm and when people come, I always make a point of being friendly to them because I think a lot of walkers think farmers are curmudgeons, 'get off my land' sort of thing. They can be quite shocked when I speak to them. I always go out of my way to say 'Hello'. At lambing time we'll say to kids 'Would you like to come?' and they'll absolutely love it. They'll remember that.'
Commoner, Yorkshire Dales

There have been changes in upland farming practice, and the upland environment, in the last 50-60 years

1. A loss of smaller farms and a shift towards 'ranch' style farming
2. Shift away from pure breeds in some areas, threatening genetic continuity of stock
3. Insufficient money to support a second or third worker on the farm
4. Concern about succession
5. Increased pressure on the lower ground when animals are taken off the common
6. Decline in numbers of active graziers; and this is a progressive decline
7. Negative impact on local communities, with local schools and shops struggling to survive in some areas
8. Decline in quality of habitats and diversity of species
9. Lack of monitoring is a widespread issue

A shift towards ranch farming

Farms are gradually becoming larger, with one home farm subsuming other farms over time. The rights with each individual farm are typically taken on by the single home farm. This is driving a tendency towards 'ranch' farming. Almost exclusively, although it can make good business sense to have more land, farmers tell us that smaller farms are likely to be more environmentally friendly (both on the common and on inside land) and more financially viable; there is a strong desire to farm as extensively as possible which benefits the environment, livestock and people.

Shift away from pure breeds

This is not a universal truth on all farms but there has been a tendency to increase the stocking numbers of cross-breeds, largely because of market forces which deliver a higher price for mules etc. Foot and Mouth was a significant factor in the decision to change practice on some farms. Looking ahead, some people suspect that if they have to rely more heavily on markets to make a living, they are likely to move away from pure breeds of hill sheep which fetch lower prices at market.

Financial ability to support work on the farm / succession

'I think people of his generation will actually become part time farmers and probably need to major an income from somewhere else. That's kind of alright, but I think the first thing that will suffer, if that's the case, will be common land.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'It comes back to our incomes really, doesn't it, and what we can make, to try and encourage people to stay. If we were generating a reasonable income, not a lot, not mega loads, but if it was easier – I don't know if would ever be easier! – but to generate more income then it would be easier to keep young people at home to help at home, and not have to juggle two or three different jobs. If we can make enough for us to live, and just live basically, I would be quite happy, as long as my stock is fighting fit (and I look like shit!) I would be quite happy really.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'The biggest issue is we're not getting enough income to keep young people on the fells.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

Concern about pressure on lower ground if the common is not used

This concern was expressed by farmers and environmental specialists alike.

'If you reduce the amount of time the animals are on the common, you are increasing grazing pressure on the home farm. If you increase the amount of time they can be on the common, you decrease the pressure on the home farm. So where do you want your environmental benefits?'
Commoner, Dartmoor

Decline in numbers of active graziers

The general pattern is that numbers of people with registered rights on the common who actively use those rights, or actively become involved in decisions about agreements and activity on the commons, is falling.

'The common is becoming less important as a management tool. Less and less sheep have been put on that common in my lifetime of farming. Most are in the enclosures – it is fenced moorland, it's rough. When I first started there would be six or seven different people with sheep on that Moor. Now there are three. Twenty, thirty years ago the sheep would be out now, perhaps until end of January, depending on how bad the winter was. Effectively, I use the common from summer until tupping time. Nobody puts sheep out with lambs or hoggs any more in Spring; partly because they just don't come back - they just disappear, we don't know where.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'In the late 19th Century there were possibly 15 or 16 graziers on the Common. There are now only 4 of us.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'To put it in some kind of context, on the road that we live on, on the old Ingleton road there used to be 10 family farms, all producing a little bit of milk. Now there are only 4 farms in total and we're the last ones producing milk.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'What has happened, and people don't realise, is that the number of active key graziers on the common - I will use the word active as involved graziers - has dropped. You will get graziers who have purchased a farm, a small holding, think it's nice to put a small number of sheep, or ponies up, they're classified as graziers; but when it comes to doing anything on the common, in reality they aren't. The actual number of families that are really involved in commoning is dropping. And in a lot of commons it's down to two or three families.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

Negative impact on local communities in terms of population

There are concerns in all areas about affordability for younger generations to live in the areas, and to take on a farm if this is what they choose to do. This threatens schools and shops as numbers of residents fall – could more involvement in the commons and a system where there are more farmers on smaller farms regenerate rural areas and add resilience?

'With another hat on, I am a school governor. Pupil numbers in Burnsall have gone from 60, when my kids were there ten years ago, to 20. The school is under threat. We now have a federation of four schools in Wharfedale to try and make budgets balance. So you could say perhaps the decline in farming has had an influence on that, but the bigger influence is young people not being able to stay in the area. The cost of housing is the big thing - £650,000 in Hebden for a decent sized house. That's what young people are up against.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'Even in my lifetime there would probably be twice as many farms grazing Ingleborough, and each of those would have a family that would go to the local shop and the local school, the local church, the local pub.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

There is no Young Commoners group in Yorkshire and the Young Farmers group is on a downward trajectory.

'It goes in waves, the young farmers. When I started there were about 30 or 40 of us, and my generation all have young kids now, so we'll have to wait until that lot grow up.'

Decline in quality of habitats

There is a very large gap in provision of 'facts' and the results of formal monitoring on common land. This is something that needs urgently to be addressed going forwards.

There is, however, strong anecdotal evidence and shared observations that habitats are changing and this change is not always favourable. This relates to heather moorland, open grassland, tree cover and peatland. At the far end of this spectrum is concern for reaching a tipping point beyond which things will become simply too bad to fix:

'I think we're seeing the decline to zero of the last areas of interest to conservation on the commons. It doesn't actually take very much to increase the conservation value but I think that there is the risk that if we don't do it fairly soon, it won't be worth doing really … We have an opportunity to make it better.'
Landowner, Dartmoor

'Nationally there has been a big decline in curlew, and lapwing, and other ground nesting birds but I think generally the numbers are stable at the moment, we're doing quite well when compared to some other areas. But these are important birds, and management of that moor comes back to people working together – if you work as individuals, you never achieve anything, it just never happens. Working together is crucial.'
National Park Ranger, Yorkshire

‘It’s so important. How can you put a value on that? This area is the green lung for so many people.’

Rob Steemson, Landscape and Community Ranger, Dartmoor National Park Authority

There is also the observation of vegetation change:

'It's got a lot lowker, long brown dead looking grass. The only way you can get rid of it, I think is, you either put a lot of stock on it and get it back green again, or you're going to have to put some cows on it to break it up.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

In Dartmoor there is a concern about excessive growth of Molinia on the moor. There is general agreement that this reflects a reduction in grazing by both sheep and cattle; the impact of increased atmospheric nitrogen may also be significant. Studies and reliable research are important.

In areas where grazing has been reduced, scrub is returning and gorse is becoming more widespread. This is considered by many to be a good thing in terms of offering a diversity of habitats for wildlife. Concern arises, particularly among graziers, where gorse becomes an obstacle for walkers and is too thick for animals to pass through and not only erodes available grazing area but also forces further pressure on other areas that are still open for grazing. The numbers of horses on the moors is also a concern, as the market for them falls: there is widespread agreement that there is little money to be made for them, at present, and numbers may greatly reduce, with a knock-on effect on the land.

'Is scrub a good thing? That depends how you see it really. With the right sort of management, it increases the habitat for ground nesting birds. The problem though is that it concentrates stock and people, walkers, riders, into lines. So now there's an increasing concern about erosion. We have a town of 15,000 a mile off the edge of our common.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'Most of the ponies are on the moor for 12 months. From an ecological point of view there's growing evidence that the ponies are really valuable, and it's the loss of ponies that might be causing some of the problems we've got. How many? We think there's unlikely to be more than fifteen hundred. Once there were as many as 30,000 and the market was good – now there's no market and some people think the ponies' demise is almost imminent.'
Dartmoor Commoners Councl

Lack of monitoring

Commoners and other stakeholders share the view that monitoring has not been consistent or detailed in most areas, and this needs addressing. Recent programmes to trial alternative methods have included Farming Futures in Dartmoor, which brings farmers into the process.

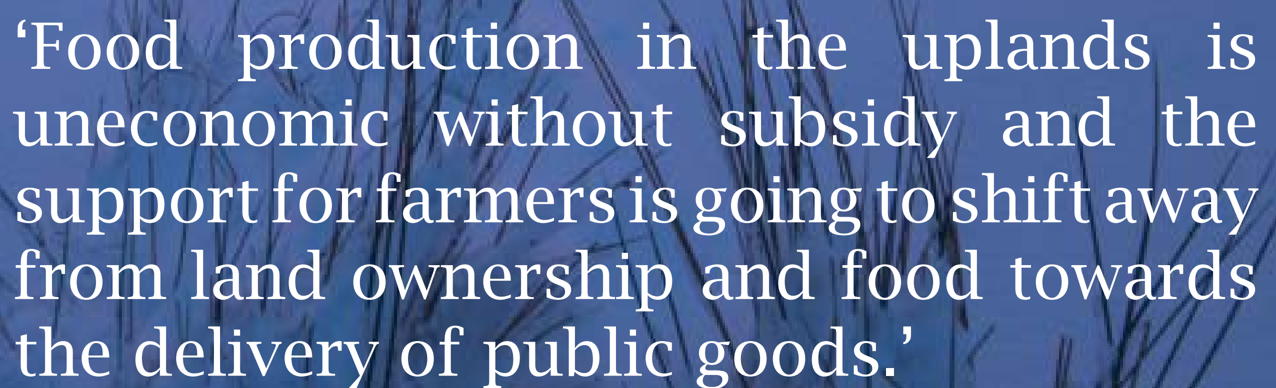
'We need impartial studies of where the species are, what they need, where we're able to graze more, so people do have access to the moor, so that farmers can farm the moor, so that all the species can live successfully on the moor. I think in order to achieve that, studies have got to be done, otherwise you've just got people's opinions. And, you know, sometimes they can be right and sometimes they can be wrong.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'… it's having all the information, documenting it, so you've got all the evidence coming in from every party, and then you get somebody with a pragmatic hat on to look at the level playing field and say well, that's acceptable there, we want you to do that there, so you've just got to sit down again and look at it. And if there are rare butterfly here, great, that's a prime species – we want to do some work there to encourage that growth with management. On Hay Tor that's what the farmers are doing – there's a blue butterfly and its habitat has got better because the farmers are aware of it: they graze it at a certain time of year, they swale it, and the butterfly's slowly coming up the hill. But you don't see it going on, it's only because I'm aware of it, I know the commoners over there.'
National Park Ranger, Dartmoor

Agreeing and administering schemes

The provision of money through government-led schemes plays a fundamental part in terms of personal wellbeing and relationships within the close and wider community. How payments through schemes are devised, negotiated and delivered, however, is a very common source of distress.

1. Pressure felt by commoners to negotiate schemes and aportion payments
2. There's a wish for proper facilitation when it comes to organising schemes
3. Problems where schemes exist on some commons and not on others
4. Breakdown in relationships with Natural England
5. Problems with imbalance of power, including bullying-type behaviour within groups of commoners
6. Schemes have altered over the years and are not always fit for purpose



‘Food production in the uplands is uneconomic without subsidy and the support for farmers is going to shift away from land ownership and food towards the delivery of public goods.’

Kevin Cox, landowner, Holne Common

'We can't survive on what we produce on our animals, so a scheme up there would be great but I do feel that certain areas have been forgotten. There's a lot of money been spent in the likes of Swaledale. They seem to get a lot of money for things that we cannot get money for. I sometimes wonder why. That money doesn't always seem to benefit an area. It leads to two-tier farming. They get all these field barns and all that sort of work done for them. A lot of them can get grants for that and get everything paid for. We've never had a chance.'

Commoner, Yorkshire

'If we've got no support bar through agri-environment schemes, your good farms will become more intensive but won't have any support and will be totally dependent on market forces, and schemes will support the high nature value farmland on the hills. But what about the in-between land that hasn't got the environmental benefits to get payments, but you cannot farm intensively enough to earn a living by market forces? There's going to be a tipping point at which if you have enough of those people go out of business, you will lose your infrastructure.'

Commoner, Dartmoor

'The problem with the commoners is that they're used to not being listened to. They're used to being pushed from pillar to post. I mean you hear it in the Health Service, Education service and everything. People are really frustrated by changes in government policy. I've heard it said by graziers at meetings with Defra, National Park, everybody else, people saying, Well ten years ago you were telling us to graze more, now you're telling us to graze less. What are you going to tell us in ten years' time? And do you think we can run our businesses with more or less animals just on the whim that you come up with? Well, the only way they can do it is by being given money to do whatever they're told to do. And if that's based on a prescription for England as a whole, or England and Wales, or the EU, that doesn't work.

… government policy is just not long term enough to address all these issues … but to have it set up so that it can be managed in a completely unsustainable way, and to know that, and to have a government body that knows that, and to have graziers that fundamentally know that, and to do nothing about it, is just stupid. And to be bound by a law produced by the generation before last, basically my grandparent's generation, and to be bound by flaws in it, is ridiculous.… There has been a lot of muttering in the rows. Well you have to agree with that because it's our policy. Well we don't. It's not a very friendly agreement.'

Landowner, Dartmoor

Pressure on commoners to negotiate agri-environment schemes and deliver payments

While groups of commoners have had many years' experience working together to discuss practical issues, including the negotiation of agri-environment schemes, and many groups do work well together, it is not unusual for this process to become socially divisive. There may be existing disputes between families, or disagreements may arise in the process of discussing schemes. The responsibility of managing large amounts of money and maintaining working relationships can lead to considerable stress for individuals who often have taken the role on not through choice but through necessity.

'Money is such a difficult thing. A lot of people are really short of money. There's a massive prize and so they scrabble for the prize. That's no way to build engagement and rapport between a group of people.'

Commoner, Dartmoor

Need proper facilitation when organising schemes.

'With Countryside Stewardship, it has become essential for any group of commoners to have somebody to facilitate with them. It's not strictly a requirement of the scheme, the scheme just requires them to have a single named contact. Sometimes in the past, particularly with the HLS agreements, we've had farmers who've done it. They've seen it less as a facilitation role and more as the role of being the contact for the application, the person who receives the money and distributes it out.

'I feel commons have got into quite a lot of difficulties with that because they haven't had an independent person facilitating. And the farmers don't necessarily have the time, the skills or the inclination to carry out that role. And if you're a farmer who's dealing with a grouse shooting interest who's maybe your landlord or a powerful presence in the area, that's potentially a difficult relationship anyway. I think having a separate person facilitating is critical.

'It worries me a lot that these agreements have the potential to cause tension or rifts in small

communities where it's so important that people do get on for all sorts of reasons, not just for the sake of their business.'
Natural England Adviser, Yorkshire

'It just takes one bugger, one awkward cuss, to make life very difficult for everybody else. And I think a few commons unfortunately have a couple of those individuals.'

'Facilitation advice is really critical at certain points, and yet nowhere in the proposals going forwards is that recognised. Gove is convinced that if a farmer needs advice, he should buy it on the open market. Who from? It doesn't happen. There's lots of evidence to show that people will not buy it.'
Dartmoor Commoners Council

Problems where schemes existing on some commons and not on others

Many commons are contiguous, i.e. they abut one another but there is no fencing to isolate one from another. Where a scheme restricts grazing on one common, but the neighbouring common has no such restrictions, there is a negative impact for the environment and a negative impact for some individuals; it can also disrupt relationships among commoners. The decisions not to go into schemes can be linked with poor relationships, imbalances of power, or a fault in the system of delivery schemes. All these are significant going forwards.

'The common next door's under an agreement, the common on the other side is on an agreement, but our common isn't because nobody gets on with each other. We've tried lots of times with 'there's a big pot of money on the table' but these people make so much money out of the other agreements, where the commons are bigger, they don't see the point of being in an agreement here and having restrictions. I think that's part of the problem. It's too much money going in to people's businesses so they can make choices like that. And through the scheme rules, you can have an agreement on one piece of land and trash another piece.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

Breakdown in relationships with Natural England

At the level of individuals, relationships can be very positive between Natural England staff and farmers. There have been significant changes in recent years however, and in many cases this has resulted in far less personal contact between individuals on the ground, and/or continued staff change at Natural England. Thus a breakdown of general relationships between farmers and Natural England is widespread. It is largely due to the reduction in numbers of project officers within Natural England, although on one common the commoners refused to continue working with the NE member of staff assigned to them because of relationship difficulties: this resulted in the common not going into an agri-environmental scheme. A sense of continuity has been lost, often referred to as 'institutional loss of memory'.

In the areas of this study there was universal experience of reduced contact with Natural England officers. This either contributes to, or follows on from, a sense of distrust in the agency. Natural England officers report that they feel the pressure of their job and are frequently in a very difficult position; many farmers fully appreciate this, yet feel impacted by the way the system is working.

'Ten years' ago you always had somebody you could phone up, talk to, and you'd get answers back. But now you're phoning somebody miles away and nobody knows what's going on.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'It is quite complex as you can imagine. Before we had Higher Level Stewardship schemes (which started around 10 years ago), we {Natural England} tended to have involvement with individual commoners and talk to them about ways that we might like individuals to manage their grazing on the moor, for instance to address a localised problem of grazing pressure. Or how we would like an estate to manage their activities on the moor, and we weren't at all talking collectively with people. Then with Environmental Stewardship, the HLS agreements worked in a very different way because it was based on a single agreement for a whole group of people.'

'To be honest, I don't think that was facilitated as it should have been. That wasn't really something that we had the luxury of the time to do, or the skills/experience to do. When we worked up the HLS agreements we had to very rapidly get some of these areas into agreement, due to various political pressures at the time. So we had to specify grazing levels, and what we wanted to see in terms of the burning management, and secure agreement for capital works such as grip blocking. We had to try to get everyone to agree on our proposals, which didn't feel very comfortable, but because there was quite a lot of money on the table, people did work

together to try and make that work. We found that typically the graziers were particularly interested in trying to access the funding; some estates were more interested in not being restricted in terms of their shooting interests, and not always motivated by the financial element.'
Natural England Adviser, Yorkshire

Consideration of suitability of schemes and their management

'The problem with the commoners is that they're used to not being listened to. They're used to being pushed from pillar to post. I mean you hear it in the Health Service, Education service and everything. People are really frustrated by changes in government policy. I've heard it said by graziers at meetings with Defra, National Park, everybody else, people saying, Well ten years ago you were telling us to graze more, now you're telling us to graze less. What are you going to tell us in ten years' time? And do you think we can run our businesses with more or less animals just on the whim that you come up with? Well, the only way they can do it is by being given money to do whatever they're told to do. And if that's based on a prescription for England as a whole, or England and Wales, or the EU, that doesn't work.'

'Government policy is just not long term enough to address all these issues … but to have it set up so that it can be managed in a completely unsustainable way, and to know that, and to have a government body that knows that, and to have graziers that fundamentally know that, and to do nothing about it, is just stupid. And to be bound by a law produced by the generation before last, basically my grandparent's generation, and to be bound by flaws in it, is ridiculous…. There has been a lot of muttering in the rows. Well you have to agree with that because it's our policy. Well we don't. It's not a very friendly agreement.'
Landowner, Dartmoor

A need for education to enable those outside farming and commoning to understand more

'There is only one thing. It's got to be education. Links with the countryside. If you need to move forward you need to be positive, involving people, or educating people about it, is the only way forward.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

1. There is a lack of awareness among public both living in or in close proximity to the National Parks, and visiting from further afield, about the level of management that is required to 'keep' the uplands.
2. This is perceived by farmers and others involved in the management of the uplands
3. And it is expressed by people interviewed who are not farmers or otherwise involved.
4. There is a need for knowledge sharing between farmers, conservationists, and other stakeholders

General views about the uplands from those who are not involved in farming are based on leisure use and aesthetic appreciation.

'The hills are my breathing space, they're part of my life. I moved here so I could have access to the open space and I love it.'
Public opinion (paraphrased), Yorkshire

'We have so many memories as a family from here. When I was a child I would be up here every summer with my parents. Now I have children, we come as often as we can. It's an hour's drive for us.'
Public opinion (paraphrased), Dartmoor

But all our findings show that, with a few exceptions, the level of understanding of commoning and management of the uplands is low.

In all our recorded interviews, people told us they thought the general public had a very low level of understanding of what goes on in the uplands. When we spoke to members of the public, this perception was confirmed: the general view is that common land is there for everyone, and practically looks after itself.

Only two people knew what a common was, with rights to graze. Only one of these had a high level of awareness about the range of habitats connected with grazing and the absence of grazing.

'I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about commons. I think there's a perception that commons are there for everyone, and in some ways they are, but people misinterpret the rights of common that commoners have to graze and take products from the land, and also the need for management, as in the link with farming and nature conservation issues, and how the land needs to be grazed, managed and maintained.'
Member of the public (recorded) Dartmoor

‘It’s not a job someone’s going to come in and jump in and say, oh yes I’m going to do hill farming. Let’s be honest, you’ve got to be born and bred into the job. There’s a hell of a lot to learn, how to heft sheep and all the rest of it.’

Brian Lavis, Great Cranford Farm, Bridestowe

The views of farmers and those involved in commoning show they frequently encounter very low levels of understanding.

'Their understanding, on a scale of 1 to 10: 1!'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'Twenty years ago, I would have said that a great many members of the public understood hill farming and Rights of Common fairly well. Now I don't think the school curriculum includes education about farming. Children might learn about factory farming methods but I doubt very much they learn about methods of farming that are historical - where farmers are custodians of the environment. It is a shame.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'I don't think they actually realise what the farmers do up there. I really don't. They come, they go up there and see it all, but I don't think they actually understand how much the livestock, you know the farmers, actually keep it like it is. If it wasn't for the livestock farmers up there, it would suddenly overgrow and you wouldn't be able to get access up there. I think they've got to know that it's an incredible natural asset, that they are going to be very sorry if they allow us to lose it.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'I think we all have a duty to enhance and maintain and restore and manage cultural heritage and open space that we're very lucky to have. But I think there is a need to involve people in understanding what goes on and what has to go on: the landscape we see today doesn't just retain itself. It will change hugely if it's not managed and farming is a hugely important part of that process, based on farmers with years and years of experience and stock that have been born and bred and hefted – or leared – on this landscape.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'There's such a rift between the town and the country that I don't know where you start to try and heal it. You've got the hunting lobby, that gives us lots of grief. You've got the vegan movement. You've got people who take every opportunity to black-list farming and livestock production. And that's pretty hurtful really. I've got the same lines of cattle on this farm that my great, great grandfather started with. We've got those and our white-faced Dartmoor sheep as well. My ambition in my farming career is to leave those breeds in a better genetic state than when I took them over.'
Dartmoor Commoner

'There's a lack of respect. I'm actually a massive fan of the right to roam. We're very fortunate to live here and be able to have access to all of this. I think when you're born in the ghetto, you know, to not have the chance to experience nature, that's wrong. The trouble is, is that the few are spoiling it for the many. You will have seen Private signs on my gates. I've got people coming down through, climbing over all the walls, pulling fences down, leaving gates open, dogs chasing sheep, you know. And I've turned into this grumpy farmer that doesn't want people on their land. I wish I didn't have to be like that but I do have to be like that cost there's such a huge lack of respect.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'I often do film the dogs working, when I'm on the fell, and put it on Facebook. And people comment on it, folk from America. It's surprising how many non-farmers comment on it.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

There is no suggestion from the non-farming public that their attitude comes with a lack of respect, even though it is interpreted that way by some farmers. The lack of knowledge is, we believe, due to lack of information rather than through a choice to ignore information. Education would help to fill the knowledge gap and may also increase the level of enjoyment and attachment that people already feel to the upland regions that they love. In terms of valuing the work of farming, or taking part in discussions around policies impacting the uplands, further education would help.

Good experiences of public interaction indicate the positive impact this can have, as well as a wide interest and curiosity to know more about the heritage of farming and the farmed upland landscape. A number of farmers spoke of open days on their farms that were very busy, and were very obviously enlightening for those visiting (as an example, in Yorkshire, one visitor didn't realise that to obtain wool from a sheep it didn't have to be killed). Others welcome visitors in who walk past, and enjoy talking to them.

In Dartmoor the Public Gather organised by local farmers in association was a huge success. Some visitors had come after hearing the event advertised on local radio; the majority of people we spoke to were learning

about farming and the interaction between animals and the moors, for the first time. People walked with farmers and asked questions as they watched the sheep being driven in, and then were given a talk and sheep handling demonstration in the field. Conversations covered the historical layout of the landscape, breeds of sheep, generations of farming, ground nesting birds, plants, grasses, archeology and more.

One farmer in Dartmoor told us about an occasion when she opened her farm to the public for a farm walk and expected about 50 visitors but got 400.

'It was a truly beautiful thing and that made me really happy. It just showed to me that massive appetite people have to engage with the natural environment and the fact that they don't feel confident enough to do it.'

'People [who visit the farm and engage with us] love the idea of the common. They're really engaged with it. They love the idea of the cattle going out and grazing on the common, and coming back in. They really get the whole story.'

'We've got about 800 followers of Facebook, of which 200 of those are regularly buying meat from us - as much meat as we can produce. They like the story of it being grass fed, they like the fact that it goes from here to Ashburton, which is six miles away, to an abattoir with CCTV and a very high welfare standard, and then to a local butcher, which is five miles up the road.'
Dartmoor Commoner

A selection of paraphrased quotes shows the range of views about the uplands and the part that farming plays.

I love to watch the farmers getting their sheep in. We were walking once and there they were, we just stood and watched. It was amazing. I felt really lucky to have seen it. If we had been closer to the farmer I would have gone and talked to him.

I've been to this display today, and I've learnt so much. I never realised how many times the farmers had to go out to check their sheep, or how the fell worked. It's really interesting, good to know.

We go to the show every year, and love seeing the animals. My kids have a great time. It feels like a really important part of our community, which is quite spread out really, across valleys. I don't know that much about farming but I can't imagine the place without animals, the tractors, the people on the land.

In winter the snow can be a real problem. If it wasn't for the farmers clearing the road I think I'd be stuck a lot more. They just get on with it, and I'm sure they're really busy. I really appreciate that.

Oh yes, everyone knows him! He's on the parish council and he'll always stop and chat when we pass on the lanes. His family's a bit of an institution.

I don't know any farmers. It feels like we're in very different social circles.

When I visit, I come for relaxation. I hadn't really considered the work that goes in to the land. It's easy to think it looks after itself.

It means a lot to me to see the traces of people on the land, whether that's old archeology or the walls and barns that are around now. I like to feel history when I'm walking.

I don't see why tax payers should subsidise farmers. We all know that they don't make enough money from selling their animals. If they weren't there, the uplands would rewild and it would be brilliant. I'm all for that.

A common? That's a place where anyone can go. I don't think anyone owns it.

No one owns the ponies on Dartmoor do they? They're wild. I love seeing them.

I think there's a problem with a decline in the environment, and I think farming has to change. Why are we addicted to having sheep in the hills when the demand for lamb is going down? Crazy.

For me, seeing farmers at work, or just knowing that they are there, that's what brings the life to this place. I wouldn't want it to be left to go wild and scrubby. That would be a shame, not just because of how it would look, but it's something about the heart, about the feeling of history. Difficult to find the words for it.

It makes no sense to have grazing animals up on the hills. I'd prefer to see trees. It's like an outdated system and I think it's wrong that farmers get paid to wreck the environment.

I can't see the sense in it. It doesn't make economic sense to run farms at a loss does it?
I haven't heard of the public goods argument before. I didn't really see it like that but now you mention it, it makes some sense: farming isn't just about sheep is it?

Knowledge sharing

In our conversations we heard from some people that they wanted to have an opportunity to share more about their knowledge - whether this was farming or conservation - and also to learn from others. On the whole, however, the need for improved knowledge sharing was inferred and has become apparent through this report.

Many farmers expressed a wish for people from organisations to be given more time to spend on farms where they can learn through experience. There was also an apparent gap in knowledge among farmers about habitats and environment - while farmers were aware that certain areas were considered special, ad were keen to care for them, there was little ability to name plants or evidence of knowing how one thing affected another. There was a wider knowledge of birds and often very keen observation of nesting and breeding habits.

'Sometimes, these organisations just need to come out and spend time with the farmer and realise that we actually do have the best interests of the countryside at heart. We are not here just to make money out of farming; otherwise we all would have stopped years ago. A lot of it is that we are doing it for the love of it.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

The need for better and more frequent sharing of knowledge and insights exists between all agencies and stakeholders. In Dartmoor, during the process of setting up the 'Vision', what became apparent was that while people thought they held different points of view, they had more in common and might have benefitted from more conversations.

'Following the devastating outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease, in 2002 a consultation with farmers found that the farmers were fed up with potentially conflicting demands by agencies; one body, like English Nature at that time, telling us that they want this land managed for the natural environment and then two days later someone from English Heritage or whatever they were called at the time said, well the archaeology is important. The farmers, consistently, complained that they got different messages from different agencies...

'We found that the agencies didn't have different demands, it was just that they used a different language. Some of them were better at talking to farmers than others. It was mostly communication or poor communication. But also it flushed out a lack of a longer term vision for Dartmoor, which the farmers wanted – they wanted to know whether in twenty years' time they were still going to be needed. Their farm businesses are long term; their livestock breeding programmes need confidence there is a long term future. The process resulted in the Dartmoor Moorland Vision a vision for the next 25 years. But it was just a process. I keep saying, you can throw the final product away when you've finished it, because is the process has secured all the agencies agreeing that they want the same thing: that's a farmed landscape and generally for it not to change too much. But as a process, it managed to overcome some of the farmers' fears.'
Dartmoor Commoners Council

A wish for a stronger voice for hill farmers in debates and in public-facing media

Most farmers feel their story is not well told and their voices are not heard in the midst of stronger voices from environmental groups. There is also an issue with having insufficient time to attend meetings and join in discussions: it is not possible to leave the farm for a day when there is no other worker to do the jobs.

'I think we'll get forgot. I may well be wrong. I hope I'm wrong … perhaps I'm old and cynical, but I have seen it all, and what I see now I don't like the look of. No, I really don't. There's too many people got all the yap and all the ear of the government, don't understand the situation – don't want to. They've got other agenda haven't they, let's be honest. That's my thinking … You get the picture that if something isn't done fairly soon, there won't be too many hill farmers about. … I'm all in favour of the environment, don't get me wrong. But who have they got to manage the environment other than the farmers? Nobody. Because the people who come with all the bright ideas haven't got a clue. It's the farmers that look after the environment. Cos it's in their own interests to do so – that's what it's all about. It has to be sustainable hasn't it.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'Is my voice heard? I don't really feel like it is. I feel like I am on the bottom of the chain. And am I going to be able to shape the future of this common? I don't know. I feel that what will actually happen will have nothing to do with me – somebody else will decide that.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

Levels of optimism about the future of farming on the commons and the practice of commoning through active grazing

'It's on a knife edge really.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

Although a small number of people expressed a belief that things could keep going as they are, if sufficient money was available to farmers, and within this hope also wished for better relationships with agencies, the majority of people are more pessimistic. This comes in the context of huge uncertainty around Brexit and future agricultural policies. In asking a question about expectations of the future when the whole system is uncertain, it is very difficult for anyone to project forward with positive plans. The pessimistic views that were shared with us come in this context, but also in the context of a gradual change (on the whole decline) in the overall system in the past few decades.

While these points of view exist, it's important to stress that the every-day life of a lot of farmers is still carrying on, and there is willingness to make positive changes if and when a more stable framework emerges.

'We've got one family of grouse that live just at that spot and about once a year you bump into them, and they – brrrr – take off, with a little brood, and you think, You've made it another year, we both have! We both made it another year, despite the bloody weather and the officials telling us we're extinct!'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'… hill farming probably has the highest expenses and the lowest output per acre, certainly on sales. It can be a pretty thankless task and we need – the market alone does not provide the turnover capital requirement that we have to reinvest and move forward. Those are major sticking points … The biggest fear I have is that hill farming is not going to survive on a penny less than it's been receiving. No matter where you are, I don't think it's possible. I'm worried to death that any future policies will be able to hang enough value on what they call 'Public Goods', that meet the mark that farmers are going to need.'
Commoner, Dartmoor

'There's only a certain amount you can do. There'll come a point when you can't do any more. We're always tightening our belts.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'At the moment, I feel optimistic that positive change is coming … but we will have to see. I believe that upland farming is in the best place to deliver a range of public goods: biodiversity, carbon storage, flood mitigation, access to green space. However, a lot more information needs to be disseminated about what 'public goods' means, to the public as well as to farmers.'
Landowner, Dartmoor

'I can only ever see a decline in the upland farm at this stage. My son is quite unusual in that he looks like he wants to be the next generation here. The last two farms that a farmer has retired from, the land has been split up between the other farms to make them more viable. I can only think that's going to happen again, looking at the tenants' situation.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

'I think some level of sheep grazing is inextricably tied up with maintaining communities, social communities in many hill areas. I think environmental and other priorities could be delivered more cost-effectively with many less sheep than are currently out there, but it all depends on how payments are structured and whether people and businesses can survive in financial terms with less livestock and/or different enterprises.'
Natural England adviser, Yorkshire

Areas for attention

1 Relationship Building

1. Relationship building with better dialogue between different parties, whatever their level of agreement or disagreement about issues. In some cases a mediator may be helpful to guide effective, safe communication and constructive listening.
2. Knowledge sharing where 'knowledge' includes passing on information about place, ecology, animals, farming systems and existing social systems and issues. This element requires time together (and this may, as above, be more productive with some element of facilitation).
3. Relationship consistency, particularly but not exclusively in the context of organisations, so that where people with management or negotiating roles leave their post, there is effective passing on of necessary information. The same could be applied to farms changing hands, so that learning is a shared and continued process rather than stop/start.
4. Reconnecting people with commons in a way that includes more knowledge of environmental management and farming practice as part of general leisure and enjoyment of some of the country's most cherished open spaces.
5. Relationships with the wider local communities are critical and our findings suggest the sense that these are undervalued by external agencies, while farmers often see themselves as the glue of the local community and are actively involved in helping out in times of need (e.g. clearing snow and fallen trees, helping with transport, addressing wild-fires).

'It takes time. You need to build trust. You need to find some way in. Often, all they want to do is talk. They feel unheard, they feel unlistened to, and often their bullishness or their aggression or their lack of willingness to engage is about loss of face and not wanting to be the one to back down, and they've got themselves to a place where it's always around an imbalance of power. There's often things from the past that have never been resolved, that cause issues in the future. They often don't talk to their neighbours, they feel isolated.'
Natural England adviser, Dartmoor

2 Working towards (stakeholder) equality

1. Which voices are heard and how are they heard? In an environment of shared management there are a number of voices at the table. Our findings show that hill farmers feel as if they don't have a strong enough (or equal) voice either at discussions or in the national media. There is a strong sense that 'environmentally focused' organisations such as RSPB, UU and Rewilding Britain have the ear of government and take prominence in the press without acknowledgement of the role of farmers in the management of the uplands.
2. Addressing this imbalance is a function of Improved Relationships and Communication (#1 above), and Raising Awareness (#3 below).
3. There is also a financial element, where farmers report a common situation where they are not remunerated for their time at meetings; this can be an obstacle for involvement, whereas some additional money could, for example, cover the cost of assistance on the farm when it cannot be left unattended. This financial inequality is an ingredient in poor social cohesion, or put another way inequality in remuneration for time/work is not conducive to social cohesion.

3 Improving awareness and understanding

Our findings reveal an extremely low level of awareness about commons and common land management among people who are not involved in the system. We also discovered a low awareness of what hill farming entails (among those who don't farm). To begin to redress this we suggest:

1. Education and dissemination of information with the public. This may range from the sharing of individual voices and stories online and in exhibitions to informative signage on walking routes, guided walks and farm open days, books or films, and the use of social media.
2. Education in schools which allows children and young people to learn about different styles of farming including low intensity farming and hill systems.
3. Education and dissemination of information between stakeholders and specialists (links with relationship point 2 above)
4. Effective 'story telling' to raise general awareness of commoning, farming, and the varied landscape of common land. Going forwards, this may involve

telling stories of individual farming families' experience of change and adaptation; a story that reveals the day-to-day life of farming and, importantly, puts human faces to the journey of navigating uncertain times while having stewardship of the land.
5. There's a need to address a misconception that all hill farmers are well or (over) paid. Some farmers feel that public opinion dismisses them as well-paid (often seeing tractors or cars as indications of wealth, whereas in reality they may be cash poor) and with this comes a low level of respect.

4 Improving environmental monitoring and assessment of outcomes

It was a perceived truth among farmers in all our study areas that independent monitoring of the environmental condition of land, whether that land is designated or not, is either non-existent or insufficient. For trust to be placed in agri-environment schemes going forwards, and also to ensure that schemes and expectations of what land can 'deliver' are well thought through, this must be addressed. Farming Futures is an example of a new model of monitoring and we will share comments about this.

1. Monitoring needs to be as independent and non-biased as possible, and ideally involving many people in a system of shared monitoring.
2. Co-designing of schemes and landscape management plans, with appropriate facilitation and advice, is likely to have the best outcomes.
3. Broadening outcomes and indicators of success. The idea of payment for the provision of Public Goods is widely accepted. There's a feeling that management agreements, which work towards outcomes, need to broaden the range of environmental indicators (flora and fauna) with local specifics taken into account. In addition, improved individual and social wellbeing could be measured alongside the provision of public goods as a desirable outcome that ultimately feeds into better delivery for all.

5 Improvement to payment system

Money is a widespread issue. There is much uncertainty around the introduction of new schemes and this study cannot project forward but did identify the need for:

1. New payment schemes need to be devised in consultation with farmers.
2. Payments need to be made on time. Late payment can derail the business and is extremely stressful.
3. A computerised payment system that is fit for the purpose of commoning.
4. Funding for some capital items would be useful to assist commoning; e.g. hurdles on Ingleborough Common. But this requirement is not felt to be as important as effective schemes.

'I'm not a big believer in schemes. I think it totally upsets the balance for farmers. There were 12 graziers when it first started, and they were getting into their late 50s, early 60s, so having a scheme that reduced sheep numbers, they thought it wasn't worth turning the sheep out at all so it went from about 12 down to about 5, 4 maybe.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

This is one of the major issues for me really. I have enough work for Chris to work for me at home without him going anywhere else but we don't raise enough money to pay him, so he has to go out and work for other people. And I myself go out to work as well, I teach part time.
Commoner, Yorkshire

6 Addressing issues of land registration, fencing, farm sizes.

1. Review of registration of commons rights. Disagreements or hard feelings about registration of rights by previous generations still cause issues of conflict. There are also problems where farms are sold and the rights are no longer used.
2. Fencing to protect environmentally sensitive areas is desired by some farmers; sometimes with recompense for lost grazing land or a relaxation of grazing restrictions on other areas of common.
3. A desire for a system that supports smaller farms. Farm sizes and the corresponding use of areas of common land have altered over the last 50-100 years with a tendency towards fewer, larger farms, often with fewer people managing a bigger area of land. While this can be a beneficial business move, this reduces the availability of starter farms for younger people; makes viable succession less likely; increases the pressure on existing farmers to cope (without sufficient funding to support a second or third worker); and potentially increases the division between home farm and common. The availability of more viable small-scale farms could create opportunities for more farmers, greater diversity in farming practices, and more resilience in the commoning system; it also contributes to a more resilient local community with active and vibrant schools, shops, pubs etc.

7 Funding for training and ongoing payment for freelance shepherds and farm workers

This issue was voiced in the Yorkshire Dales and when we mentioned it in Dartmoor the concept was met with enthusiasm: the possibility of future schemes allowing payment for freelance workers who can assist on farms in their region and have sufficient support to allow for continuity, for the benefit of good relationships and also to allow learning about specific commons, to build up a team of dogs for gathering, to develop walling skills, etc. This would potentially support commoning systems, would allow individual farmers to call on backup in times of need (and to free them up to take part in meetings), and would support an ongoing process of training and involvement. This could be a feature of upland farming communities as part of a larger system including starter farms, tenanted farms, share farming, owner occupied farms, and other models.

'I could show you our old minute book. We used to hire a shepherd. Every common used to hire a shepherd, and that shepherd would probably work for four or five different commons. That is a skill, running three or four hill dogs on different commons, keeping the sheep heafed. That's the kind of thing you think, that would be great. But there just isn't the skill level out there, and the problem with the project is, in three years' time the project comes to an end. Whatever money we might have been able to devote to hiring somebody to do that, the farmers would then have to take on, and they won't.'
Commoner, Yorkshire

NB
Acquisition of new skills was not widely seen as important. We suggest that this is because the prevailing view among farmers was that farming practice will continue in the familiar way, or that they are unsure of what the future holds; and the view among 'conservationists' was that they knew their stuff. Both parties consider themselves well-equipped in their respective fields. Training in clear communication (point #1) may be a skill that's worthwhile for all. More support in business management may also be useful for farmers, but this was not identified to us. Going forward, if unforeseen changes occur, or new strands of the business begin, other skills/knowledge gaps may be identified.

‘There’s nothing more natural and better for the environment than a lamb coming off Ingleborough, going through the food chain, and being eaten in Ingleton or Bentham or within 10 miles. That’s a sustainable food process.’

John Dawson, Bleak Bank Farm, Ingleborough

Action Suggestions

Using the findings of this report we recommend specific measures in relation to social cohesion. Each one of these needs to be resourced and facilitated with a strategic plan that allows for results to be evaluated within a given timescale, and actions amended accordingly. The ideal scenario is that these actions, or developments in working strategy, will be set up in such a way that they may continue beyond the *Our Common Cause* funding period.

C**reate facilitated spaces for conversations and the positive development of relationships** which do not follow a 'top down' model, and are regular and ongoing, with a focus on areas including:

- identifying shared values
- acknowledging difference
- identifying barriers to cohesive relationships, such as indifference, isolation, discrimination, upset
- providing space to work through conflict

This may lead to the development positive practice in governance, management decisions and practical work, such as co-design of monitoring programmes, with multi-party interests represented. {4}

Create opportunities for knowledge sharing between people with different areas of expertise, within group settings, through training opportunities and with the use of printed material and accessible online resources.

Provide facilitation and/or representative support for commoners in the delivery of agri-environment agreements to minimise the possibility of relationship breakdown, and stress for individuals.

Create opportunities for training and upskilling. Specific skills were not indicated in this study but the need became apparent among farmers for training or assistance in business management/accounting; and learning more about specific environments and habitats to deepen understanding about the positive and negative impacts of specific practices, and to encourage pride about an improving the environment. A need for people working in environmental organisations (most mentioned were Natural England and Defra) to have time on farms and on the commons to gain a greater appreciation of farming environment and practice.

Raise awareness of upland commons among the general public. This recommendation extends from learning in schools (primary and secondary) to including upland farming in agricultural training, accessible learning materials for local residents and for tourists, and a strategy to host particpatory events in commons locations. Resources for learning will need to be created with engaging narrative and visual content, and shared in a number of ways including online, through social media and through public events, e.g public gathers, open farm days, exhibitions.

Provide financial and other support for farmers to take part in meetings with a range of stakeholders.

Provide financial and other support for the development of 'young commoners' groups, with the young people defining what shape such groups should take and having regular opportunities to openly share views with other stakeholders.

{4} One study bringing different stakeholders together is the 'Loweswater Care Project' (LCP), which sought to address the problem of pollution in Loweswater. The project brought people together from different backgrounds, including local residents, farmers, National Trust, environmental organisations and local businesses. The process, a series of 15 meetings held over a three year period, allowed conversations to arise without hierarchy, and ideas and partnerships to emerge as relationships developed, with positive practical results. An extract:

'The Loweswater Care Project demonstrated that subtly changing the philosophical basis of knowledge-making within participatory initiatives can allow for more integrated and open-ended ways of governing complex socioecologies like Loweswater. This requires people from diverse backgrounds to create the knowledge and commit to the particularities of place, while recognising that place-based knowledge and action needs constantly to be challenged, kept open and carefully linked to frameworks of governance and the political arena.'

Committing to Place: The Potential of Open Collaborations for Trusted Environmental Governance. Claire Waterton, Stephen C. Maberly, Judith Tsouvalis, Nigel Watson, Ian J. Winfield, Lisa R. Norton PLOS Biology, March 5, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.1002081

Baseline Indicators:
Suggested framework for future research and evaluation

The purpose of a framework of indicators is to enable assessment of change over time. The process of conversations and interviews in 2018 and 2019 has fed into the development of this set of indicators. They are designed to allow evaluation of social cohesion at particular points in time, and changes over time, through providing an overview of quality of relationships and an individual's sense of belonging, inclusion, participation and wellbeing within the context of their community.

The pilot study found that the quality of relationships and opportunities for communication were important factors in the collaborative management of common land. There is acceptance that there will inevitably be different points of view, and a common expression that trust, positive relationships and resolution of power imbalances are all likely to facilitate negotiations and idea-sharing as new management plans are devised, and existing situations are assessed.

Relationships are, however, nuanced and 'quality' is difficult to assess using an exclusively quantitative framework. In future research, these questions should ideally be backed up with qualitative assessment arising from conversations.

The questions could be used in a face-to-face meeting, or sent to recipients. The answers will provide an indication of individual situations and common themes and are intended to be used alongside other evaluation tools that monitor the efficacy of particular events and programmes with regard to farm businesses, livestock, environmental condition etc. If this set of indicators is adopted it can be apapted for digital input and analysis.

Questions for commoners:

A: Relationships, communication and collaborative frameworks

1 Your view of relationships between commoners on the same common:
poor / neither good nor bad / good / excellent

2 Opportunities for meeting and discussing issues with other commoners, as a group, within this past year:
low / medium / frequent

3 Quality of relationships with other stakeholders (this is very broad, and per common could be broken down into specifics, e.g. gamekeepers, landowner/s, national park authority, environmental management organisations)
poor / neither good nor bad / good / excellent

4 Opportunities to be included in discussions with other organisations about commons management decisions
low / medium / frequent

5 Actual meetings attended, or conversations had, in the past year, with other organisations about commons management decisions
none / 1 / 2-5 / more

6 Level of confidence that your opinion has been considered and responded to in decisions about commons management
unsure / low / moderate / high

7 Extent of facilitation advice or support for implementing commons-wide programmes, funding packages etc.
low / moderate / high / unsure

B: Learning, skills and knowledge sharing

1 What level of new information have you gained from environmental specialists about the habitats and environment in your local area?

none / low / high

2 What level of advice or support have you received with regard to business management and accounting?

none / low / high

3 Have you received training in the past year?

not at all / once / more than once

4 Have you been involved in delivering training or upskilling other farmers in the past year?

not at all / once / more than once

5 Have you been involved in delivering training or sharing knowledge with people outside your specialism within the past year?

not at all / once / more than once

C: The local community, and opinions among the general public

1 Your involvement in activities in the local community, e.g. village hall, school, sport, local council

none / irregular / regular / frequent

2 Your involvement in events, in the last year, designed to raise public awareness about upland farming

0 / 1 / 2-5 / more

3 Your experience of level of knowledge & awareness about management of the uplands among the general public

unsure / low / moderate / high

D: Farming structure on the common

1 Changes in numbers of active graziers on the common

decrease / remain the same / increase

2 Changes in numbers of stock on the common

decrease / remain the same / increase

E: Considerations for the future

1 Your feeling of financial security in the farm business

weak / neither weak nor strong / strong

2 New employment opportunities linked with your business

none / 1 occasional / 1 part time / 1 full time / other (please state)

3 Expectations of succession on your farm

unsure/ low / medium / high

4 Confidence about the continuation of this farm in the next ten years

unsure / low / medium / high

‘The biggest issue is we’re not getting enough income to keep young people on the fells.’

Graham Taylor, Wenningside Farm Clapham

Questions for other stakeholders on the common:

A: Relationships, communication and collaborative frameworks

1 Quality of relationships with active graziers on the common
poor / neither good nor bad / good / excellent

2 Opportunities for meeting commoners
low / medium / frequent

3 Amount of time spent with commoners in a farm setting or on the common
low / medium / frequent

4 Your view of relationships between different organistions and stakeholders with shared interests on a single common
poor / neither good nor bad / good / excellent

5 Opportunities to be included in discussions with other organisations about commons management decisions
low / medium / frequent

6 Actual meetings attended, or conversations had, in the past year, with other organisations about commons management decisions
none / 1 / 2-5 / more

7 Level of confidence that your opinion has been considered and responded to in decisions about commons management
unsure / low / moderate / high

B: Learning, skills and knowledge sharing

1 What level of new information have you gained from other specialists in your local area?
none / low / high

2 Have you been involved in delivering training or sharing knowledge with people outside your specialism within the past year?
not at all / once / more than once

3 Have you been involved in receiving training or learning from people in other specialisms in the past year?
not at all / once / more than once

C: The local community, and opinions among the general public

1 Your experience of level of knowledge and awareness about the management of upland commons among the general public
low / moderate / high / unsure

Appendices

‘There is only one thing: it’s got to be education, links with the countryside. If you need to move forward you need to be positive, involving people, or educating people about it. It’s the only way forward.’

David Cole, West Peek Farm, Bittaford

Public gather off Pupers Hill to Bowden farm, Buckfastleigh

1 Brief overview of the commons in this study

This study was directed at three particular commons in the Yorkshire Dales, and three in Dartmoor. Because of the nature of hill farming, where many farmers have rights on more than one area of common land, or are otherwise involved in initiatives collaboratively, in practice we met farmers who had interests on more than these three commons.

Our Common Cause has drawn up 'pen portraits' of the main commons in question. These provide a concise outline of key features on each common, including size, registration of rights, numbers of active graziers and habitat types. The wider material included in the final report of the pilot phase of this project will contain maps to indicate locations of the commons and where more than one common are contiguous; i.e. share the same area of fell or moor without segregation by walls or fences.

For the purposes of this report the following outlines provide an overview. They draw on the material provided by the *Our Common Cause* records, and make reference to key findings on each common in the context of this report.

Yorkshire Dales

Brant Fell Common

Brant Fell Common is in the southern third of the Howgill Fells, adjacent to Sedbergh. It is privately owned and has an area of 2720.8 hectares, which take in three distinct areas including Howgill, Marthwaite and Cautley. On the Howgill side the land around farms that have rights on the common incorporates a variety of habitats, including significant stretches of woodland and meadows on the edge of the River Lune.

Brant Fell Commoners Association, with two delegates from each of the three areas, was formed in 1965 when commons rights were registered. At the time there were 108 graziers registered, 49 of whom were exercising their right to graze. There are currently just over 20 active graziers, but in this shift of numbers of graziers the numbers of rights held by individual farmers – and the number of sheep – has sometimes risen. This has altered the system of hefting, although as we understand it the current flocks are well hefted. Sheep breeds on the fell include Rough Fell, Swaledales and crosses. There are currently no shooting interests on Brant Fell.

Relationships between commoners are generally good. Most farmers have been here for generations and there is a strong sense of neighbourliness and co-working. The commoners we spoke to all reported good experiences of engaging with walkers and tourists who are generally unaware of how farming works but show a great deal of interest and seem pleased to learn. The Dales Way long-distance walking route passes through here but footfall is much lower than on Ingleborough common.

Brant Fell common joins three contiguous commons to the north Tebay, Langdale and Ravenstonedale; there are no fences to restrict stock moving from one common to the next. This does on occasions cause difficulties where stock – often horses and more recently cattle – come from the north onto Brant Fell. This can disrupt the pattern of grazing/non-grazing that farmers try to keep to in order to keep the vegetation optimum for grazing sheep.

Habitats recognised under the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP, established by the UK government 1992-2012) include wet and dry heath, blanket bog, scrub woodland, bracken and acidic grassland, and noted birds include peregrine and raven and whinchat. 245.67 hectares are registered as SSI (Sites of Special Scientific Interest). Some of the commoners we spoke to listed other species of grasses and flowers that they felt were special in the area, and commented on the richness of flora in the gills. Significant Historic Environment features include a Bronze Age cairn, folds, shielings, and ridge and furrow patterns.

In terms of relationships with organisations, the commoners report very good relationships with the National Park Authority. Of note is the recent dispute with Natural England over negotiations to plant trees on the common, which has had a knock-on effect on the willingness of commoners to engage with Natural England staff and a reduction in trust. The common is not currently in an agri-environment scheme.

We did not gain any clear picture about succession on this common. One family (Hoggarth/Capstick) has two daughters who seem keen to follow on and seem optimistic about the future; the other two we interviewed do not have this succession.

Ingleborough Common

Ingleborough Common, incorporating Ingleborough, the highest fell in Yorkshire, has two recognised sections: Ingleborough in Ingleton Common (742.73ha) and Ingleborough in Clapham (745.53ha). Farmers talk about this as the 'Ingleton side' and the 'Clapham side';

there are no walls or fences separating the two. Much of Clapham side is owned by the Ingleborough Estate; the Ingleton side has an absentee landowner who lives in the Philippines.

There are 12-13 active graziers on Ingleborough Common, and an active Commoners Assocation. Sheep include Dalesbred, Swaledale and crosses. The active graziers meet at set dates in the year to gather flocks off the common, walking them down from the tops and separating off to individual farm gates. The commoners report good relationships as a group, no problem with relationships with the owners, and positive relationships with the National Park. The common is currently coming to the end of its time in a Higher Level Stewardship agreement. There are currently no shooting interests on Ingleborough.

Ingleborough is one of the most popular fells with walkers and visitors, with major points of access from Ingleton, Chapel-le-Dale, Clapham and Horton-in-Ribblesdale. It is on the Three Peaks route and on occasions can be very busy with races and organised events. There has been footpath work to accommodate this and minimise problems of erosion. Farmers report some problems with dogs agitating the sheep, and put this down to the public having a low level of awareness about the impact of their dogs not being under control.

Inleborough common is characterised as limestone landscape with accompanying flora, and had significant work to block grips and treat bare peat in 2014/15. The Ingleborough National Nature Reserve (NNR) is managed by Natural England and is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The reserve covers 1,014 hectares on some of the northern, north-eastern and eastern slopes surrounding Ingleborough. Plants favouring limestone habitat and wetlands include Yorkshire primrose and bloody crane's-bill; there is calcareous grassland with common rock-rose; and limestone rock outcrops, cliffs and scree with juniper. Birds seen regularly include snipe, curlew, wheatear, skylarks.

The general feeling about succession among farming families actively exercising rights on Ingleborough is that there may not be enough interest among the next generation to keep current levels of engagement; and the likelihood is that individual farms will continue to get bigger.

Grassington

There are three active graziers on Grassington; a reflection of a continual decline in use of the common. Graziers report that the quality of grazing on the common is low, and the length of time sheep spend on the common has been falling over the years, with sheep going up to the common later in the year. This is partly due to grass quality and partly due to changes in sheep breeding practice, with more twins being born and a reduction in hardiness.

Grassington Common is unusual in that there is no legal owner. Since 1987 the Grassington Moor Management Association, chaired by the Yorkshire Dales National Park and including graziers, people with sporting interests and local parish councils. A large part of Grassington Common is used for shooting, and managed by C&G estates for grouse and the conservation of ground nesting birds. In the past relationships have been strained between graziers and the shooting estate, but things are improving now. Some disagreement arose over approaches to burning heather; some was due to numbers of livestock on the hill at particular times of year.

The common has a history of mineral extraction, with lead mining remains on the lower slopes scheduled as an ancient monument. There are plans to improve interpretation around the mines as well as fencing to improve safety around shafts. With regard to environmental condition, this area there are some flowers are specialist to this heavy-metal contaminated ground (e.g. leadwort). There is a cave system listed as SSSI; and the northern part of the moor (111.05ha) is in the Black Keld catchment SSSI, with dry upland heath, acid/neutral flush and blanket bog habitats. Heather moorland managed for shooting is noted for birds including merlin, curlew, lapwing, redshank, dunlin and golden plover. Ring ouzels are rarely seen. The higher reaches of the common are not widely used by walkers although the Grassington Moor Lead Mining Trail is popular.

The future of active grazing on this common looks particularly uncertain: there is currently a very low number of graziers and while there is likely succession in two families without an increase in active farmers it is unclear how the future will pan out.

Dartmoor

The three key areas of common land studied for this report were Holne Moor, Harford Moor and Ugborough Moor Commons, and Bridestowe & Sourton Commons. We also spoke to people with rights on The Forest of Dartmoor, which is contiguous with many other commons.

Harford Moor and Ugborough Moor Commons

Harford and Ugborough Common covers an area of 1260 ha and has two private landowners. This long, thin

band of common land runs from the growing town of Ivybridge in the south to the landmark of Red Lake in the north – a distance of over 5 miles. Harford Moor and Ugborough Moor have been managed together since the 1990s when the two associations were brought together to form a joint ESA agreement. They are currently in a Higher Level Stewardship Agreement.

These commons are important catchments for the rivers Avon and Erme contributing to the supply of water from the whole of Dartmoor which supplies 45% of South West waters daily supply.

Around 6 commoners work together to manage the common through grazing their sheep, cattle and ponies and undertaking other activities to manage the vegetation and archaeology.

With Ivybridge on the doorstep, and Plymouth nearby, this area receives a high number of visitors. There has been a noticeable increase in pressure from recreation in recent years due to increasing housing development on its edge. Many people come to the area to walk and the Two Moors Way long-distance walking route traverses the length of the common. People also come to ride horses or just enjoy a nice picnic.

Like much of Dartmoor, the common land here is valued for its archaeology with a range of ancient monuments, which are also significant at a landscape scale. Remains of previous industrial use for mining of china clay at red lake date back to the early 20th Century, including a railway known locally as 'the Puffing Billy Track' which is now a walking route. This reaches its highest point at around 457 metres and on a clear day gives wonderful views.

The common is an area of western heath with valley mires and blanket bog of ecological importance. A range of moorland birds can be found here, including the skylark. There was shared concern among landowners and graziers that changes in vegetation, including excessive Molinia growth, were not beneficial to grazing or to a continued diversity of habitats.

Relationships were reported to be generally good between the commoners, with an active association. Between commoners and landowners relationships are also good, although there are clear differences in targets for what the common delivers in the context of environmental quality / grazing quality.

Holne Moor

Holne Moor is part owned by Dartmoor National Park Authority and two private landowners. Venford reservoir, owned by South West Water, is located in the middle of the common (but not on Common land) and this is a draw for many visitors.

Holne Moor has 7 active graziers, keeping a variety of sheep breeds and cattle on the moor and on lower ground. They get on well together and have an active commoners association. Management of the moor is discussed between graziers and land owners and has recently come under strain with differences of desired outcome with regard to vegetation type and habitats, specifically with the aim of fostering improved bird populations. Positive progress is being made in terms of building relationships.

Holne Moor spreads for roughly 1000 hectares and is of national and international importance for both its ecology and archaeology. Its scheduled monuments include boundary markers, hut circles and homesteads. It is well known for the Dartmeet reave system, an ancient field system dating back over 3,000 years to the Bronze Age.

Previous agri-environment agreements have been set with the maintenance of and access to archeological sites as one of the priorities.

The Common has a variety of heath and moor habitats and important valley mires and blanket bogs. It is home to a rich diversity of birds, including cuckoos and whinchat both of which are declining nationally. The common also provides habitats to support rare butterflies including the High Brown and Pearl Bordered fritillary.

The moor is fringed on its northern edge by the River Dart, which curves in a spectacular gorge of ancient semi-natural oak woodland home to the rare blue ground beetle and many rare lichens. The views from Combestone Tor, in the northern part of the moor, take in the river gorge and on a clear day stretch for many miles beyond.

Sourton and Bridestowe Commons

These 2 commons form part of the northern plateau of Dartmoor. Just under 1240 hectares in area, they are set on the northwest edge of Dartmoor National Park with 30 hectares west of the A386 and so outside the park boundary. They adjoin Okehampton Common to the north, the Forest of Dartmoor to the east and Lydford Common to the south.

The commons rise steeply from the villages of Bridestowe and Sourton and the main road at 260m above sea level to a high, exposed landscape of blanket bog and rocky Tors: Great Links Tor is Dartmoor's third highest Tor at 586 m above sea level and is one of the Park's most prominent and well known. From here, on a clear day

the views to the north stretch as far as Hartland Point on the coast, to the west take in Bodmin Moor, south to Plymouth Sound and east across central Dartmoor.

The higher land on the commons is experiencing an increase in the growh of Molinia; work is being done, including through the Moorland Bird Project, to manage the vegetation to provide more favourable conditions for ground nesting birds.

The commons also take in steep-sided river valleys and some old woodlands. Black a tor copse, a nature reserve, is one of three remarkable ancient oak woodlands found in Dartmoor: the trees here and hunkered down, and as well as being known for their antiquity they harbour a vast range of mosses and lichens as well as rare birds.

There are around 14 active graziers on these commons, many of whom also exercise rights to graze on other neighbouring commons, including the Forest of Dartmoor and Lydford Common. In terms of succession the graziers we spoke to were concerned about fewer numbers of young farmers coming through.

2 Questions asked as part of the project

This set of questions was used as a reference point for each interview to ensure all areas were covered. The interviews were carried out conversational style, thus the questions were not asked in a set order, rather in response to the flow of conversation. Not every question was relevant in every situation; for instance, a landowner and farmer will have different insights and priorities.

The intention of this set of questions was to cover the range of information that was required according to the Tender Brief to assess the current farming and commoning situation in the context of the past; to gauge the state of relationships and communications between different stakeholders on the common; and to enquire about desired changes and support going forwards.

Preliminary/Context, to start

1. How long have you been on this farm?
2. Are you a tenant or do you own this farm?
3. What is your background (do you come from a family of farmers)?
4. What stock does this farm support and how much land is in your care?
5. Do you have any supplementary business / income?
6. Can you tell me about the landscape around your farm and how this affects the way you manage your stock?
7. How many people work here with you?
8. 30-40 years ago how many people worked here?

Social – collaboration and relationships

What has changed, if anything, on 'your' common or in commoning in general over the last 20 years in terms of:

1. numbers and ages of graziers
2. social groups and meetings among commoners
3. relationships with the landowner
4. relationships and interaction between different generations of commoners
5. relationships with local communities
6. relationships with other agencies and stakeholders

Practical – farming and land

1. Over the past 20 years, what has changed, if anything, in the way your common/commons are managed?
2. What new or different techniques have been introduced?
3. Are there any differences in livestock management (e.g. grazing routines or restrictions)
4. Has it become necessary to learn new skills?
5. In what way, if any, have changes in weather patterns had an impact?
6. Have you been part of environmental schemes and if so, how have these driven/impacted your practice?
7. Has the development of IT and social media had an impact on commoning?

Value of commons

1. What do you value about commons and commoning?
2. How would you describe the value of commons in the wider environmental and social context?
3. Do you see a difference between generations in valuation/appreciation of commons?
4. How widely/well is commoning understood among non-commoners?
5. How do you think non-commoners perceive and value commons?
6. What features – built and environmental – are the result of commoning and are these valued today?

Future / looking ahead

1. How do you imagine the future of commoning in 10, 20, 50 years?
2. With policies and payments increasingly focused on 'public goods' (e.g. biodiversity, water quality) what impact do you foresee in management choices?
3. What upskilling and/or training is needed going forward?
4. Is there a need for change in collaboration/ integration among commoners?
5. Is there a need for change in collaboration/ integration between commoners and other groups, agencies, landowners?
6. If commoning ceased, what social, cultural and environmental impact would there be?
7. If there was one key issue that this project would help with, in terms of social cohesion, what would that be?

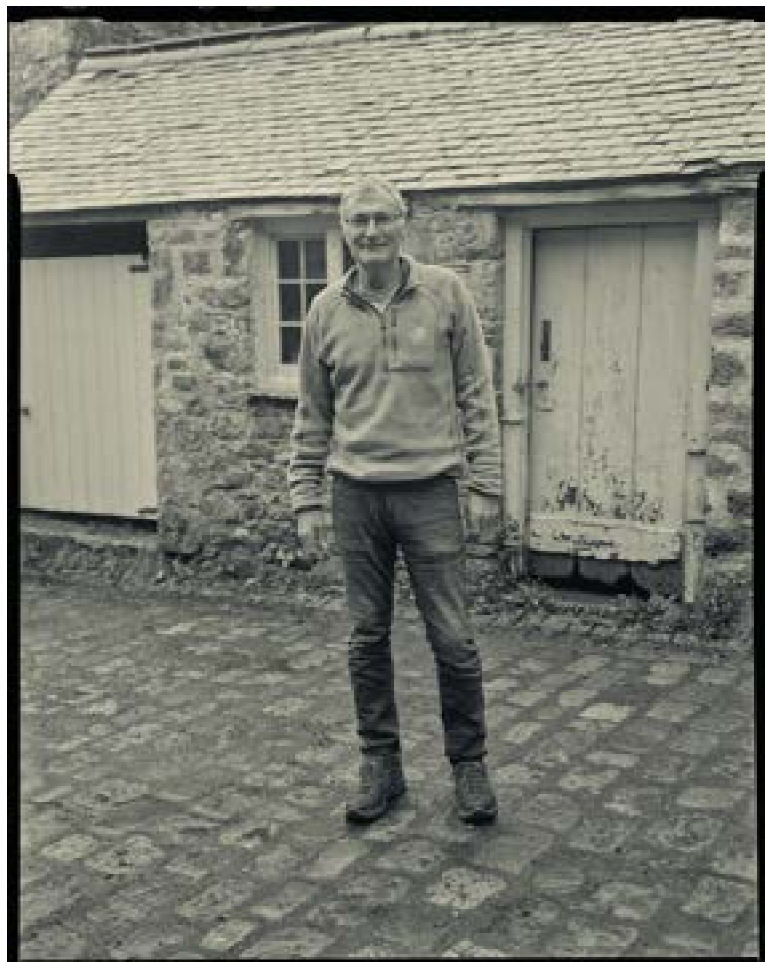
Additional

1. What is it about commoning that's irreplaceable?
2. What makes you smile?
3. How does it feel when you're out there, walking on the land?
4. Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't asked?

‘I think more and more people nowadays are more than one generation removed from the land and don’t have a clue about what goes on in the countryside.’

Robert Stockdale

3 Selected quotes from conversations: Dartmoor



David Sadler

Butterbrook Farm, Harford

David is secretary of Harford and Ugborough Commoners Association. He keeps some sheep off the common, and has just over 50 Mbar sheep and followers on the common.

He keeps Herefords, but does not graze these on the common (although he has grazing rights for 11 cattle and 6 ponies); he would only put his Herefords out if others' numbers dip. David used to farm in Wales, and then on the north side of Devon, before he moved to Harford, where he has been since 2003. Other sources of income include building work, and the family has a holiday cottage.

On not having a strong enough voice as commoners

'One of the things that we are frightened of as graziers is that you've got the RSPB, you've got the Water Authority, you've got Natural England, you've got the public – you've got all these other organisations in the National Park who want their input into Dartmoor, into our common, and the graziers are just one voice, although we're the ones that do everything: we create that environment in the first place, we've actually reduced incomes and changed our policies to accommodate certain views. It's like you're one-eighth or one-sixteenth voice, and that's what a lot of commoners are beginning to feel quite bitter about.'

On pressure of public access

'Unfortunately, I think that most people don't understand that the common here, and in many places, is owned. They think it is a public resource for a playground.'

'We're near a very big population. First access to the moor is here. You've got 250,000 people, probably more, just in Plymouth. Let alone Ivybridge etc.'

He talks about people using motorbikes, people with dogs, walkers, campers, and the problem of rubbish.

'The rules that are there are pretty weak, they're not enforced.

On general understanding of farmers among the public

'I just think people don't understand what is done.'

‘And I think the appreciation of an industry which is under pressure, and is struggling, and has done for a while – there’s not a lot of sympathy, people see big tractors and things…’

‘If I put a notice on my gate saying Private Access, Keep Out, you can guarantee you’d get campers in …. If I put ‘Conservation Area, please No Access’, nobody would go in there. It’s a social no-no to upset everybody because we all care about the environment. Very few people would then challenge that …’

Schemes and pressure to reduce stocking numbers

‘We feel that Natural England don’t take their responsibility of making sure that what is in the agreement is upheld. They have a single view.” He also questions their use of heather as a singular indicator of ‘success’. He talks about understanding the need for rules but calls the indicators of success ‘very sketchy at best, very opinionated.’

A lot of schemes are now coming up for renewal. ‘There is nothing in place, we don’t know where we’re going. This is a real problem that farmers have.’

‘The answer of just reducing stock doesn’t mean that that stock will do better. Because you need a nutritional cycle. If you fertilise a field it grows better grasses which are more nutritional, more palatable. If you don’t, what we’re having is quite a lot of grass up there, like molinia, that nothing wants.” He talks about Natural England saying they want 400 bullocks to knock off the thatch – when molinia is palatable and nutritious – but doesn’t consider where the bullocks go when they’re not on the moor. “What are we meant to do with the bullocks? It’s as if they haven’t thought of that – that is why you have to keep commoners going, with a viable number and a viable system.’

Protecting the common and knowing what’s there

David would like a map of the areas on the common showing: ‘where you’ve got bracken, where you’ve got gorse, where the Dartford warbler is, where there’s a problem with water puddling, where the cattle could drink – there really are only two waterholes …’

‘Maybe we could ask the secretary of state if we could fence off, not a tiny amount, say ten hectares, in the Glaze Brook, or something like that, where the Dartford warbler may have died last winter, who knows. But you could say, for that gain, for the wildlife, we need to be able to graze heavier in another area.’

‘In the same way as we are having to radically change how we do things, perhaps the rest of the country has to change certain things. We’ve got to protect them by keeping our sheep away, and cattle, and maybe people have to respect the same thing, that they can’t take themselves and their dogs there.’

Looking to the future

‘What are people trying to achieve? Are they trying to achieve Dartmoor two thousand years ago? Ten years ago? Do they have a different vision for the future? You know, that would affect what you’re trying to do.’

Says the lack of vision that the government has is ‘criminal – that’s probably pushing it too far – but it’s bad.’

Future generations of farmers

‘I can think of nothing worse than doing a job just for money.’

‘What I think is important for my two is that they grow up with a realisation of what life is. So they know about death, they know about loss, they know about life, and excitement – chicks being born … you don’t have to have a farm to get that excitement out of life but I think it’s a very good lesson.’

What would be lost if the commons weren’t farmed

‘Well you would have lost the hillside communities, so in bad weather, for instance, or if there’s a tree across the road, it’s not the authorities that cut them up, it’s the farmers who cut them up and clear them. They get rid of the snow, they’re the ones that have got the four-wheel drive to get Aunt whoever to hospital. They are the glue of the communities. But they also help in the wider sense: they provide employment, interest. I can see that if it’s not viable to keep sheep up there, it would soon get scrubbed up. And if there were no sheep farms I don’t suppose there would be ponies either. We’re the ones with the machinery to put out the fires. We’re the ones with the know-how, where the breaks are, and just you know, we actually probably are very cheap labour.’

David would like to change the language, from: ‘subsidy to compensation, for giving food to the people too cheap. Food now is 8% of our disposable income. 30 years ago I understand it was about 30%.’

‘I think that is part of the problem. I think the government is very quick to blame, to say you’re killing the moor by putting thousands of sheep up there. But if they’re paying you for something, that’s driving that process. Not all farmers will approve of that, but if you’re going to go bankrupt, you have no choice.’

'I would like to see it, certainly not going back to where it was, but a realisation that you've got to have a common that's sustainable; with a sustainable level of grazing so the commoners can survive and the common survives. There may come a point at which if sheep are worth pennies, there is no point at which that would marry. But there must at the moment be a level, ideally.'

In talking about a single holly tree, he emphasises the importance of caring for small details, even a minority:
'Now I know that holly trees don't actually support that much life. But they have got one or two individual species which are specific, like the leaf miner grub that a tit or any small birds utilise in winter as a feed source. We all know that an oak has 250 live species or something – but just because something doesn't have many [things living on it] if it's the only place that that thing survives, that doesn't mean to say it's got no value.'

November 4, 2018

Brian Lavis

Great Cranford Farm, Bridestowe

Brian has farmed all his life. He now keeps Scotch Black Face sheep, Mules (North of England and Welsh) as well as Welsh and Speckled Welsh sheep. Brian has rights on Bridestowe & Sourton Common, on Lydford Common, and on The Forest; all three are grazed. He has Welsh black and Shorthorn, kept on the common (but not wintering there) as well as cross-bred cattle and Charolais, kept in the inbye land.

“It’s nice to go up the top. You can see for miles, Exmoor, Cornwall. Coming in the peat track, a place called Woodcock Hill, looking out, down over there, lovely evening, you can see the water glistening.”

Cattle on the common

‘I’ve been keeping cattle out on the hill for 50 odd year. When we started, my cattle would be out on the common nearly all year round, other than summer to go to the bull … We’d feed them, come Christmas time, on the edge of the common with hay and a few cobs. The cattle would come back every morning to feed and the rest of the day they would walk out and up over that hill that I showed you, out over the back there, and then they’d come back the next morning.’

That stopped when the farm went into the ESAs. “These cattle will stay there no problem if you’ve got the right cattle out there. And they’re doing far more good there out there – just got now that it’s not worth the keeping, because the cost of wintering them has got too much.’

As commoners, how often do you meet as a group?

‘Quite honestly, we don’t meet so much now as we used to because the ESAs and HLS has taken over from running the commons. I was on that committee but I’m off that one now. We used to meet when I was involved … four times a year probably when things cropped up.’

‘We get on quite well, round here, we do, there’s no bad feelings … We are quite amiable on these commons! We try and gather most of our own and then we go out collectively and sweep in when we – like now, dipping time, tupping time … four of us, five will go out, and tidy up at the end.’

Affect of public access

‘The pressure from the public is greater than it ever has been.’

Levels of understanding

'I think, specially down this part of this world, if you talk to somebody in Birmingham or London they won't understand a word of what you're talking about.'

Regarding the schemes and relationships with Natural England

'A lot of it we don't agree with it anyway, to be honest, what has happened. There is bad feeling really, they haven't listened – though they're beginning to listen now – that's why you're here isn't it?'

'Quite honestly, these ESA agreements and HLS agreements have not done what they thought they were going to do, and they've just alienated the people that are involved in it, a lot of people.'

'We got some money out of it, but as I said, this money ain't going to carry us through this winter. I don't know where we go from here now.'

'We have no project officer on Dartmoor, not one. We've got to ring up a number now. They're walking away from us. They know they've made a bit of a cock-up earlier, with this grazing, one thing and another, and I'm beginning to think they're walking away from us.'

Concerns about the future

'If you want to keep youngsters coming on, to come into the hills? It's not a job someone's going to come in and jump in and say, oh yes I'm going to do hill farming. Let's be honest, you've got to be born and bred into the job. There's a hell of a lot to learn, how to heft sheep and all the rest of it.'

'We don't know what the changes are. Everybody's in the dark. Nobody knows if they're going to look after the hill, or if they're going to abandon us. There's certain people that's got a lot of say that say there's no need to be stock out there. I'm afraid they get listened to, don't they?'

"First of all, they've got to be the youngsters've got to be encouraged to be there. If there's no encouragement to be there, no-one's going to be bothered are they? You can't just do it for the love of it. We've been doing that for a long time. It is what it is because we've got the commoners there, people grazing."

'Without livestock – it is going to turn in to, I don't know. I don't know the scenario. Government's got to be prepared to put its hand in its pocket to support the people who are there at the moment to keep it as it, something that the general public can make use of.'

'If you don't get support, there'll be nobody out there. Maybe a few diehards – there are only a few diehards that are out there now quite honestly, that's what it is. There are no actual youngsters, very few, that want to start to go out there hill farming.'

'We have been bashing our heads against a brick wall quite honestly. I mean, us old guys taking on this HLS, we were blackmailed into it, as far as I am concerned. No one listened to us. Alright, things we were doing to start with were wrong and we could have put it right, had the middle road. But nothing's the middle road now with government. It's one way, or the other, isn't it? Just listen to a few old guys who've been doing the job for a long time, saying: look, this could be run easily, go back to wintering these cattle out, not a problem. There ain't half so many cattle as there was any way.'

Thinking about public goods

'Carbon storage? You've just come down the M6 and the M5. Look up in the sky on a Sunday morning, how many planes are going? I mean it's a bloody nonsense. What we're going to save on Dartmoor, carbon storage, will not alter things one iota. Will it?'

Do you have any optimism? Thinking about the future.

'Not at the moment, no, I don't. To be honest, no I don't. I just think we're, now there's no project officer, I think they're walking away from us, I really do.'

'I think we'll get forgot. I may well be wrong. I hope I'm wrong. But what I see now I don't like the look of. No, I really don't. There's too many people got all the yap and all the ear of the government who don't understand the situation. They've got other agenda haven't they, let's be honest. That's my thinking.'

'Oh yes, I'm all in favour of the environment, don't get me wrong. But who have they got to manage the environment other than the farmers? Nobody. Because the people who come with all the bright ideas haven't got a clue. It's the farmers that look after the environment. Cos it's in their own interests to do so – that's what it's all about. It has to be sustainable hasn't it.'
'I know this land. I've looked after it for 50 years. I know what it'll do. Listen to people that've been there, done it, got the T-shirt as they say. But that's not the case. That's what I think anyway, and I think several other people do as well: we are not being listened to.'

'You get the picture that if something isn't done fairly soon, there won't be too many hill farmers about. No.'

October 31, 2018

Brian and Angela Coward, with their son Miles

Leawood House, Bridestowe

Leawood Estate has been in Angela's family for 400 years and there has been a settlement here since Saxon times, according to popular story. Angela has been here all her life and has always been involved with the horses; this is her profession. She is a freelance equestrian coach, keeps liveries, and teaches. Brian, originally from from a farming family in Porlock, met Angela in 1983 and now runs the farm. Brian and Angela have four children (age 16-24).

The Cowards have 430 acres of land as well as rights to graze on Bridestowe Common where ther are 14 active graziers. They keep around 240 Red Ruby cattle (110 cows plus followers) and around 60 sheep.

Commoners' Committee

Brian on negotiating among the commoners going well. 'It takes some sorting out, a lot of people aren't happy, but we've just got to sit around the table.' 'We're quite amicable about it.'

Angela: 'you've got a very efficient committee, and a very efficient secretary. There's a phenomenal amount of paperwork that goes into this, and an amazing amount of tact and diplomacy as well. The secretary is very, very good.'

'People see it's for the greater good. Everybody gets an equal share portioned out onto what they should have. .. When they realised it's been worked out properly for them, and fairly, they all calm down.'

Relationships with Natural England

'Ten years ago you always had somebody you could phone up, talk to, and you'd get answers back. But now you're phoning somebody miles away and nobody knows what's going on.'

Value of the Commons

Angela: 'There just amazing aren't they? They're a part of Devon, and part of its history.'

'It's a community, Dartmoor. It has value. I don't think there's another moor like it.'

Brian: 'I go up there some mornings and sit up the top of Sourton Tor, or Loaf and Cheese, it's called, that's further up again. You go up there early in the morning, you turn your bike off, and you sit there, and you just take it all in. You forget everything and you just sit there and look around.'

Angela: 'Everybody has got to see everybody else's point of view and accept that, haven't they?'

Brian: 'But being told you can't do this, and you can't do that, but you've done it for generations – you're just losing it. And a lot of older farmers don't like to lose their touch to the moor. That's why it's like it is.'

Public understanding of farming on the moor

Brian: 'I don't think they realise what the farmers do up there to keep it like it is. If it wasn't for the livestock farmers up there, it would suddenly overgrow and you wouldn't be able to get access up there.'

'It's a way of life. I'm very lucky in what I'm doing. We're not there to make a fortune, we're happy in our work. And you've got Dartmoor, the scenery and the wildlife. It's the way farmers love it. They love their animals, they love the wildlife. We don't want to get rid of everything.'

'We just want to carry on .... and not be interfered with by people higher up who think they know what they're doing, but they don't.'

Angela: 'Well, I think there is this perception that farmers are just literally raking it in, and, you know, drawing on everything and denuding everything to make a living, and that's not the case. We are so aware that so much has to be given back, all the time.'

Payment for Public Goods

Brian: 'I think we're doing our bit for quality water, for everything. We've got loads of trees around.'

Angela: 'We've got frogs and newts in our water supply!' Brian 'So if they're living there, you know, our water is pure! We're doing alright at the moment.'

The Cowards don't use any pesticides, no sprays at all, leave the 3-metre gap 'headland' when the fields are mowed – leave ten foot all round so they don't cut tight to the hedges, and hedge trimming is always done at the appropriate time so as not to disturb the birds.

Brian: 'I'm happy the way we are, the way we're farming. If you get all these nature people coming round, they'll still say we can do more, but I think we're doing plenty enough. I don't really want the money to be paid to do something, to be told how to do it. We're doing a good job. We're not overstocked. We're making a living – we're not making a fortune, but nobody makes a fortune, and you know, we can pay the bills and carry on. But I don't want to be tied to somebody who says what you haven't done, so you're not going to get that payment.'

Farmers' voices

Brian talks about the Dartmoor Commoners Council, Dartmoor Hill Farmer project and others doing very good things. 'They're pulling the whole moor together, but you know, we've still got our hands tied with Natural England. We've always got to tick boxes. We've got to do this, and that.'

Angela: 'Which is good, providing they know what they're talking about.'

Brian: '...And provided they listen to the farmers. When it was all in ESA they just wouldn't listen to the farmers, and the farmers know how the moor runs better than anybody. It's passed down the generations. We know how it's run. But when you've got new people coming in, and saying, No, you've got to do this and that – it puts farmers' backs up.'

'The local people know more about how to run Dartmoor than people higher up in the government, but they just will not listen to the local people. There are a lot of older farmers on Dartmoor and they don't like to be told how to run their business –'

Angela: 'No, being told how to run their business is different from someone coming in with an overview and saying, you know with modern knowledge, technique or whatever, you could tweak this. That's very different from telling someone how to run their business.'

Training and change

Angela: 'All your little farms, there aren't groups that pull you together. You don't do any first aid, and my God you need it. You're not encouraged to go to courses and seminars to see how modern practices are. Yes, young people go to agricultural college, and I think that caused a huge problem to begin with because these lads were coming home and telling their dads how to do it. But it never used to be like that. You'd just do what Dad said, and how he'd done it for generations, the way his father had done it.'

Brian: 'Our age group, a lot of us get stuck in our ways, don't we? We're just happy as..'

Angela: '...No you're not, because farming has the biggest suicide rate - am I right? - of just about any industry in this country, because you work alone, you work with dangerous machinery, you're often tired … '
Brian says yes at intervals

Also there is the flip side of passing knowledge down through generations and the value of knowledge among older generations.

Brian: 'If one of the kids came home I would have to move with the times. Then I'd stand back and say, go on, your turn, you do it. I'm stuck in my ways I think … laughter … and I like the old traditional ways.'

Succession and the Future - The Cowards have four children

Angela: 'They all help but none of them want to farm at the moment, which we think is brilliant. We'd far rather they went off and did their own thing, and then if they want to come back that's fine, but they've lived their own life, done their own thing and explored the world first.'

'A lot of our friends' older children have felt they've had to stay. We've seen resentment and family bust-ups because they've felt pressured into it, or duty bound, and it hasn't worked.'

The future

Brian: 'It depends on the next generation. There aren't that many youngsters around here coming on the farms, who want to graze them. I reckon out of the 14 graziers there's maybe 3 farmers' sons who'd actually go out and do it, but that's all. I really don't know. I don't know what's going to happen.'

How will that gap be filled? 'I don't think it will be.'

'A lot of farmers' sons don't want to farm, don't want to take it on. It is a lot of work. You know checking the animals, and the moor's got to be maintained, you've got to do your swaling and that, you don't get paid for going up there. You only get paid for your livestock units.'

Angela: 'I think this is the crux of it. The younger generation want more money. Our children have gone into the jobs they've gone into because they want more money than they could earn here.'

Brian: 'I think there are big changes on the horizon.'

'For us it's a way of life, we enjoy what we do, but youngsters want Monday to Friday, and weekends off. In farming you don't get weekends off, not unless you employ somebody, but that is more cost. I love the moor, I really do, you can't beat it, in the mornings, late in the evenings, it's fantastic. But it's never going to be like that in twenty years' time, or thirty years' time - it will be different. And it depends when Brexit happens – are they going to help farmers more? Or are they going to say, right, you're on your own, just get on. Or is the money going to be there to pay for what needs to be done? Nobody knows. And if there's no money to pay to keep animals up there, a lot of farmers will just turn round and say well I'm not going to put my animals up there.' 'And they'll be working the inland more ..'

Angela: 'I think they've got to know that it's an incredible natural asset, that they are going to be very sorry if they allow us to lose it. … everything, the Neolithic hut circles, the ice works, the army, the prison … a fantastic resource.'

Miles: 'Everybody who uses it benefits from it. And when the cattle are out there, it looks better, doesn't it?'

November 5, 2018

David Cole and Corrina Watson

West Peek Farm, Bittaford

David is farming on his grandfather's farm, which was passed on to David's father, who was born here and lived here all his life. David was born locally and has lived here all his life, with a brief spell away, in London. 'The farm was too small beforehand to support another person here, but with the opportunity to take on the rights for grazing on the common that made a big difference. My life is split between sheep, dogs and growing veg on an allotment scale.' David and Corina work together, and Corina who has a background as a chef, is exploring the possibility of building a business selling slow-cooked mutton.

The farm has rights on Harford and Ugborough, and grazes 450 sheep, with a maximum of 100-160 on the common.

All quotes from David except where marked as Corrina.

Changes to the farm over time, and expectations going forwards

'In the 1970s and 80s the farm was bigger, then Dad came down off the common for one reason or another. 'We're at the end of this scheme. The scheme previous to that, Dad was paid to not graze on the common. So for ten years before that we certainly didn't graze on the common. I think the general feeling about that was it's gone backwards: it's become overgrown, less palatable, so now it actually needs a bit of work to go back to that state where there is grazing. I think it was probably over-grazed for a period of time, and then under-grazed for a time, and over the last ten years more of a balance has been struck, although personally I think we could graze more, while still maintaining habitats for all sorts of other species.'

'At the moment I'm subsidised so we can run a reduced stocking rate up there. If I'm not subsidised, I've got no choice but to increase my stocking numbers cos I need to make up for the shortfall in my income. If everybody does that to the maximum of their rights, I'm not sure whether, you know, habitat will suffer. I don't know.'

'I will be financially worse off, but by exercising my rights it will make up for some of the shortfall. And my farming system will have to change. I will have to start putting bluefaced Leicesters on a lot of the hill flock to produce

mules because that's the most profitable thing, as far as I can tell, to produce a commercial breeding sheep. The hill sheep as pure bred sheep have got very little value by comparison.'

Corrina is a chef and has been trialling the sale of slow cooked mutton, e.g. as kebabs at campsites, and may be able to make this work to bring in additional income. David: 'If we're not going to be subsidised, how do we make it pay? Luckily you're a chef and we might make it work. That's an option for the future.'

Relationships between commoners

'We get on very well on this common' 'When we've got ponies to gather in, everybody's given a call and we all go out there and meet. We're all needed, you know you can't bring the ponies in without this.'

'We work together well. If there's a problem people are always keen to help. There is community here.'

Importance of education for the general public

'I don't think they know anything about it. I was telling you, when we first met, it wasn't very long ago, I was moving some sheep from A to B, on the common, and I got shouted at by a lady to keep the noise down. And who the hell did I think I was, and I don't know what you're doing but some people come here to get some peace and quiet. I was gob smacked.'

'There is only one thing: it's got to be education, links with the countryside. If you need to move forward you need to be positive, involving people, or educating people about it. It's the only way forward.'

Corrina: 'A lot of people think automatically you've got a lot of land, you've got a lot of money, you're alright. There's no understanding of how far from the truth that is. Like how many hours you have to work to make just enough money to survive. It's not proportionate to any other job. It's just, from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to bed, and through the busiest periods it's so exhausting. I think that somehow people have this idea that you're you know, rich, and people then don't have so much respect for them, their land.' 'A lot of people's perception of animals is from the perspective of a pet, not a flock.'

Corrina: 'Ponies cost farmers money. That's another disconnect. People love to see them, but the reality is: if it's not feasible, farmers won't be able to keep the ponies, so there has to be some reality check about how that is sustainable.'

Thinking about management options on the common, and balance

'We're a little bit anxious. We're looking into the abyss. We don't know what's around the corner. We know this scheme's coming to an end. What's going to replace it? Nothing, probably. Don't know. It's a feeling of uncertainty.'

'I don't think it's a case of letting it re-wild. I don't think that's good. I mean there's a lot of studies that have shown that poaching and grazing and burning allow for different habitats and different species to thrive. I think it's beneficial to have the stock there, I genuinely do, and I think there's been plenty of studies about that, but again it's a balance, isn't it? I don't like the idea of over grazing it and I don't like the idea of rewilding it. I like the idea of us coming up with a management plan which is based on facts and evidence and science. I think that could be beneficial for everybody.'

'We need impartial studies of where the species are, what they need, where we're able to graze more, so people do have access to the moor, so that farmers can farm the moor, so that all the species can live successfully on the moor. I think in order to achieve that, studies have got to be done, otherwise you've just got people's opinions. And, you know, sometimes they can be right and sometimes they can be wrong.'

"You've got the bird bodies, the walkers, the farmers, and you've got them all separate, and I don't like the idea of going into a meeting where it seems like you're going to go in for a fight. Because the bird people want to just think about the birds, and the graziers want to just think about the grazing. If we could all work together on a model that could cater for everybody, that seems logical to me, that seems positive."

'That leads us into the health of the natural world or the environment. How you quantify or value that, that's the big question, isn't it? So by providing an environment which is healthy and diverse, you've got to consider that as public goods. If I'm taking sheep off of the common in order for other species to live, then I think that's providing, you know – we need a good healthy natural world don't we? We do. If farmers are providing that, you know, it keeps coming back – that's my concern. I need to make a living. If I'm providing a healthy environment, I need to get paid for that. If I'm not getting paid for that, I need to get paid for my sheep, and in order to get paid for my sheep, I need to stock more. I would love to continue this scheme but I can't continue if I don't get paid …'

On Public Goods and being paid for public goods

“How do you value the public goods of a healthy environment? I think it’s absolutely essential. And I think if farmers don’t know that, then, you know, we’re all doomed. Like a healthy environment for our children and our grandchildren. It’s like the native American seven generations: what I do now considers my great, great, great, great, great grandchildren. Clean water, healthy environment, lots of species – you need all of that.”

‘Is my voice heard? I don’t know. I don’t really feel like it is. I feel like I am on the bottom of the chain there, you know. This scheme was available to us, we took advantage of it, got involved, that was great, really positive about the current scheme. But the rules and regulations – it has been said, people have been concerned – we have common rights and people think that means we have the right to exercise those rights, but they could withdraw Single Farm Payments, if they wanted to, and go, if you put your stock on the moor, we’ll withdraw your SFP. Do you actually have the right to exercise your rights? I don’t know.’

‘Am I going to be able to shape the future of this common? I don’t know. I feel like I’ve got my opinions about the future of this common and the way I think it should go, but I feel like what will actually happen will have nothing to do with me – somebody else will decide that.’

David, on what he loves

‘I grew up with this. I had a short stint in the city where I pretended to be something that I’m not. I grew up with sheep, I grew up with horses. It’s a part of me. I can’t stop. It feels like – if everything points at being ridiculous, like what on earth are you doing, you’d be better off getting a job somewhere else – I know it’s not all about money, but you do have to pay the bills. It does need to financially work. But I don’t want it to stop. Picking out the ewe lambs that you’ve bred every year, and looking at the next generation of breeding, and how your flock develops. I mean that, for me, is, that’s the bit that I love. Looking at the pure bred sheep on the moor. Seeing your breeding decisions and how it works. It sounds like a cheesy cliché but it’s life. It’s my life. I don’t want it to stop. I want it to be a feasible way forward.’

November 4, 2018

John Howell

Landowner, Harford Moor

'The northern half of the moor seems to have become a Molinia wilderness and we don't know how to resolve that. We've talked about shepherding and stuff but it's obviously not worth the while at the moment for the farmers to have the right kind of cattle up there, at the right time of year. In any case what would they do with the stock for the other ten months of the year when you don't really want it up there?'

'Down towards Lukesland they have tried bracken rolling, and bringing the stock down from where it tends to accumulate on the top. That's worked to some extent, but may have increased compaction of soil in those areas, possibly causing changes to the hydrology – in the last 10 years we have had more high level floods than within generations … it could be the land, or it could just be that we've had a number of high intensity rainfall events. We just don't know.'

Current situation is one of reduced grazing, with livestock concentrated on the southern half of the common. 'Now the middle looks overgrazed, the north looks undergrazed, and the southern end looks about right.' Gorse is becoming more widespread on the higher land in the south. Is that a good thing? 'That depends how you see it really. With the right sort of management, it increases the habitat for ground nesting birds. The problem though is that it concentrates stock and people, walkers, riders, into lines. So now there's an increasing concern about erosion. We have a town of 15,000 a mile off the edge of our common.'

Sense of community between graziers.

'They seem to cooperate quite well. There are certainly some long term differences of view between some of the families. They certainly are quite good at uniting to uphold their rights and uniting against the land owners.'

Your relationship, as a land owner, with the graziers?

'It's not too bad. I'd like to think I'm reasonably broad minded and accommodate them.'

'I can have a good conversation with some of the farmers, but not with some of the others. And that's what you find with any common resource management anywhere in the world. It's a long term process to get

people to understand the need and to be a bit broader in their thinking.'

With reference to other landowners on this common:

'The Hurrells on Ugborough Moor are very committed conservationists and very knowledgeable naturalists. … They have a very conservation-dominated view as to how the moor should be run, which is sometimes in conflict with the commoners'. I can see that with the Commons Acts, particularly the 1985 Dartmoor Act, the creation of access has basically changed the whole level of interest in the commons so that neither the owners nor the commoners have the full say as to what should happen.'

Plans to change schemes around the concept of payment for the delivery of public goods

'For obviously good reasons, the whole concept of ecosystem services and everything related to that in the broader sense means that there's a whole different requirement for the commons, and a lot of that's at conflict with both farming and conservation. I mean particularly the extent of dog walking that we have in the southern half of our commons: a lot of animals killed, a lot disturbed, both wild and farm animals.'

Level of understanding among general public

'Generally pretty low. If you talk to people they're surprised that it's owned by anybody. Many think it's either government land, or it's a park, or it's owned by the National Trust. And they're confused about the National Park and the National Trust and they have an idea of Yellowstone or something as a national park that means it's a totally wild area owned by the government, whereas in Britain it's only a planning entity, to a large extent.'

The importance of maintaining commons for delivering public goods, food, water and access

'I think as a nation we should be concerned about food security and therefore I think it's important that we keep these areas available for agriculture. Water supply as well is important. I think that these Dartmoor commons need to address that – we need to get the peat rewetted, we need to use them more as water storage areas. I think it's important to see the ecosystem service function in the broader sense. Yes, for responsible recreation as well. I don't see that it's appropriate to have uncontrolled access so that people, for example with dogs, can go and cause damage to the wildlife and to the livestock without any repercussions. People with horses, for example, shouldn't be allowed to go wherever they like causing damage to the ground without having any responsibility for that ground, for sorting out that damage, or even paying for somebody else to do it. That's like being able to drive a car without paying road tax, which pays for the maintenance of the highways.'

'Under the law, the National Park Authority's supposed to restore damage, but of course they don't have any budget to do it, and they never have had enough.'

In the context of government policy around management of common land

'… government policy is just not long-term enough to address all these issues … as a society, to have it set up so that it can be managed in a completely unsustainable way, and to know that, and to have a government body that knows that, and to have graziers that fundamentally know that, and to do nothing about it, is just stupid. And to be bound by a law produced by the generation before last, basically my grandparents' generation, and to be bound by flaws in it, is ridiculous.'

In the context of relationships and discussions about agri-environment agreements with Natural England:

'On other bits of our land, I've had disagreements with Natural England as well, but in terms of the commons I've tried at least to keep a dialogue, to keep it not unfriendly. But a lot of the graziers have very little time for some of the Natural England advisers, most of who have disappeared out of sight now. We have somebody else who I've never met.'

Hopes for working together towards a positive future.

'What I would really like to see is some sort of agreement coming out of this visioning process. The reason why I thought that the Common Cause initiative was worth giving time to, was that it might allow us to move towards something more logical, go through these dialogues with a facilitator and address the issues which are not addressed and try and reach an agreement whereby we would be more in charge – we as an association, the owners and the commoners together.'

'If we can agree between us that from the landowners' viewpoint that agriculture is here to stay; if we can get the graziers to agree that ecosystem services is here to stay – access, water supply, and all those things – and conservation and biodiversity; so there's got to be a change, you cannot just graze whatever you like wherever you want to. It's got to be managed. Some bits of the common have got to be excluded from grazing, for example the sphagnum flushes, some of the rocky hillside areas …' and 'if you're going to have good biodiversity on these commons, you'll have to have fences'

The need for raising general awareness of commons and the management of commons

'There's certainly a need for education and awareness materials, and it probably needs to get into the national curriculum if it's really going to do any good, because it's not just here – any national park in Britain faces the same issues.'

On conservation

'Specifically here, what would make a bigger difference is to have areas zoned off for conservation, and that inevitably ends up with fencing. I say this because I think we're seeing the decline to zero of the last areas of interest to conservation on the commons.'
'It doesn't actually take very much to increase the conservation value but I think that there is the risk that if we don't do it fairly soon, it won't be worth doing at all … We have an opportunity to make it better. And if we don't have enough vision and can't achieve that as such a wealthy society, then there's something wrong with us as a society.'

October 31, 2018

Phil Cleave with son Tom (far right) and son-in-law Richard Gray

Mill Leat, Holne

Phil Cleave is Chair of the Holne Commoners Association. Phil and his son Richard, and Phil's son-in-law Richard Gray, hold grazing rights on Holne Moor and Forest of Dartmoor. They have one farm out at Combestone Tor, surrounded by the common, land at Mill Leat, and some further land a mile and a half away from the common. They keep cattle, mainly South Devons, and sheep, which are predominantly Swaledales, and under the current HLS agri-environment scheme have rights to graze on the common over winter. Lowland sheep, which are bred from the hill flock, graze the common in summer.

In the past, many more cattle would have been on the common, including through winter. The cattle now live out there on the summer, then calf in October, November, and come off the common. Sheep numbers have also gone down; except in some areas where Richard's flock graze, and archaeological sites have been prioritised; grazing helps to keep theses visible and accessible.

The Cleaves told us that midway through a scheme Natural England changed the prescription. The Cleaves decided not to reduce sheep numbers (and as a consequence, receive lower payments) because they wanted to keep the flock hardy and hefted.

On stocking numbers and winter grazing

Phil: 'Traditionally, really traditionally, cattle would have been wintered on all the little farms, and a lot of them would have been tied by the neck for the night, and would have had their hay, or be turned out in the morning, and walk onto the moor, and came home at night." Talks about anecdotes and people saying the cows knew exactly where they needed to go.

On how to stand up for yourself and the value of grazing with sheep and cattle.

Richard: **'**I think you have to look them in the eye and say, Look, they're doing that job there. What else is going to do it? What is that rare plant there that the sheep are creating a habitat for? That is not the habitat that a cow produces. And is that valuable? They say

it is, until you mention sheep. If you say you've got to have sheep to do it, they back away from it, I feel. To me the only way to fight them is to look at the ground and say, Oh Look at that! A pretty flower – that would be swamped if the grass was high, wouldn't it? Of those mine workings wouldn't be kept clear, so you could see the archaeology.'

Richard: 'Some of the best archaeology on Dartmoor, world renowned some of it, is out on Holne Moor, to do with the ancient field systems, reeve systems; our agreement was tailored to show that archaeology off. That was supposed to take priority over all other aspects of environmental condition. Quite a rare thing. That's what we agreed to, that was what the stocking and burning regimes were set up for. And it worked quite well for several years. We got into a good routine.'

On turning down payments for reducing sheep

Phil: 'We've chosen to lose the money and keep the sheep. This all will blow over one day and they'll want us again. And if we haven't still got those flocks there, when they do want us, where are those sheep coming from? Where is the labour to redo what our ancestors did when there were huge amounts more labour on these farms to heft these sheep? Somebody was home doing the farm work, and one member or two members of the family, were taking the sheep in, and keeping them there, until they learned to stay there? That will never happen again unless somebody says, right, we'll pay you …'

Tom: 'What they don't get is that taking away the winter grazing is taking away the true hill stock. And the true hill stock do a much better job in the summer. The proper hill ewes and the proper hill cows, even in the summer they graze in small groups … they don't mob up, just evenly stocked over the whole common.'

Suggested ways of improving trust and building new partnerships

Richard: 'Stability. The same people there. Spend time. And use these [points to ears]. You know, really a ministry person should come onto Holne Moor and say, I'm going to listen to you for two years, and not say a word – get on with it. Prove to me that you are doing a good job. I need time to judge it fairly. If we need to tweak it I'll make a comment. And I think as a farmer, we'd take it on board.'

Phil: 'They'd need to spend a couple of visits a year. But they also need to know the common themselves. Up until quite recently, three to four years ago, if we spoke to any of our people from the national park, and any of the Natural England people, and you said that it was up and so and so on the common, you knew that they were seeing that bit of common in their mind.'

Phil: 'I can see that we need to have representatives when we talk to the others involved in this common, like they send their representatives. It seems awful that we just can't sit around the table but that just doesn't seem to happen.'

Richard: '… what we need is maybe not even a farmer, we need an eloquent person that we can brief, and who can sell our corner just like everybody else is selling what they're selling. I mean farmers are terrible at talking, we're all awful at it, we sound like local-yokels. You need someone who's switched on, business like, who can say, look these guys are doing this, this, this and this for you! It's only costing you a hundred grand. That would cost three hundred grand to get a contractor. What a bargain! They're providing this, and this. Sign now, before they go!'

Education

Richard: 'We've got to re-educate the general public – not children, but general public. We aren't here to spoil our heritage. What is the point of us going out there to spoil our future? Obviously we've got businesses to run, we're going to weight it towards our own good in some ways, but we do understand; we've been in these schemes for so long that we know we've got to accommodate everyone else.'

'Most of the people teaching in institutes of learning have only learnt from institutes of learning, and there's that agenda going round. There's nobody has come out of practical knowledge, that is passing that on.'

Changes in habitat and birdlife

Phil: 'The cuckoo was everywhere when I was a kid. And now it is up on the moor. And not many other places, not even down as far as here. But it's not going to revive very many cuckoos just to try and keep them where they are. Putting the pressure on us to change our way of doing things, to keep the four cuckoos hatched up there every year – they've got to move.'

'Three years ago, four were tagged up here. One came back. One had dropped in the sea, one had been shot … you're not going to preserve them by looking at one little circle in the middle: they've got to create more habitat, and perhaps be hard on the places (lower land) where they have lost the habitat – but that's not easy.'

Phil talks about some parts of the common have been noted down as 'special bird areas'

'But if the vegetation grows from what the ground-

nesting bird likes, our vegetation will grow from being burnt off to 18 inches high in 8 years. Could be less than that, I'm trying to be fair about it. With global warming. That probably never happened before – we didn't have global warming, we had harsher winters … for much of the summer there were quite big areas that the gorse never really got going again until the autumn cos the frost had got to it in the winter.'

'These ground nesting birds want to nest in a certain type of vegetation. But if that vegetation grows, in two to three years, at the rate we're talking about, that piece of land is not going to be the ideal bit. They're going to want to move. My biggest concern at the moment, is when we've allowed this gorse to get to 18 inches, 2 foot high, because they don't want us to burn it down, there are rowan trees coming up through it because the ponies, the cattle, the sheep have not been able to get in there and nibble off the shoots. Well the next single interest group is going to come along and say, you can't burn those rowan trees now. I can just feel it coming – somebody else is going to have another say at us, and therefore we're going to lose our common, plot by plot, as the birds move out to a more suitable nesting place for them.'

On the need for burning to support a mosaic of habitats

Phil: 'When I was a kid, Dartmoor glowed with red in March and April. But the bird surveys say the birds were there.'

The Future

Are you optimistic about the younger generation having commons to go onto?

Tom: 'I don't know. The way it's gone we're particularly sore – three years ago, yes. But now ultimately, we feel that Natural England has not seemed to stick to our agreement, that says that within the PAL area vegetation should be down to 20cm tall. We thought we had signed to an agreement and it was OK. But that seems to have been shown no respect along with us as commoners being shown no respect.'

Tom: 'Without the commoners, it would just be a forest wouldn't it? It would be overgrown.'

November 2, 2018

Phil and Richard Coaker

Runnage Farm, Postbridge

Runnage Farm, run by Phil and his son Richard, is 1000 feet above sea level. It covers 220 acres with 150 inbye and 70 rough inbye, opening onto the Forest. The family also rents land elsewhere, which enables them to carry the stock they do. They have South Devon cows (around 75), and 400 breeding ewes including pedigree Whiteface Dartmoor, Scotch Blackface, Texels, and Suffolk-cross-Bluefaced-Leicester. They started a beef enterprise ten years ago, which includes tanning and the sale of pelts, and, under the leadership of Phil's wife Christine, the family also run a camping barn and a campsite. Phil has been heavily involved in Farming Futures since it was set up and through this is involved in self-monitoring key species on the moor, to feed results to Natural England.

Quotes below are from Phil except where Richard is named.

Farming Futures, wintering cattle on/off the moor, and a holistic view

'Farming Futures really was about giving commoners back the opportunity to prove that they could come up with a better recipe for common land management, than the prescriptions from Natural England. The Forest of Dartmoor is one of those partners. The trustees openly invite graziers, say if they think a cattle extension on their area would be a good thing. And this varies year by year really – if it's deemed to be a good year they're invited to put in an application that may give them an opportunity to graze, say, 50% of their herd up until Christmas. That happens each year. We usually get 20-25 applications. There's usually a site inspection that goes with that, and local knowledge whether the area will carry cattle for another two months …'

On allowing cattle on the moor over winter:

'If you have to bring all those animals back to your farm you're not exactly looking after your farm in a very environmentally friendly way. You're bringing all the slurry back, that has to be managed from the yard, taken out and spread on the land, you're having to ferry in extra loads of straw: there's a cost in growing that straw and moving it around from the counties that have it to the ones that don't. So it's not just really about whether the animals are doing the best they can on the common, really what needs to be taken into consideration is the

best job that can be done between the home farm, where they belong, and the common where they're allowed to graze, and getting that balance right.'

Perception of the public

'I think they think that if there's something wrong, then the first person you complain to is the farmer, because he's the guy that's there, and it must be his fault.'

'The government wants to promote the use of National Parks to the public, and for those parks to be useable, they are going to need farmers. The thing is, we don't want to be called 'park keepers', we want to be called farmers. And we want to have a value in what we do as the food that we produce. That's what we want to be recognised for.'

'The problem with educating the public is people take in education at different levels. And the people that really tune into it and understand it very often aren't the ones that make most noise. They're not necessarily good at promoting the message afterwards. The people that usually get the wrong end of the stick usually make the most noise and blow things out of proportion, on something that they maybe haven't understood properly.'

'There's such a rift between the town and the country that I don't know where you start to try and heal it. You've got the hunting lobby, that gives us lots of grief. You've got the vegan movement. You've got people who take every opportunity to black-list farming and livestock production. And that's pretty hurtful really. I've got the same lines of cattle on this farm that my great, great grandfather started with. We've got those and our white-faced Dartmoor sheep as well. My ambition in my farming career is to leave those breeds in a better genetic state than when I took them over.'

Values/benefits that farmers bring?

'Many fold really. Food production. We're also the owners, keepers, custodians if you like, of a herd of Dartmoor ponies. There aren't so many of us left doing that because it's not a profit-making activity.'

'We don't just manage the land and the landscape: we're managing the breeds that are on it. We're trying to strengthen those gene pools, strengthen the breeds, keep that hardy hill-type stock, and I think those are all benefits that the public don't see. They can understand that there's a gorse bush in the way, or some molinia they can't walk through, but they can't see the farmers' role.'

'We could make a much better job if we weren't restricted in the way that we are, but we've got a big balancing act – we've got to balance the books as well as balance the food production or the needs of the farm.'

On monitoring habitats and species:

'We kind of feel that we're doing their job, we're doing another one of their jobs. But it is good to be aware, absolutely. And really you need to do it. If you're going to take control of a scheme and deliver a better outcome than their prescription, you've got to understand what's under your feet and what you're trying to do. And from that point of view, yes, it is a benefit for commoners to do it. Do they all have time to do it? I'm not sure. That's tricky.'

Richard: 'With grazing being reduced when you can see the moor isn't improving, it's not working hand in hand is it? I think the moor wants assessing on a regular basis.'

Richard on the practice of using quadrats: "It's not looking at the whole common, is it? Everything grows in patches, it is a quilt up there. Just because it's not in one area, 250 yards away there could be three acres of that!"

Looking to the future

'In the hills, we need money. If we're going to stay here and we're going to successfully hand over to another generation, so the knowledge is passed over, we've got to be able to meet our expenses. And when you come down to it, hill farming probably has the highest expenses and the lowest output per acre, certainly on sales. It can be a pretty thankless task and the market alone does not provide the turnover capital requirement that we have to reinvest and move forward. Those are major sticking points.'

'The biggest fear I have is that hill farming is not going to survive on a penny less than it's been receiving. No matter where you are, I don't think it's possible. I'm worried to death that any future policies will be able to hang enough value on what they call 'Public Goods' that meet the mark that farmers are going to need.'

'… I actually feel quite worried for him [Richard] that agriculture won't be the steady thing that I've known it to be. And I think people of his generation will actually become part time farmers and probably need to major an income from somewhere else. That's kind of alright, but I think the first thing that will suffer, if that's the case, will be common land. Because I think it's quite possible to scale back within your own boundaries – keep less cows, less sheep – less of a full time job. You're only responsible for your own little bit of inbye, tick the boxes, look after that, and maybe add to it another type of business …'

Richard: ‘In the future you just want to be a farmer, you don’t want to diversify to do something else to fund your farming.’

Other people’s agendas

‘My worry is what the agenda is, that some of the representatives or some of the agencies have. I don’t think that they necessarily want the same things from common land as I need. And I think their voices get louder and louder. …. It’s so difficult. Everyone says they all want to work together, but they all want their own thing. And you can only have a partnership when everyone agrees what to do. Common land management can only be delivered by commoners – no one else has the right to do it. And in upland areas you can only do that with grazing. And that’s why it’s so difficult to hear our minister and our government now say that food production isn’t a public benefit. It’s an absolute public benefit because it delivers the landscape as well as something on a plate. And you have to have both.’

‘… we visited London right at the beginning of the ESA schemes, and one of the speakers confidently predicted that if we can’t do it with sheep and cattle, we’ll do it with mechanical means. We will find a way to manage the uplands, we don’t care if you’re there or not. I think that’s pretty dangerous talk. My guess is that the man who made that statement has probably already gone through three or four departments in Defra, and at the moment probably works for British Gas – his input probably wasn’t for very long. But as a commoner, my input is for my lifetime. And my family’s input has been for five generations already. The things that were passed to me, I can pass to the next generation, and take that forward.’

Abandoned Farms

‘We are just seeing that farm falling apart. There are 20 cattle that live on 350, 400 acres. The fields never receive any grassland management, so they look the same all year round. There’s no harvesting done, there’s no period in the spring when there’s lambs in the field, and there’s no fresh grass, it’s just dead. The enclosed piece of moorland that goes with that farm is just a jungle. It’s occupied by deer and nothing else, and it’s a huge fire risk. We look at it and we laugh at is as we go by, because we remember what that farm used to be. But there’s a prime case, right on our doorstep. Not because of recession, but just because of family circumstances it’s fallen into the condition it’s in. But if you throw recession into that mix as well, then you’re going to get that all over Dartmoor.’

Commoners’ relationships

‘We’re wonderful neighbours to each other, there isn’t anyone that we don’t help, that wouldn’t help us. We’ve got that spirit all the way through, and that’s the communal aspect.’

Vision

‘You said earlier, what did Richard, or I, what did we want to see for future common land management. I want to see him wanting to go there and do it. I want to see that there’s benefit to the farm still, that there is every reason to keep hill cattle, hill sheep, turned out to graze the uplands. That’s what I want to see. And the landscape produced is half of that equation, and the stock is the other half.’

November 1, 2018

Rob Steemson

Landscape and Community Ranger,
Dartmoor National Park Authority

In his role as community and landscape management ranger, Rob covers Widecombe as a single Parish dealing with the public and managing public rights of way. He also does a lot of wider partnership working with various agencies, sits on the Dartmoor Commons Council, and deals with everything to do with the military, is the park's link on common land, the main link on ponies, the main link with Police via the Community Safety Accreditation Scheme, oversees erosion monitoring and practical repairs, emergencies, hunting, swaling and wild fires 'you name it I end up doing it.'

Erosion

What's causing the erosion?

'it's a mixture of everything. Over recent years due to less stock on commons and access land the vegetation has grown more, so the animals keep to certain known tracks; then we have ever increasing and different types of public use – a lot more people horse riding, mountain biking, organised events and general walking.'

'It's a great area to come and recreate, to use, but from my angle, from an erosion point of view, there's a lot more happening on the same tracks – unfortunately the bracken, Molina and gorse has got away in some areas because there's less animals out here, and of course there is less burning.(swaling)

'So we're at a crux time now really, with various agreements – landowners and commoners coming out of management agreements, others going into different types of agreements, and all the Brexit stuff – on actually how the land is going to be managed so everything is going to be taken care of.'

On large events that make use of the commons, and organisation behind these

'This year the National Park has revised its recreation strategy – we went to both the Commoners Council and the Commons Landowner Association (that represents the owners on Dartmoor) and said, we need you to be part of this. So it's a partnership approach. The people who are organising can then see the link – the fact that

people live and work here, people have rights on the common, and it's actually owned by somebody. They need to get their entire general consensus before they can come up here and use it for a large event.'

Stocking numbers

Rob talks about overstocking in the past (in the 1980s).

'On Holne moor it wouldn't have been unusual to see about 2000 sheep and about 1000 cattle, all year round. The sheep on this particular common would go down into the woods and cause damage and stop regeneration.'

And about concerns that stocking levels are now too low

'The common thing I guess that everybody locally has been saying is that the stocking rate was reduced too much. Somewhere along the line, probably everybody's been saying it, it needs to be a little bit more flexible, maybe not to the max, but certainly a little bit more.'

'For example, there are less ponies, and ponies graze all year round. They will graze off the gorse and the bracken in the winter, and the cattle used to trample it down in the winter, which was great, so where you'd burnt an area, the hooves would go in and that would encourage regrowth and some heather and bits and pieces rather than gorse. So, how can I put it? Very low key, subtle stamping around. Now a lot of the sheep paths have disappeared, they've overgrown.'

On diversity in the landscape

'I think the trick at the moment is regaining balance using the tools you have. So there might be a bit of extra stocking, a bit more shepherding rather than all the animals going to the green grass. I think the Farming Futures is looking at that. When it's dry, we need a bit more burning. Generally speaking it does improve the habitat, if you're managing it for the right reasons – so if you've got the heath fritillary butterfly, it needs a mixture of different heights of vegetation particularly bracken, and so do some of the other rare butterflies and birds. The biggest thing about the agreements was getting it all mapped and knowing what's there, so you can explain that to the people that live and work here, including, say, a bank which is thousands of years old, and we want the bracken off it, so people can see it … I think that opened people's eyes up to the fact that there are lots of premier archaeological sites. I can think of 2 or 3 farmers who I've taken on guided walks in my own time, and shown them: that's a burial chamber. And it's Blimey, I never knew that was there. You know?'

'One of the things we did was to get archaeologists, ecologists and commoners to do this big vision for Dartmoor for the future, which is based on 2030. And that actually got people round the table.'

Understanding of commons and commoning by the general public

'Well, that is the crux of it all isn't it? In my experience as a ranger, most people's perception of a national park is that it's owned by the nation, and within reason they can do what they like. But if you say to them all of Dartmoor is owned by somebody, people live and work here, people have rights on it etc., so you can't come along and take the tree away or damage it, it's a prime site … I think we need to get people to understand that, it is an ongoing educational role.'

What's the obstacle?

'Basically it is getting the Government Agencies to understand how the land in National Parks needs managing and come up with sensible, realistic and workable agreements. Then they need to regain the farmers' confidence and to understand that they need to talk about what they do on the landscape, and that they're basically the custodians. What we come and see now has all been worked by humans, for thousands of years, and that's still going on. We come up to see the archaeology and that's thousands of years old, but there are things happening up here today which will be historic in the future. It's talking about it and being open about it and getting that into the media, to all the media outlets you can.'

'It's crucial now to say, Well, actually, just listen to these guys, whether it's in the Lake District, or here, or wherever. They know the landscape better than anybody else 'cos they are out there every day, you know, dealing with things. They will know that a sheep goes down there at a particular time of year, or over there, or when the wind's blowing or it's raining the ponies will shelter over here. And they will manage the landscape for you. It's that confidence, and having that dialogue, and getting their input into it, not just saying, we want you to do that. And I think that's the crucial thing now, is getting that message over … We've continually said in our management plan that farming is crucial to the landscape. And certainly our chief executive has said that, and is pitching that up to a fairly high level.'

'Hopefully we can explain somewhere along the line how it all overlaps, how it's interwoven if you like. The way it all works, if the farmers are here, they support the local area, they buy feed here – it's very much a rural social thing. I think that's half of it, is getting that over, there appears to me to be a general breakdown of general acceptance of the rural community against

the town community and the city community where the people that make decisions live. That's as diplomatic as I can put it!'

Moving forward

'It's crucial now to get the younger people back on board and get the new generation on board.'

'It's about engaging and understanding, listening, and feeding that back in, and people at the higher levels also understanding it and being able to reciprocate.'

'Communication and trust and respect – those are the three key things.'

The Value of the Commons

'It's so important. How can you put a value on that? This area is the green lung for so many people.'

if commoners left … 'The area would still be here but if we had no commoners and no animals on it, we, or somebody, is going to spend so much time cutting back vegetation. There will be a cost. And it will be based on machinery coming in, flailing it because the place will get completely overgrown. There will have to be some kind of manual work done on the landscape to keep it open.'

'I don't know any different so I have to bear that in mind. But I couldn't imagine coming up to Dartmoor without seeing a pony. The pony in itself is a tourist attraction. I can't imagine people would want to come here and not see any animals. And if there weren't any animals, it wouldn't be quite so open.'

'The trick now is having all the information, documenting it, so you've got all the evidence coming in from every party, and then you get somebody with a pragmatic hat on to look at the level playing field and say well, that's acceptable there, we want you to do that there … that bit scrubbed up for cuckoos, and if there are rare butterfly here, great, that's a prime species – we want to do some work there to encourage that growth with management. On Hay Tor that's what the farmers are doing – there's a blue butterfly and its habitat has got better because the farmers are aware of it: they graze it at a certain time of year, they swale it, and the butterfly's slowly coming up the hill. But you don't see it going on, it's only because I'm aware of it, I know the commoners over there.'

Relationships

'Our relationship with Natural England is good, regardless of the politics and the agreements, the working relationships on the ground are fine.' But people are getting stressed. 'It needs to settle down, it needs to be made clear … we need to get things sorted out … get things right on the ground and if there are problems we need to report it in. The working together of the agencies is crucial.'

What might you need to make that a reality?

'A little bit of training … We used to have management forum days linked to our management plan … We would walk out onto the moor and talk about what happens in each area … with different officers talking together … they may find out that there's a grievance or a misunderstanding … it's about trust, respect, education and communication.'

November 2, 2018

David Mudge

Huccaby Farm, Hexworthy

David and his wife, Shirley, both from farming families, have farmed in their own right for 20 years, and took over the tenancy of Huccaby Farm, which is a Duchy of Cornwall farm, farm from David's parents 12 years ago. David's father now farms from Holne.

The Mudges farm about 1200 acres in total, 50 acres of which can be cut for hay/silage. There are rights to graze on Holne Common, linked with Holne Farm, and Huccaby has rights on the Forest. Of 80 South Devon cows, 90% of which are pedigree; around 17 of these are on the Holne Farm, the rest at Huccaby. David tends to look after the cattle, while Shirley takes the lead in caring for the sheep, around 100 North Country Cheviot ewes, which graze on the Forest. The Mudges' son, Thomas, looks after around 50 Cheviot Mule ewes.

The Mudges have recently taken on and renovated the local pub, The Forest Inn, in partnership with two friends. It is now doing well, with good staff, and some flats for local occupancy. They also have a campsite and rent out their shed in the summer for events, such as weddings. David recalls that he and his father always did jobs in addition to looking after the stock.

David gave his son Tom some ewes and Tom has grown the flock, crossing Cheviots with Bluefaced Leicester.

David: 'He's learned how to heft those sheep, because they'd never been out there before. I showed him how to do it, we've been out lot of times over the years. He rides a bike and off he goes, makes sure they're in the right place, goes to find his flock. Thomas was out there every night, moving them back in, trying to entice them back to where they should be. He did that all summer.'

The Forest, its scheme, and Farming Futures

David: 'I feel it's worked really well and John Waldon's done an amazing job to get all of us farmers to agree, and get everything sorted. It's very interesting that we are the ones that are showing what's going on up there. We're doing all the quadrats and we're showing what we can do rather than it coming from a textbook side of things. It feels like it's our plan rather than someone telling us what to do. The agencies approve it. What John's done for us, for the commoners up there, is brought everybody a bit closer together, there's a bit more of a group working.'

'That's one thing that I've learnt with the quadrats, some of the flowers you'd never even known. We've got lots here, and before you'd just seen them as flowers, but now ..' Shirley talks about all the orchids and how years ago, not knowing what they were, David's dad used to pick them.

Also to note, there was an abundance of wildflowers in one area of the farm. When Natural England noticed them they asked for grazing to be reduced; the Mudges tell us that the flowers have decreased massively in number, as has the population of butterflies that used to be in that field.

Holne Common

David: 'Holne Moor's very good. There's 6, 7 graziers on there. We all get on well, we all help each other out, and we all know exactly what's going on. Phil's a very good chairman. And it's nice to have another generation, younger, there. And hopefully with Thomas, he'll be the next in line.'

Agricultural training and opportunities for learning among farmers and stakeholders

David on opportunities at college: 'I've been farming a long time now, and you get stuck in a rut. You're quite happy to do what you want to do. But it's nice to have an injection, something new. Hopefully Thomas will bring that in.' Thomas is hoping to go to college after his GCSEs, which he is sitting this summer.

David talks about his recent visit to Sweden and what he learned by the way farmers and other stakeholders interacted. 'They just got on, there was a really good conversation. Nothing was prescriptive, they'd seen what was on the farm, they worked together, as a partnership.'

Shirley talks very positively about the Dartmoor Hill Farm Project.

David talks about 'Moor Skills' : 'We shared with 6 other farms, and we had 5 lads, 16-year olds, and they would work for a week at this farm and then work for a week at the next farm. For me, it got me to know farmers on the other side, Tavistock side – it brought us all together.'

'The scheme worked really well. For the farmer's sons, it gave them a different direction from the family farm, a real eye-opener. Everyone farms differently, different types of cows, different breeds, different scenarios.'

General levels of understanding among the public, about the commons

David: 'I think they've got no idea what goes on up on the Moor. We've got two different types of people. We've got the walkers, that frog-march, got their packs on – you feel they haven't seen anything, they've just walked, done that route, ticked it off, and gone. And you've got the other ones that have a picnic, leave rubbish behind, oh someone'll pick it up. I don't think people are educated about what happens up here, farming-wise. We get people that come in to the fields and leave gates open, or don't understand why there's an angry farmer, if you're walking around in the hay meadows. They'll think We're not doing any damage – well you are, you're flattening the grass down, and tomorrow I want to go in and cut the grass and you see where they walked through the field and the mower can't pick it up.'

Shirley: 'It's tricky, isn't it? They need to know and to respect what they're coming to really. They just don't understand what the consequence are.'

David: 'I think that Joe Public wants to learn at a young age, and understand what happens up here.'

Shirley: 'What I would like to see is better signage, everywhere, so that if you've got people coming up here for walks, they can go in the right direction and follow the right paths.'

Payment for public goods

Shirley thinks being paid for environmental value would work well for them, as they are rich in biodiversity. 'I don't think we can get any more extensive than we are without it all becoming a wilderness. As it is, we can only cut 50 acres for hay here, or silage, and we're quite limited anyway with our granite walls and our small gateways. There has been a really good bird population here, including cuckoos, for many years.'

Looking to the future – do you feel optimistic?

Shirley: 'I think hill farmers are going to definitely need support. I don't think they can do it without. And if people want the hills to look as they do, then they have to understand that they need that farmers need help. My grandparents were selling beef cattle for about a thousand, twelve-hundred pounds, and that's the sort of money somebody would get now for a decent steer. All our outgoings are much heavier than they used to be, everything's increased in price. I don't know what the answer is but as long as we can make a living, I think we'll always be here. I think maybe Thomas will be alright but after that, I just don't know where it will be in forty years' time.'

‘It would be nice to see a lot of starter farms. But, who really wants to go into farming? It costs so much to start up, they say it’s ten years before you make a profit by the time you’ve bought your kit, and your gear and stock.’

David: ‘I think a lot of the farms up here will be sucked up. I think they’ll just get bigger and bigger, like Australia, one farmhouse in two-, three-thousand acres, two workmen, and the commons included in that. And that will be it, which is a real shame. How can anybody get into farming if you lose all the small holdings? No-one can come in and rent 200 acres, a young person.’

‘If the farmers weren’t up here, you’d have a wilderness. We’ve noticed it a lot more now.’

Shirley: ‘It would be quite barren as well. Places out beyond the Forest Inn on the common, where there’s no sheep or cattle, there’s no dung, there’s no insects, there’s no birds, your ecosystem goes. I think farming works hand-in-hand with the environment, which is where it’s all going, but you need one to keep the other.’

But you’re here?

Shirley: ‘Because I love it, I wouldn’t do anything else!’

Being on the moor

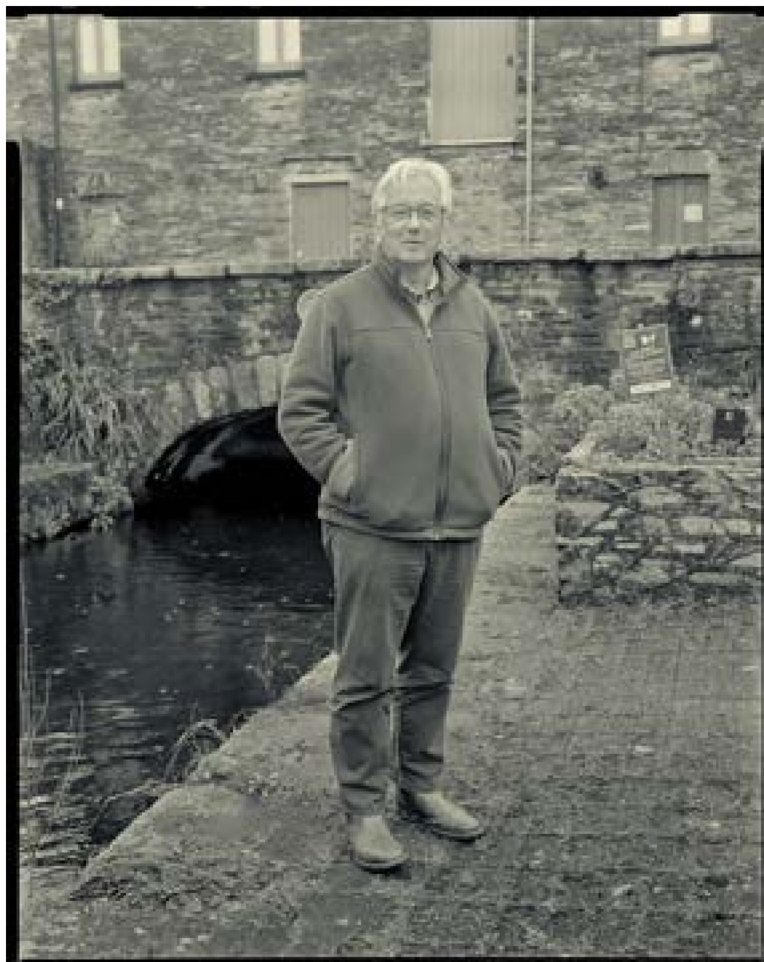
Shirley: ‘You feel on top of the world don’t you.’

David: ‘But it’s very hard for a lot of people. I’m planning ten years ahead. It’s really hard when all the schemes come up, when they put you in a different direction. You’re planning things, stock-wise, always trying to get a better stock, trying to breed the better things, and keep them for a bit longer. There’s not a chance of that to go on with, I feel.’

What would you like, what might you need, going forwards?

David: ‘I would like a better project officer or officers to come up here, for an HLS or whatever agreements they’re talking about, to have an on-the-ground education. Not to come in and say do this, do that, out of a textbook. They want to be able to come in and speak to the farmer, the person who’s been here before, see what’s going on, what they’ve done already.
Sometimes you feel sorry for the project officers. A lot of them have got so much on their plate. To walk a farm like Huccaby, it could be three days to actually see the farm, when they’ve only been given two hours to do it – they just can’t do it can they?’

February 7, 2019



John Waldon

Chairman, Dartmoor Commoners' Council

Under the Dartmoor Commons Act (1985), the Dartmoor Commoners' Council was established to represent the commoners, make regulations about matters which concern the management of the commons and the welfare of the stock de-pastured on the commons, and to enforce the Dartmoor Commoners' Council Regulations.

It is a farmer-led initiative with members elected from active graziers across the National Park, and other representatives.

We met John in the Council office, together with the Council secretary Sara Sloman. All quotes are from John except where indicated.

John's relationship to Dartmoor and vision of the future

'I find it a fascinating place culturally – I mean it's a nice place to go for a walk, I like it – but it's the people really. I'm fascinated by the cultural processes that go on here. And probably, if I'm really doom and gloom, it's not going to last for ever. It's going to change.'

Catalogue of registered graziers on Dartmoor

'It is a very difficult question. The actual number of rights can't change because they're fixed and there are about 36,000 on all of Dartmoor's common land. There are some 1500 rights registered on Council's live register, but we think the number of people with these registrations is less than that, let's say 1200 – but that's a guess. And of these, only about 150 are active graziers.'

'Most people with Forest rights will be grazing other commons as well, so there's duplication. Also some commoners have grazing rights on multiple commons so I'm sorry not to be able to provide precise numbers. We have a wonderfully robust live register but it's still extremely difficult to provide hard figures.'

'The registration of grazing rights has been a Dark Art – please don't take this as a science. If you go back to Medieval times, almost anyone farming in Devon could bring their animals here and pay the land owners to depasture their livestock. In 1965, farmers were supposed to register their rights as a definitive statement. But people registered their rights in different

ways; people interpreted the process in different ways. Some interpretations replaced or with and … and depending on which part of Dartmoor you were on, you'd have different guidance given by those doing the assessments.'

'Today people are using their rights to access support from the Basic Payments Scheme (BPS). So the rights are very valuable. Some commoners would say that this has done a lot of damage to the social structure of commons because farmers have long memories and feel that things were not done correctly in the past and will never forgive a family for trebling their rights or doubling their rights, when the opportunity was there.'

The Commons Council

'It's a farmer led initiative with the objective of commoners taking responsibility to ensure Dartmoor is managed correctly, there is a live register of rights, and only legitimate commoners who have paid to be on that register are able to exercise their rights on Dartmoor.'

Council also has to ensure animal welfare is good. And thankfully 'Most people's animals are in extremely good condition.'

Ponies

'Ponies have become a bit of a divisive issue – some people think they're essential to the common, some just want rid of them. All the ponies belong to someone and Government regulations are increasingly burdensome on the pony keepers.'

'Most of the ponies are on the moor for 12 months. From an ecological point of view there's growing evidence that the ponies are really valuable, and it's the loss of ponies that might be causing some of the problems we've got. How many? We think there's unlikely to be more than fifteen hundred. Once there were as many as 30,000 and the market was good – now there's no market and some people think the ponies' demise is almost imminent.'

Common land figures

'Dartmoor is composed of 92 Common land units. They are managed by 32 commons associations. Those 32 commons associations, over the last 30 years, have almost without exception gone into some form of agri-environment scheme. These agreements have imposed grazing restrictions on most commons.'

'Natural England reckon that on average, across all the commons agreements, the stocking rate is about ten percent below where it should be under their prescriptions. That's a generalisation because there are some commons where they are consistently grazing right up to their limit and there are some that are finding it incredibly hard to get up to their numbers.'

Reflections on farmers getting different messages from different organisations

'Following the devastating outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease, in 2002 a consultation with farmers found that the farmers were fed up with potentially conflicting demands by agencies; one body, like English Nature at that time, telling us that they want this land managed for the natural environment and then two days later someone from English Heritage or whatever they were called at the time said, well the archaeology is important. The farmers, consistently, complained that they got different messages from different agencies.'

'The farmers made a case, a very strong case. I was asked to sort it. That was my first job on Dartmoor.' John put together a process for all the agencies to come together and create a vision for the moorland on Dartmoor.'

'We found that the agencies didn't have different demands, it was just that they used a different language. Some of them were better at talking to farmers than others. It was mostly communication or poor communication. But also it flushed out a lack of a longer term vision for Dartmoor, which the farmers wanted – they wanted to know whether in twenty years' time they were still going to be needed. Their farm businesses are long term; their livestock breeding programmes need confidence that there is a long term future. The process resulted in the Dartmoor Moorland Vision a vision for the next 25 years. But it was just a process. I keep saying, you can throw the final product away when you've finished it, because the process has secured all the agencies agreeing that they want the same thing: that's a farmed landscape and generally for it not to change too much. But as a process, it managed to overcome some of the farmers' fears.'

Leading on to Dartmoor Farming Futures

'The Vision map was completed in 2005 – and some of the 'canny' farmers pointed out that they'd signed up to an agri-environment agreement for ten years but they didn't think the agreement would help them to deliver what the vision wanted. A very astute and a very interesting observation.'

'Then came an "amazing opportunity" when the then Secretary of State, Hilary Benn, met some of the farmers, heard their criticism of the existing agreements and he asked them if they could do better … after a year or so the farmers were offered the chance to have a go; and John, with two groups of farmers, got together to design Dartmoor Farming Futures.'

Changes in the last 10-20 years

'There is no evidence that numbers are changing radically in terms of people exercising their rights. Roughly the same numbers of commoners are registering their rights as they did 10 years ago.'

'That's not to say there aren't subtle shifts. TB is a big driver. Once farmers have come under restriction, have had a TB breakdown in their herd, they think, how they will cope next time?'

'Dartmoor could end up like Exmoor; they've lost virtually all their cattle grazing on the moorland. Increasingly, farmers on Dartmoor finish their animals. They've moved over to a higher quality animal, a softer animal, too valuable to go on the moor, and have enough animals for their inbye land to support. Then if they have a TB breakdown, they'll hang in there, and when they get the all clear can sell the calves or finished animals. This approach is not possible for some of our Dartmoor farmers, especially those using the commons because they have more animals than their inbye land can support.'

Looking forward

'Moorland grazing is propped up at the moment by subsidy payments. On Dartmoor between 60-80%, and in some cases higher, of a farm's business income, come to farmers in a brown envelope. That may change. We have a Secretary of State who says it's going to be OK, and we have a Treasury who'll want to grab as much of that money as they can and put it into the National Health Service, or whatever. Currently the CAP provides three billion pounds a year to British agriculture. Will British agriculture hang onto that? And if it gets cut? Say to one billion – how much of that will go to the uplands? Who knows? Politically we are vulnerable.'

The value of Commons?

'I would echo the public benefit argument, that I think is now being made very well. Dartmoor, if it didn't have grazing animals on it would not be that attractive to the public as a place to visit. A lot of its archaeology would disappear under excessive vegetation. Its ecology would change, whether the public would like that, we don't know … we'd lose the open access as gorse and scrub take hold. Then you get on to more delicate things like water: water coming off Dartmoor feeds two thirds of the people in Devon and Cornwall. Farmers must be paid for the public benefits they provide.'

Grazing and biodiversity

'If you want to keep and enhance the biodiversity that we associate with Dartmoor now, then grazing is absolutely essential. In parts of Dartmoor we are seeing under-grazing which is enabling things that are less valuable from a biodiversity point of view to dominate: mollinia, scrub, gorse. Around the edge you've got heathland species moving up, but on the high moor, it's a disaster.'

'Some farmers think that it's only related to grazing pressure. I think that's true but it's also related to a history of burning, so in a way we've got a problem that we've created by big burns in the past. But more important today, probably, is the deposition of nitrogen, with high amounts now falling on Dartmoor. Mollinia loves it and heather doesn't – and grazing has nothing to do with that. You could argue that we should be looking to increase our stocking levels and ironically have more swaling to take excess vegetation off. Both those things are happening, but whether farmers are willing to put more animals on the moor is going to be a hard commercial decision. Even the ones who are more vocal about this don't rush to do it.'

Relationships and settling disputes

'Most commons have gone through the rigours of securing agri-environment agreements … and have had to do the hard stuff, settle disagreements and work out ways to get people to work together.'

Settling disputes within associations often comes down to a skilful chair. But, says John, 'it just takes one bugger, one awkward cuss, to make life very difficult for everybody else. And I think a few commons unfortunately have a couple of those individuals.'

Public perception and understanding of commoning

John reflects on a talk he gave in his village some distance from Dartmoor; there were about 30 people there. Everybody had been to Dartmoor within the past year, they valued it very much for its quiet and its views, for walking. 'When I got on to, who owns it, how's it managed, the level of understanding dropped dramatically. These were people who were familiar with it but they didn't understand. The concept of common land? Nobody out of those 30 got it right. I think they understood that the sheep and cows were owned by people – but the ponies they thought were wild – and the mechanism by which you manage those animals was utterly unknown to them.'

Do you think it's important that they know?

'I think it's essential that they know about it. Because, there will be a time in the future when government has to decide whether it's going to support farming in the hills.'

'The number of farmers in the UK is tiny compared to how many people live in the cities, so for farmers to be able to get some political weight in terms of making sure that their way of life is sustained, having public on our side saying, you know, we really like Dartmoor, we like walking there, we like the archaeology and things like that, we're going to need those arguments for them to continue.'

Sara: 'I've lived in Tavistock all my life, on Dartmoor, as has my husband and our families going back, and until I came to work for the Dartmoor Commoners' Council, I didn't know that the animals on the moor were owned by people. I didn't know that there were restrictions on the moors … I'd been brought up in the area and I had no idea, no idea.' 'There's a breakdown somewhere about getting the message across.'

Speaking up for commoners, cultural memory, agency involvement and continuity of farmers

John: 'Dartmoor Commoners' Council won't get anywhere if it stands up and says: we really want farmers to be supported in the future just because they're there. We have to have evidence to show that what they're doing is the right thing. We are beginning to gather that evidence, and hopefully it can be supported by others. So if those groups that want certain ecological things to happen on Dartmoor are saying this can happen through grazing, then we've got some potential allies that we should be building bridges with.'

The visioning process was a good start? 'Yes but it was restricted to the agencies …' 'I suspect some of the NGOs felt a bit excluded … however the worst thing that has happened is that there has been such huge changes within those agencies, some of them don't exist anymore. All those agencies now have people in them who weren't there when the vision was put together and they don't feel any ownership … their cultural memory has gone completely.'

'One of the things that farmers can bring is continuity. Most of our farmers on Dartmoor are multi-generational farmers, so continuity is really important.'

'Dartmoor is not short of discussion groups. However the issue is how do farmers get engaged in those debates? Most people are one man bands, or one and a half man bands. It's a real issue of capacity. Farmers then have to decide whether they have people who speak on their behalf, and that's not so valuable because often it is difficult to capture the real impact on farming. The real answer is to have a real farmer in the room. But the capacity's not there.'

The social element of the commons

'We've all underestimated the importance of the social aspects of what we want to achieve, in terms of getting things done. If you look at the agri-environment schemes, all too often the agencies believe it is the numbers of grazing animals that's the answer to everything, yet disturbing the social cohesion has probably led to more problems than fluctuating grazing numbers. For example Natural England decided, for reasons we still don't understand, to unilaterally change some of the agreements; telling a group of people who have signed a legally binding document that they are going to change a significant part of that agreement. Do you know what that message sends? We now have associations telling me, I'm not so sure we're going to go into agri-environment agreements again because we've been messed around, it's caused enormous problems, we've had families falling out. Farmers are becoming more critical and cynical. And then you add to that late payments … All that is bringing a certain tension. Meetings at the moment are less constructive than they used to be'

'I think that's really sad, because I think farmers should be paid for environmental delivery.'

Future payment systems and potential effect on social cohesion

'If farmers are to be paid for delivering public benefits on common land in the future, which I think they will be, they may only be paid through associations and I think that could be unbelievably destructive. It's fair enough with an agri-environment agreement, where you've got named people signed to an agreement who've offered to do something in return for that payment. But if you imagine ELMS is actually wrapping up BPS and agri-environment, there will be people, wrongly or rightly, who feel that's the only way they'll get their support payment, and therefore will want to sign to that agreement, yet not be prepared to deliver anything. So how does the association, socially with all their neighbours, have to distribute the money? It's impossible.'

'Facilitation advice is really critical at certain points, and yet nowhere in the proposals going forwards is that recognised. Gove is convinced that if a farmer needs advice, he should buy it on the open market. Who from? It doesn't happen. There's lots of evidence to show that people will not buy it.'

February 7, 2019

Kevin and Donna Cox

Landowners Holne Moor

Kevin and Donna Cox moved to Dartmoor a little over ten years ago, and recently bought an area of land on Holne Common. Kevin Cox is Chair of the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) and is a trustee on Buckfastleigh Common. Donna was key in starting 'Moor Meadows' which is successfully bringing people together from across Dartmoor in the celebration and creation of meadows.

On coming to Dartmoor

Donna: 'We had always wanted to manage some land as a nature reserve and we were fortunate to find Brook and fell in love with it, especially the land. There's an orchard, pasture, ninety acres of woodland. The wet meadow was full of bluebells and iris… '

On buying an area of Holne Moor

Donna 'There has been 10-year survey of ground-nesting birds on Holne Moor, led by Professor Charles Tyler of Exeter University. We were concerned that once the land was sold, the new owners might not give permission for the survey to continue or take the important numbers of breeding birds into account. So, we bought it at auction because it gave us a voice. Although we don't have any common rights on Holne, we do now work with the commoners to promote good management for nature conservation.'

The Value of Common Land

Kevin 'For me, common land clearly has value as it allows access: it gives people the opportunity to experience wilder places. Also, without the common land on Dartmoor, biodiversity in the county of Devon would be so much poorer. Some areas of the high moor have become a refuge for wildlife that has come under significant pressure elsewhere. Despite this, our designated landscapes are not in good condition. Within our National Parks just 25 per cent of our SSSIs are in favourable condition; on Dartmoor it's an even more dismal 16 per cent.'

Kevin 'I think that common land has become a refuge for many species that have disappeared elsewhere,

and that's partly because of the way that common land has been managed and the constraints placed on poor management. But I think it's coming under significant pressure because we're creating smaller and smaller islands of biodiversity in an intensively-managed landscape where much of the wildlife has been eradicated. One of the key reasons is that we have lost the link between common land, the in-bye and the home farm. Looking at Dartmoor, there is a very hard line now between the high moor and the land that surrounds it. Pretty much everything that abuts the common land now is intensified, significantly.'

Some thoughts on birds and vulnerability during nesting season

Kevin 'There are prescriptions about swaling. Legally it can take place up to mid-April though commons with agri-environment agreements must not swale beyond the end of March. But of course, in an early season, there will be breeding Stonechats that have already started to nest. Other species, even Meadow Pipits, sometimes start as early as that.'

Kevin 'Bracken management is a big issue for ground-nesting birds, for example Cuckoo, Nightjar and Grasshopper Warbler, all of which nest late in the season. Many birds will also be raising second broods well into July. There is some suggestion that bracken management is most effective when the fronds are still growing, which means in June and July. The problem is that this is still the height of the breeding season for some of our most threatened birds.'

Relationships on Holne

Donna 'Our aim when we bought the land was to talk to people about the natural richness of the common.'

Kevin 'We aimed to enthuse people about the special wildlife of the common and to recognise that its biodiversity can be protected and enhanced by the ways it is managed. Like much of Dartmoor, it has suffered in the past; it is compacted in places, headage payments led to overgrazing, and there are a range of other issues, not all of which can be solved by the commoners.

'But it's important to acknowledge that farming and extensive grazing are part of what has created that mosaic of habitats for the species that depend on the common, especially during the breeding season. But to create that mosaic we need to leave stands of old gorse, we need more trees, we must rewet areas that have been drained and we need to create wilder areas.

'The common will change as it has in the past; we need to ensure that change delivers a richer environment for nature, as well as a suite of public goods. The conservation and the biodiversity of the common is, after all, what agri-environment schemes are designed to deliver. Grazing is the primary means by which the commoners implement environmental outcomes.'

On the future

Donna: 'At the moment, I feel optimistic that positive change is coming…but we will have to see. I believe that upland farming is in the best place to deliver a suite of public goods: biodiversity, carbon storage, flood mitigation, access to green space. However, a lot more information needs to be disseminated about what 'public goods' means, to the public as well as to farmers.'

Kevin: 'I think there are going to be some commons where the commoning system is going to fall into disuse. As farmers retire, there are fewer new entrants to take their place. In some places this could be positive in the short term as some areas will become wilder. But in the longer term, there are negative consequences if we lose the variety of habitats that grazing creates. We may end up paying farmers to graze the land for conservation purposes in the same way that conservation organisations currently do on some of their nature reserves.'

Kevin: 'In principle, I am supportive of Common Cause. Provided we can agree a set of shared outcomes amongst all stakeholders, then this approach could lead to greater collaboration and better delivery of public goods. However, we are still approaching this at the level of the common, an artificial unit of land, rather than across the whole landscape. We need to be bold and recognise that in some areas of Dartmoor, extensive grazing delivers environmental benefits and other areas should be allowed to become wilder.'

Kevin: 'Economics will drive much of the change to land use, as it always has. Prosperity on Dartmoor for centuries was built on wool. When wool was no longer profitable, sheep breeds changed to produce meat. Now the cattle and sheep on the commons are very often different breeds to those on the home farms and ponies have crashed in numbers. Change is coming again. Food production in the uplands is uneconomic without subsidy and the support for farmers is going to shift away from land ownership and food towards the delivery of public goods. The progressive upland farmers will embrace this shift and benefit financially whilst those wedded to farming solely for food production are likely to get left behind. In the end, society cannot afford to give financial support from public funds to people and businesses that are unwilling to deliver goods and services that the public wants, and the market does not pay for, so-called public goods.'

On the loss of habitats and birds

Kevin: 'People don't miss what they don't know. Take one bird that was common and widespread across Devon until the mid-20th century, the Corncrake. Until then, every farmer in Devon would have grown up knowing the call of the Corncrake, probably being driven mad by its rasping two-note call throughout the night! Ask most farmers in the county now about the call of the Corncrake and few will have heard it or know it. The Curlew is going the same way with just one breeding pair left in Devon And then the Cuckoo... The speed at which this change is happening is so rapid, it's unprecedented. There are many factors, including climate change, disturbance and development. But the State of Nature Report showed that the intensification of agriculture is the biggest driver of biodiversity decline. I believe we have a moral duty to address this, recognising that we need to support sustainable farming that looks after the soil and the health of the land and puts nature at the heart of its practice.'

Kevin: 'Farming can deliver good conservation outcomes. A quarter of a century ago, the Cirl Bunting was on the brink of extinction in the UK. Over the past 25 years, farmers and conservationists have worked together to reverse that decline. There are now over a thousand pairs of Cirl Bunting breeding in south Devon, a ten-fold increase in numbers..'

Kevin: 'I am optimistic about the change that's coming. There is an increasing awareness about the scale of environmental decline and the existential threat we are facing from climate change and biodiversity loss. We are feeling this loss as a community, as a country, and there is a growing impetus to act now to address these threats before it's too late. We can no longer see ourselves as apart from nature but as a part of nature.'

Donna, on Moor Meadows: 'It's encouraging to know that on Dartmoor there's quite a movement of people who are interested in nature conservation. Moor Meadows is a community group that has brought people together to enhance our shared environment. Across the National Park, people are creating and managing land for wildlife, from larger farms to small garden meadows, not because they are paid but because they are passionate about restoring nature.'

On Payment for Public Goods

Kevin: 'This is the most important policy change to how we manage land for over a generation; and it's a change for which conservation and some farming organisations have been calling for a long time. It will deliver a range of non-market public benefits such as biodiversity, clean water, clean air, better soils, carbon storage and flood prevention as well as health benefits for everyone who lives or visits the countryside. The good news for upland farmers, including those on Dartmoor, is that they are best placed to benefit from this policy change as they are able to deliver most, if not all, of the public goods that the public wants but the market does not currently reward.'

February 5, 2019

Naomi Oakley

Challacombe Farm, Postbridge

Challacombe Farm is a Duchy of Cornwall tenanted farm with 750 acres (about a square mile) of land and rights on the home common, Hamel Down, which Naomi uses, and on the Forest of Dartmoor (where Naomi is an active non grazier. The farm land encompasses 600 acres of scheduled monuments.

Naomi took the farm on from her family, who moved here when Naomi was 4 years old. She has around 250 sheep, and is reducing these to 100, keeping a small flock of Icelandic, Wensleydales and Shetlands for their wool and to make vegetarian sheepskins, which bring in a good income.

She keeps 50 Welsh Black cattle, which are Pasture Fed accredited, and the meat is sold locally. 'The only thing we buy on the farm now is straw and a few bags of grass nuts for the cows.'

Naomi is Principal Adviser: Uplands, in the Valuing the Environment team, Strategy Implementation, Natural England

On being involved as an active non grazier on the Forest

'We are active non graziers, so while we don't graze, we do other things. My husband's part of the fire party, one of the most successful things about the Forest agreement: it has stopped farmers going out and setting fire to things – which used to happen at the wrong time of the year. I also do vegetation monitoring with quadrats for Dartmoor Farming Futures. So we're actively engaged with the Forest, we're not just passive recipients of agri-environment money.'

Imbalance of power due to disenfranchisement of non-graziers

'Something I'm really keen to stress is that you can be actively engaged but not grazing. As soon as you have a scheme or an agreement where you disengage people who don't activate their rights, then you've disenfranchised them, and you lose their ability to be part of an agreement. You end up with a lot of non-graziers and if you're not careful they become completely removed from their common. From a social cohesion point of view, that's massive, because the only time

you come together is a commons association meeting. The graziers act in a very bullish manner because they feel they're the only ones who are doing anything. They forget that if it wasn't the non-graziers forgoing grazing, they wouldn't be in that position. It has led to a terrible mismatch and imbalance of power that really concerns me.'

Registered rights and an obligation to change

Naomi has rights for 360 units, which is 150 cattle, 700 sheep and 70 ponies – a 'ridiculous' amount for the amount of in-bye available.

'You could barely see the ground if everybody utilised their legal rights who put their stock out there. I think there's a moral obligation for us to relook at that registration. In the future, paying people against such an arbitrary figure that was made up almost in the middle of last century makes no sense to me. It goes on creating divisions between people that were greedy – it probably isn't these people now, it was their fathers or their grandfathers – we're just perpetuating this without looking at how we could do it better. When you move to paying for Public Goods then having that linked to an arbitrary number of animals makes no sense at all.'

Sheep and Cows

Full enterprise accounting showed that sheep kept for meat were losing money: Naomi is cutting numbers and keeps sheep now only for wool, a 'very small market for people who want specialist fleece for felting and knitting and weaving.'

She has 50 Welsh Black cows. They live with the bull, and calf when they feel like it: they don't need to calve every year to make money, so it's a gentle approach. The older ones are 16 years old and are still productive. The cows are leared or hefted to the common. 'They will move across the best part of 3000 acres. Because they've never been fed … they will be where the weather takes them.'

Public engagement with common and cattle/ meat

'People who visit the farm and engage with us love the idea of the common. They're really engaged with it. They love the idea of the cattle going out and grazing on the common, and coming back in. They really get the whole story.'

'We've got about 800 followers of Facebook, of which 200 of those are regularly buying meat from us - as much meat as we can produce. They like the story of it being grass fed, they like the fact that it goes from here to Ashburton, which is six miles away, to an abattoir with CCTV and a very high welfare standard, and then to a local butcher, which is five miles up the road.'

'We also do the skins – the sheepskins are processed in Buckfastleigh, and the cattle hides go to Italy and they come back as hair-on-hides and people love them to.'

Integration into the farming community

On feeling heard at meetings – a case in point is the difficulty of some animals carrying illness (such as sheep scab) on common areas of grazing, but when Naomi raises this point she feels unheard:

'I know nothing because I am a blow-in. I come from Ilsington, which is the other side of Hay Tor. I'm 53 this year. I came when I was 4 and I am still a blow-in.'

Naomi's mother was also treated as an outsider, and had issues with cattle going missing from the common.

No agreements possible where people don't get on, and in the context of the system that allows rights on more than one common.

'The common next door's under an agreement, the common on the other side is on an agreement, but our common isn't because nobody gets on with each other. We've tried lots of times with 'there's a big pot of money on the table' but these people make so much money out of the other agreements, where the commons are bigger, they don't see the point of being in an agreement here and having the restrictions. I think that's part of the problem. It's too much money going in to people's businesses so they can make choices like that. And through the scheme rules, you can have an agreement on one piece of land and trash another piece.'

'If a common is designated you have rules around SSSIs but there's so little resource to enforce that, so nothing happens. So what happens then is you've got all these extra animals put on a common, perfectly within people's legitimate right, and it pushes other people off.'

Naomi agrees that it can be a negative thing that people have to work together. And says that the main problem is money, and the fact that the commons are unbounded:

'Money is such a difficult thing. A lot of people are really short of money. There's a massive prize and so they scrabble for the prize. That is no way to build engagement and rapport between a group of people.'

'The BPS {Basic Payment Scheme} is high, and then there's money coming from an agri-environment scheme; and if you have rights on more than one common, you can take your sheep off the one that's in an agri-environment

scheme, and just go and put them on another, which is adjacent.'

There are issues with aggression, including the use of dogs to drive animals away from certain areas of the common. Of about 9 graziers on Hamel Down common, 6 experience this type of behaviour.

'If you put your animals onto a common, they should be able to determine where they go themselves: they shouldn't be pushed around by other people, and certainly not by a dog. And we get that all the time, other people pushing animals around.'

'Our nearest point of access is farmed by a farmer who is very, very keen that everybody knows that that bit of the common is his and he will push everybody else's stock off. So even if I wanted to use my nearest bit of common, I can't.' 'Because it has happened for 30 years, it has become his piece of common. And people will call it his bit of common. And he sees that as his.'

'Personally I would like to be able to exercise my commons rights – to give my inbye land a rest in the summer, and I could grow more flowers!'

On levelling the playing field

'If you want cohesion, if you want to engage and get people to want to look after something, especially a public good, then you have to have a level playing field, or else some people are always feeling they are at the bottom. It's very difficult – the balance of power is so out of kilter.'

'Actually, everybody gets on because nobody pushes. Everybody's getting on as long as they behave, as long as they don't step out of line, and as long as they don't try and exercise their rights. And that is really interesting to me because on the surface it all looks OK - and these big graziers? They're OK because nobody's going to push to get on and exercise their rights.'

Naomi refers to the report done by Jen Manning from DNPA who concluded that there are two types of people: those who are engaged with the wider cultural issues and traditions, and those who see the common as their property that they can do as they wish with.

High Nature Value farming and engagement

'We're really, really keen on High Nature Value farming. The sheep are here to graze the archaeology so people can see it, and the cows are here to graze the wetlands. We're restoring our hay meadows, and we have people come along – we did a walk last year and we had nearly 400 people turn up.'

'It was a truly beautiful thing and it made me really happy. It just showed to me that massive appetite people have to engage with the natural environment and the fact that they don't feel confident enough to do it.'

Naomi talks about being Principal Adviser for Uplands, through Natural England, and the Moorlands Association. 'The Moorlands Association is made up of major land owners who are interested in shooting but also, a lot of them, are doing great things for conservation, and some have the shooting estates in the north as well as estates in the south where they work differently.'

Where it would help to work together, and taking small steps

'There's so much contention around the uplands at the moment but there's so much we could do better together if we were more joined up and we thought about the areas that we have in common rather than focusing on the areas where we disagree.'

'For me, it's about talking about outcomes. And it's about little bite-sized chunks. You can't eat an elephant and it is an elephant of a problem. You have to have a little bite of the elephant, one bit at a time. You can't change everything at once. You have to have a sort of path, and that path's not going to be straight, it's going to meander along. And you can achieve little things along the way.'

'It's really hard, and it's a long journey.'

Naomi talks about alternatives to burning heather by using cows to break it up. Making change is about 'giving farmers on commons a role that's meaningful. It's giving animals a role that's meaningful, and it's giving people a reason to be in the hills, and to be active and managing land, rather than some things where they're paid to do nothing, and that's not good.'

Farming and environment connection

'When we're honest, if your farm doesn't make money before you receive your BPS and your agri-environment payments, then those payments are propping your farm up. So to say, I want to be paid to farm and I will look after the environment, the environment is what is propping your farming hobby up, isn't it, because your farm isn't making any money. It's a really, really hard thing to say to somebody: basically this is your hobby really, isn't it? And if you have more sheep, you don't make more money, you make less money.'

'A lot of farms have switched from being mixed farms to just sheep, so they've lost infrastructure and knowledge.'

Resistance to change

'I've worked with farmers all across the country and I find Dartmoor and the North York Moors the most, like, No, that's not how we do it. We don't want to change. And because of that status quo – it's more like a stasis – people just sit and wait for change to happen to them. It looks like everybody gets on, but they don't: underneath there's this fermented disillusionment.'

The future - potential for tree planting, who supports farming, and what may change

'When we get the eleven-million trees target people are going to be looking to common land. Politically, commons look really easy; you can pay commons off and get your trees target. People don't seem to be thinking about that at all, they're just going, oh, you know, we will be paid in perpetuity to keep us grazing the land. They are not thinking about wider scenarios of what could happen.'

'The trouble is that the loudest voices are the ones that are saying 'Farm Your Way out of it', and that's the NFU …' Naomi also refers to NSA (the National Sheep Association) talking about the need for sheep in the uplands, and large numbers of them. 'I don't think that's how it's going to be. I think there will be a radical change.'

'The cynic in me is very concerned that we'll move to less regulation and people will go right up to their rights: we'll have lower welfare rules.' (refers to less regulation through SSSIs as well, and without the constraints of the Water Framework Directive.)

'My Happy side says that farmers would have a role to play in commoning. I've seen it work elsewhere – using grazing animals as a tool to deliver Public Goods. By that I mean using animals to break up heather and to create niches and to be part of that mosaic in a more wooded landscape in particular. And I would like to see a lot more trees in the uplands. Anywhere there is bracken, there would be trees. I would like to see more trees, and more wildlife.'

'I would like to see relaxation of the rules around fencing so you could fence sensitive areas and manage them specifically for certain outcomes, with more tone and texture across commons so you haven't got this homogenous nature we seem to have so much of.'

On having a mediator to bridge differences

'What I've done personally is I've spent time trying to build a relationship with the difficult people. Often they are so difficult that everybody just steps away from them.'

'If you can take the time to talk to them and build a relationship with them and spend an awful lot of time listening to them and let them have those silences when they're thinking about stuff, and not be in too much of a hurry. I've had really good results doing that. Because it's about bringing them into conversations with other commoners, not everybody together, just one or two key people, and using local contacts.'

'It takes time. You need to build trust. You need to find some way in. Often, all they want to do is talk. They feel unheard, they feel unlistened to, and often their bullishness or their aggression or their lack of willingness to engage is about loss of face and not wanting to be the one to back down, and they've got themselves to a place where it's always around an imbalance of power. There's often things from the past that have never been resolved, that cause issues in the future. They often don't talk to their neighbours, they feel isolated.'

Value of Common Land

'It's open space. It's got a tradition of people using land that doesn't belong to them. It's an amazing thing, a public good that's better for the whole of society, that is being looked after for everybody's benefit. If you can show that you can look after commons well, then it's a lovely thing for wider society, to show that you can cherish something without having to own it. And that's how I feel about my common: I cherish it, I care about it. I want to look after it, I want to keep it nice. And for me that's not about having somewhere to graze. It's about something much more philosophical than that to me: I feel a duty to it, I suppose. We're all just a little blip. We're here for such a short time. You look after it while you're here, and then you pass it on to someone else.'

February 5, 2019

Philip and Alex French

Corrigdon Farm, South Brent

Corringdon Farm has been in the French family for just under 100 years. Philip is now 'semi-retired' from working on the farm, but is involved in many groups including the Dartmoor Commons Council and the Dartmoor Access Forum. Sons Alex and James take on the day-to-day running of the farm, while Philip's wife Charlotte oversees the books.

The farm supports 800 sheep (mainly Scotch Blackface) and 100 sucklers (now principally Stabiliser cross), and has 580 acres of land, including woodland, moorland, pasture and meadow land. The French family has rights on Harford & Ugborough Common (which is in an HLS agreement) and South Brent Common (not in an agreement).

Alex on loving the place:

'I love it up there, I love it up there, out of the way.'

'I like the fact that we're commoners, and using it up there.'

Changes over the years

Philip: 'When the environmental schemes came in at the peak of headage payments they reduced our stocking levels then by 50 to 60 percent.' 'That triggered commoners to go into environmental schemes.' 'One common went back into the HLS and the other one didn't.'

With closer record keeping, they can keep track of the efficiency of their animals and the environmental returns. This has led them to shift their cattle from Galloways to Stablisers, through breeding.

'It's a case of scale and efficiency. And to drive that efficiency into a business is a long term thing and requires a lot of money and long term commitment actually.'

Considering the way people get on within commons.

Philip: 'I've worked for a long time on commons and amongst commoners on Dartmoor and I've said the way this money is paid out is the base of the problem, that the schemes themselves need to change. That they

need to start by creating a pot of money specifically for managing commons, and that would enable commons to have some money to run their common. Because if it's not in a scheme there's no money to run it.'

'Government come in with a big scheme: 'here's a big pot of money, split it up amongst yourselves and deliver this'. In some circumstances it's never going to work, I don't think. And there's a huge amount of ill-feeling in some areas: it's just created division. It's the way the schemes are designed and this complete hands-off approach is not helping, having no one on the ground.'

On Payment for Public Goods

Philip: 'Public access - I think it is a public good and we should be paid for that, as well as biodiversity, as well as water quality, as well as everything else. But who manages it? Who analyses it? Who's going to decide what public goods you're delivering and whether you have delivered those public goods or not? I think there's a lot of questions there that nobody's really answered.'

Levels of public understanding about commons

Philip: 'Very Little. Even most of the locals in the village wouldn't understand.'

Do you think there's a curiosity?

Alex: 'I like seeing people out and having a chat to them. They seem quite interested when I stop and speak to them. Very interested. I'm sure they'd want to know more as well.'

On the gradual decline in numbers of rights holders grazing the common

Philip 'What has happened, and people don't realise, is that the number of active key graziers on the common - I will use the word active as involved graziers - has dropped. The actual number of families that are really involved in commoning is dropping. And on a lot of commons it's down to two or three families.'

The Value of Commons

Philip: 'It's an integral part of farm management. It's a valuable resource for those who know how to use it.'

Alex: 'The Common keeps smaller farms viable and in our case we are bigger but then we've got two, two-and-a-half of us here, which wouldn't be able to be supported without the common.'

Alex: 'I think it's so valuable. I'm worried with these schemes, because farming's a generational thing. If these schemes let the commons go, what will happen for the next generation? What the commons will be like for them - whether it will be viable to run the commons and whether the farm will be as viable, with the knock-on effect.'

On being involved in discussions

Philip: 'I deal with so much of it, with being involved with NFU and Commoners Council and the National Park, I've been involved in consultations and working parties.'

'Very often there are a few commoners and they are the only ones there who's not being paid.'

'I think that is quite a big issue. You see the same faces there, the ones that are giving up their time, and it tends to be us older ones. Because in fairness the younger ones can't afford the time. They're under so much pressure now.'

'It's better to turn up than for no one to be there. Otherwise there's no voice for the uplands at all.'

Looking to the future

Alex: 'My main thing is keeping the commons going for another generation, making sure they're still viable.'

Philip: 'One of the biggest threats to commoning in areas like this is change in ownership of land. Because what you have is your common there, and your land there that your rights are attached to. If that's on estates, like the Duchy, you know they're going to stay intact. But on private farms as soon as farms come up for sale at some stage in generations – you'll have a generation that will give up – that land is probably split into many different bits and it's bought by people who have no interest at all in commoning … so that land with rights attached to it is lost from the common because it can't afford to be bought by people with an interest in working commons. And that is your biggest risk, in my view, to active commoning; we see it all round here now. I have no idea how you're going to solve that.'

February 4, 2019

Tom Stratton

Land Agent, Duchy of Cornwall, Princetown

The Duchy of Cornwall was created in 1337. It has a long-standing role on Dartmoor and much of its Dartmoor Estate dates back to this time. The Duchy owns just under a third of the National Park area: 50,000 acres of common land and 25,500 acres of enclosed farm land, including around 2000 of woodland, most of which is leased to the Forestry Commission on long term agreements. The Estate includes 22 fully equipped farms and 40 separate bare-land tenancies, many of which are let to the tenants of the equipped farms. The Duchy owns 97% of the Forest of Dartmoor common (30,000 acres), on which there are roughly 80 active graziers.

The Prince of Wales inspired the 'Better Outcome on Commons' project which was the precursor to Our Common Cause, to explore better ways of bringing people involved in common land management together.

Tom oversees the management of the Estate on Dartmoor and in other areas of Devon. He is involved in close relationships with the key stakeholders, DNPA, DCC and Commons Associations. Tom is also Secretary to the Dartmoor Commons Owners Association which represents the majority of common land owners on Dartmoor. Tom is involved in 13 or so initiatives including Farming Futures, Dartmoor Hill Farm Project and the Moorland Bird Project, looking at the recovery of curlew. Other value-added initiatives include wood-fuel cooperative supplying biomass boilers; and the Dartmoor Farmers Association meat marketing cooperative: the Duchy has been instrumental in setting up sales with Morrisons, 10 stores in the southwest. 'Assuming we can't all sell our meat over the farm gate, it's a way of getting that premium and that regional identity attached to it, and the slightly increased price.'

Tom is based on Dartmoor and runs a farm with his wife.

Link between common and home farm

'The interrelationship between the common and the home farm, whether or not it's a Duchy farm, is critical. Many of us have said that there hasn't been enough regard for that linkage in policy. We tend to have an agri-environment scheme for the common and a separate one for the home farm, but there needs to be better thought attached to how the two link together.'

How might this be done?

'Looking at the commons in a more holistic way, not necessarily looking singularly at what you're trying to deliver in the first instance but looking at a collective number of outcomes to then assess which should take priority and the required management. A greater depth of conversation with the farming community is needed; a community which has a wealth of knowledge about the land that they farm; something not always made best use of in structuring management schemes.'

'The common plays a key part in delivering a balanced management system, where stock extensively graze to enable the production of winter fodder on the enclosed land.'

Farming Futures

In ten years in his position, Tom has seen the advent of HLS agreements, and he helped to develop Farming Futures work back in 2011:

'The development of that project was initiated because farmers and many land owners felt that existing agri-environment schemes are often too prescriptive, with restrictions within them that are not always relevant to the subject land area.'

'Farming Futures is based on identifying outcomes with the farmers and giving them more lead in how practical management on the ground is used to deliver them. Farmers are engaged in monitoring the results and many have had training from Natural England in order to do this. We are looking at quite traditional sets of outcomes at the moment but as we move into the post-Brexit era and we start to look at the wider management of natural capitals, I think we'll be talking about things other than just vegetation height or type as the proxies for whether something is in good or bad condition. It might be that we're looking at water, carbon, trees, etc. in a much more holistic way. The big challenge is how you actually monetise that and get it into an agreement that sustains the farming community.'

On developing new approaches to Land Management

Defra has confirmed that they will support the furtherance of the principles established through Farming Futures as part of the tests and trials for the new ELMS (New Environmental Land Management System) that's coming in.

'We want to focus on how management plans for commons and home farms can be structured in a way that results in greater farmer engagement and clarity of delivery. Likewise we need to look at how the payments would need to be shaped to make these schemes work. Whilst Government's direction of travel relates to public money for public goods, we need to ensure, on the assumption that food prices will not markedly increase, that there is a level of support provided which underpins the viability of farming. Without this there will not be the farmers on the ground to deliver the management.

'Some of the work we're doing for curlew and other moorland birds has recommendations that we reduce some of the vegetation height in areas caused by under grazing, particularly of the purple moor grass, the Molinia, which is very dominant. When you look at ways to open that up on the common, it can only really be done by cutting or burning, and some of the areas are so thick that you can't safely do that.'

'And the other problem is that areas of sweeter vegetation on the edges of those Molinia-dominated swards have become overgrazed, and the recreational pressure has then focused on those areas.'

'Vegetation management is all about balance and that's why it's important to look at the common more holistically and to see the various demands on it and how we can best manage those.'

Public perception of commons

'I think the perception is that Dartmoor is a wild landscape largely owned by the state and they probably have very little understanding of common land management and the management of livestock on the commons.'

Bird monitoring and the Moorland Bird Project

With reference to the Moorland Bird Project, and the Curlew project (which is seeing some success), and the Devon Atlas in 2016 looking at bird distribution across the whole of Devon:

'Over the last years I'm mindful that across Dartmoor we have spent thousands, I mean even in my ten years we've probably spent 30,000 pounds, on bird surveys, but I very rarely see them result in anything practical on the ground. The Prince of Wales provided the foreword for the Devon Bird Atlas and this book inspired the Duchy to initiate a meeting with partners to discuss how we could work better collaboratively to help moorland birds and gives farmers and landowners a better understanding of their requirements.

'A project officer is now employed, hosted by the RSPB to work with farmers and landowners in a range of ways; developing information sheets to demonstrate to farmers the birds they have, their importance and habitat needs, working alongside farmers to gain

anecdotal information to add to surveys and assisting in developing agri-environment scheme applications.

Economic pressure on farmers and the prospect of Brexit

‘I’ve always thought farmers are very stoic. It’s more than income generation, it’s a way of life. And there’s a huge amount of pride attached to it. So they will endure huge economic and physical pressures, and make very little money, and still keep going, and it’s only when they start to make a loss over a sustained period when things can go badly wrong.’

‘Government support plays a huge part in ensuring the viability on many of the UK’s farms and particularly those in the uplands.’

‘There are huge sensitivities attached to what happens post-Brexit but I am hopeful that the hills will be highlighted for some form of support. It’s a question of how much, and what you have to do for it. It’s difficult to say. All I can say is it will be very difficult to farm your way out of it if you don’t have some form of support.’

Natural Capitals project, and promoting farming as a deliverer of Public Goods

‘The Duchy is developing integrated plans for every farm across the Duchy. We did this on Dartmoor in the late 80s, sent 5 experts in differing fields to every farm, and produced A3 documents for each holding, looking at everything from the soil structure to the existing farm system and the capacity for diversification. On reflection we did not make as much use of these plans as we should have.’

‘The drivers behind the natural capitals are twofold; we wish to have a better understanding of the extent and condition of the key natural resources across the Estates (Dartmoor and across the Country) in order to guide our management. We also hope that this work and the associated development of a plan in conjunction with each tenant will help, ahead of the new ELM scheme being produced. On Dartmoor this will also feed into the Defra Tests and Trials work, which gives an excellent opportunity.

‘We have started with a dozen farms along the East and West Dart Rivers.’ Jeremy Clitherow, who we have employed as Project Officer, has been walking the farms with the tenants … checking for all the natural capital opportunities. Not that all these need to be taken up, but with a change of schemes – potentially payment for public goods – it’s useful to know what’s there.’

‘You have to engage in the discussion very carefully. We don’t want to be seen to be trying to thwart agriculturalist views. From a Duchy and a personal perspective I can see there’s quite a lot of fear at the moment and you don’t want to create the impression that the Duchy wants to be promoting any particular regime, in the absence of any payments. We’re really thinking: there’s clearly a move towards a more environmental focus. You’ve been used to doing that already for agri-environment and you’re probably not getting rewarded fully for what you’re doing now, so it’s not necessarily about new things in every case, it’s about harnessing what you’re offering, whether it’s the environment, access or food, bundling that up and saying to the government, look this is what I’m doing … and perhaps more could be done. I hope our tenants will be ahead of the game.’

‘We need to be better at promoting to the government, almost a marketing exercise, what we’re doing to actually deliver what we see now.’

The pessimistic view: the possibility of commoning breaking down

‘There’s a huge risk.’

‘But whatever we collectively decide we want to see with the management of our uplands, you do still need the people on the ground, with the skills, to deliver and to help – the farming community plays a huge role in that.’

Succession

‘I don’t see as many potential successors as I’d like to see. It does vary from community to community.’

‘The skill set you need is quite unique and there aren’t that many colleges providing the training.’

February 4, 2019

Tracy May

Eastdown, Lydford

Tracy runs a flock of sheep with grazing rights on Lydford Common and the Forest of Dartmoor. She has built this flock up since taking on a farm almost 40 years ago. Tracy is closely involved with Farming Futures, and is the Area Facilitator for Our Common Cause in Dartmoor.

Personal connection with farming and Dartmoor

‘Home is up there. Put me out there, preferably on my horse, ’cos the quad bike’s too noisy, with my dogs and my sheep, and I’m happy. It’s totally home.’

‘You have to earn a living out of it, but I’ve always done it because it is my passion. All I’ve ever wanted is to be looking after the animals, to be making their life as good as I can. To make sure they’re healthy, they’re well looked after, they’re not suffering.’

‘At no point have I ever not been accepted by the farmers. I’ve had people say to me, oh, how did you get on being a woman, didn’t you find a lot of prejudice? Perhaps I’m totally oblivious but I’ve never experienced any at all. I’ve never expected anyone to treat me any differently because I’m a woman. As far as I’m concerned I just get on and do the job. I’ve felt totally accepted, because I can do the job, and do it well. I’m one of them.’

‘What I really want to be doing is farming. That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. I still love doing it now as much as when I started doing it. But I know I can’t do it, because I’m getting too old and I cannot physically do the work. I’ve got this opportunity of doing other work, which is fantastic, but it’s not what I want to do. I enjoy it but ... the thought of not being able to farm … over the last 35, 40 years I’ve built up a system of farming with the sheep that suits me, suits the farm, works, but I’ve broken it, and I can’t put it back again. It is gone.’

‘In 2022 we should know what’s happening with BPS, we should know what’s happening the HLS, as in is there going to be anything in the future, we’ll know a bit more what’s happened with Brexit. So we will carry on til then, when we both know where we are.’

On the issue of keeping flocks in particular places on large areas

Tracy is running down her flock now, but her experience has been that it has been difficult to keep the sheep out on the Forest, and they drift back down to Lydford common; this is similar for many farmers whose home commons adjoin the Forest, and who don't have farm gates leading directly on to The Forest.

'When the ESAs came along they made everyone reduce by about 50 percent. What kept the stock up on the moor was the pressure from the home commons, so once you've reduced that pressure, the animals drift back. The answer from Natural England is 'you've got to shepherd them, you've got to drive them up every day.' Well you can drive them up, but they will follow you back. Not only is it an absolute waste of time, you're damaging the ground going backwards and forwards all the time, but there is also a welfare issue, and you never hear anybody saying anything about that. Those animals, if you keep driving them up, day in day out, especially if they're heavy in lamb, some of them will die. If they're carrying twins they'll get twin lamb disease; you will run so much weight off them, they will die of starvation. It is wrong. I have to bite my tongue at meetings because I get very angry about this – Oh you've just got to shepherd. What I try to do, to describe it, is: picture putting a group of 4-year old kids in a village hall at a party. At one end, you've got a table with jelly and ice cream. And at the other end, you've got toast and water – you sit them all at that table and tell them you've got to eat that, and then you leave. How long's it going to be before they're all at the other table?'

'The boundaries are lines on maps! You couldn't go and stand on the moor and guarantee you're on the right spot, so how can you expect animals to know when they're on the right place? It is very difficult, and it's getting worse and worse, because the more vegetation you get on the middle of the moor, the less the animals will go in there, so therefore there's less grazing available to them, because it's no longer palatable, and the sheep physically can't walk through it – it's too dense. So the sheep are penned back on ever smaller areas that they're grazing down.'

'And so then Natural England say that area's over-grazed, so you've got to reduce sheep numbers. So you reduce sheep numbers, so they go back into an even smaller area that they over-graze. But the only tool Natural England have got is grazing numbers, so the only action they can take is to say to reduce stock numbers.'

'They're finding that the birds are all disappearing off the middle of the moor, because there's no longer the habitat that they need, there's too much molinia.'

Tracy's role as administrator of Farming Futures

'I deal with all the financial side of it. I'm responsible for managing the whole agreement. I manage the grazing schedules, I manage how the money is divided between people, I do all the paper work.'

'I'm also responsible for liaising with all the agencies and the commoners and basically keeping it running. I understand the problems people have, I try to get them to do what they can to deal with these issues that I'm talking about.'

'The people who are actively involved in any of these agreements, or the commoners associations, tend to be the graziers because it's part of what they're doing, and theirs is the voice that's heard. You have non-grazier representatives but you struggle to get anybody to do that job, and you don't tend to hear anything from the non-graziers. Right up until the point at which their money is threatened.'

'If you've got no agreement, if it's just the common and the association, the owners actually don't have that much of a voice. It gets very political.'

Pressure from big graziers

'It's the big players who, if they aren't signed up, Natural England wouldn't go ahead. That's what they do on the home commons, they hold everyone to ransom. You've got on the home commons a lot of bad feeling where the big people have said if you don't give me more money, I won't sign, and if I don't sign, nobody gets anything.'

Changes on the Forest – most significant is the advent of Farming Futures

'We invite people to apply for how they want to change. One of the big things that people wanted to do was to relax the date of the 31st October for bringing cattle off.'

'What you can do, is by doing keeping cattle on they can pull off the dead molinia. If you're chucking cobs down they have to pull it off to get at the cobs. And also they're trampling it down with their feet. Once they've done that, the next spring, they've opened it up and the sheep will go in and graze it, so I think it's a really useful tool if people want to use it. The problem is that doing it on the Forest, for some people it's a long way away, and it's the time factor.'

'What I want to show is that farmers can do it responsibly and that it is a good management tool. And the message is very, very slowly seeping in to Natural England that it's something that commoners can do.'

Tracy tells us that one of the problems with Farming Futures is that because it is underpinned by HLS there is no extra money for people to do more – so it limits what people want to do. And because it's so big, and many areas of the Forest are conting-uous with other commons (and not separated by fencing) it's difficult:

'... you get the: you've let so-and-so do that, I want to be able to do it. And because of letting cattle out later in winter, some people want to increase their summer stocking rates. And one of the issues with this is that the stock could be on the home common rather than on the Forest.' *There is an aspect of* 'Playing the system rather than actually engaging with it.'

Payment by results

'If you've got a group that really work together, I think it's great – you can actually manage it according to the ground conditions, the weather conditions, everything. But if you've got areas where there's conflict, I don't see how it can work.'

'You will have the people who buy in to it, understand it, but you will also have the people who don't understand it and don't see that what they want to do is wrong. So if it's just left for the commoners to sort what people are doing, that's leaving the bun fight for the commoners.'

'You've got to come up with a way of it being monitored in a simple way – what you can easily look at that will be indicators of how it is.'

Value of Common Land

'What's the value of common land? It is an intrinsic part of the farm business. That is where in my mind all the agreements fall down is because they deal with the common and then they deal with the farms, and payment by results. You cannot separate the use of the common from the use of the farm. They dictate to each other. I think you need to deal with all of it.'

'If you reduce the amount of time the animals are on the common, you are increasing grazing pressure on the home farm. If you increase the amount of time they can be on the common, you decrease the pressure on the home farm. So where do you want your environmental benefits? Because if you increase the pressure on the home farm you will reduce the environmental benefits on the home farm, and vice versa. So it's a balance.'

The future, and being listened to / heard

'From what people have said at meetings. And you know, I've met Michael Gove, I've talked to him, I've talked to the person who's in charge of coming up with the next agri-environment schemes, all these government bods, and they all seem to think you can take the support away and say right, you've got to farm from market forces, and that'll work. But you've still got to maintain all the welfare and the environmental things you've been doing but you've been paid for. You've got to do that and you've got to survive from market forces. Well to me, the two are mutually exclusive.'

'If you want people to farm profitably to market forces with no support then welfare will go downhill and environmental gains will go downhill because those are the things you have to cut costs on.'

'If we've got no support bar through agri-environment schemes, your good farms will become more intensive but won't have any support and will be totally dependent on market forces, and they will support the high nature value farmland on the hills, but what about the in between? The in between land that hasn't got the environmental benefits to get the payments but you cannot farm it intensively enough to earn a living by market forces. There's going to be a tipping point at which if you have enough of those people go out of business, you will lose your infrastructure. And If you lose your infrastructure like your machinery dealers, your abattoirs, your hauliers, your feed merchants, if you start to lose that, in one sense it doesn't matter how much money they shovel at the commons, the farmers won't be there.'

'That worries me, that it's going to break it.' 'I'm hoping that's not how it works, but if you actually listen to what Michael Gove is saying, that's what they're talking about.'

'The trouble is that at the end of the day you've got these people listening to you but if you go too far adrift from what they want to hear, they stop listening.'

'If you're not involved in it, people think they know but they don't understand and I think that's a lot of the problem. You can talk to people and they understand what the words mean but they don't understand what it really means.'

'It's a passion and a way of life.'

February 6, 2019

4 Selected quotes from conversations: Yorkshire Dales

Sarah Hoggarth and Frank Capstick

Birkhaw Farm, Howgill

The family has been here since 1845, on Frank's side, making Sarah the fifth generation of farmers. Frank and his brother farmed together, Frank looking after Birkhaw (now taken care of by Sarah) and his brother looking after Syke and Nether Bainbridge. The three farms all have commons grazing rights.

Birkhaw has 80 acres inside land, am allotment on Kendal Fell, which they rent, and rights to graze 260 Rough Fell sheep on Brant Fell – Sarah grazes around 225 ewes (plus followers).

Most of the yows go to a pure tup, with 20-30 put to a Leicester Tup. Sarah also takes cows in over summer

There are just over 20 active graziers on Brantfell, covering Howgill, Marthwaite and Cautley. The common is not in an agri-environment scheme. Sarah is secretary of the Brant Fell Commoners' Association, and an advocate for Rough Fells.

Brant Fell common is bordered by Ravenstonedale, Tebay and Bowderdale commons – but there are no physical boundaries and the hefting system is important to maintain the grass and keep animals where they need to be. There are some problems with horses and cows straying onto Brant Fell from Tebay.

Reduction in number of graziers

Sarah: 'The number of graziers has dropped quite considerably. The way in which the numbers are spread out has changed a lot as farms are bought up – so one person might have rights for a hundred at one farm, he then buys a bit of land further down the road which has another hundred rights, but he wouldn't put his sheep out at that gate, he'd put all the sheep out at the gate of his original farm. Things have moved round. In Howgill there'll be five or six hefts that have completely disappeared in my time.'

Keeping the sheep hefted

Sarah: 'With sheep, years go you'd shepherd your heft. So I suppose now it's about keeping that tradition of the boundaries of the heft.'

Frank: 'Traditionally, the farmers would walk their piece

and keep them to their heft, which isn't done the same nowadays. Just our side is wonderfully well hefted really, isn't it.'

Sarah: 'Yes, we feed out in winter and also when we gather, we all gather separately, through our own gates. They are used to being separated off. So if we gather and our neighbour isn't, you try to shed them off as you're going round. We all try to work so that if you go one day, the other person goes the next day, or later on that day. It's easier because you're not getting a bigger quantity of sheep, and everybody's sheep are going in at their own gate.'

Frank talks about seeing the hefting system in action as he watches Sarah gather. 'She's going through quite a few different hefts and it's amazing to see her driving away, and sheep branching off to where they should be. Unless you understand it, you wouldn't believe it.' Sarah: 'Yes, they do know, they know where they should be, they'll turn off on their own.'

Change over the years

Sarah: 'Everything's pretty similar really. My neighbours are the same neighbours – or the same farms – as they've always been. But quite a few of the farmers who join Tebay common either don't put sheep out as often, or a lot of them have disappeared. So there's a hole, and there's more Tebay sheep coming into that hole. There's got to be sheep there to create a boundary.'

On the reduction in keeping horned (traditional) breeds

Sarah: 'White faced* sheep are a bit like cattle: when one goes, they all go, they don't spread off on their own because they're not a naturally hefted breed.' {*mules, cheviots, texel crosses}

White faced sheep tend to get more money at market, but Frank can't understand why this is. 'It's maybe pushed people off horned sheep and onto white faced sheep – thinking they may make more money through the market. It's probably damaged the hefted flocks. Quite a few of the Rough Fell members have gone on to different breeds. Some have gone out completely, and some have gone more towards the white faced.'

Rough Fell Sheep

Sarah: 'They're just bred into us I suppose, they're what I enjoy.'

Frank: 'In our opinion, this fell, it's a dry fell and I think it suits the Rough better than the Swale.'

Changes in vegetation on the fell

Sarah: 'The odd scree's got slightly bigger. But it's pretty much the same as it's been. There's maybe more bent, as we call it, on the top. It's not eaten as hard – that white, old grass.'

Frank: 'It's certainly not over-grazed. It's the feet above sea level and the elements – a lovely fine summer day you go up to the higher fell, sheep are enjoying it, there's no flies. But they can't stay out there if it's blowing a blizzard, they seek shelter. There again, a lower fell is better, and there'll be more sheep there grazing it. And it has to be grazed to stay sweet, if it's not grazed, it's not palatable.'

Sarah: 'When I was younger there were definitely more sheep on the top.' Part of this is connected to more ewes having twins: these sheep and their lambs go to the fell much later than ewes with single lambs, and don't become hefted to the higher areas. It may also be connected to a reduction in keeping the pure hill-breeds. 'If you're breeding pure, you're keeping your followers, but if you're breeding to a Leicester tup, people buy in replacement ewes.' Sarah talks about how keeping a pure bred keeps the flock in place, and at Birkhaw they do not buy replacements.

Sarah: 'Thinking about the common and how it's changed, I think the heather this year, and the last couple of years, has been the strongest that I can remember it. Sheep like the heather areas – heather's good for farming.'

Problems with Natural England relationships

'Quite a disaster' Sarah talks about recent issues.

'Things didn't go very well. The adviser didn't answer any questions and he came with his opinions. Unless we planted trees, he wasn't interested at all. There had been a lot of fall-out with Ravenstonedale Common before our meeting – and a lot of our commoners knew what had happened, that there was a lot of bad feeling, things weren't going very well. When they asked him about it, he had a very different story to what our commoners knew. His truth was very different. We wrote to Natural England and said we're not willing to work with this adviser.'

Future schemes

Sarah: 'A third of our commoners would quite easily cut their numbers down. They've got other jobs, so a nice letter through the post with a bit of money in it, they would go for. But there's quite a few of our commoners that aren't. So unless it was something for us to look after the common as it is, to keep doing what we're

doing, as we are, most of them wouldn't sign up to it I don't think.'

'As a common we're probably better off than some because at the moment we are managing without any payments. Other than that, I suppose nobody really knows what the future is and what's going to happen, do they?'

Frank: 'People have diversified, have other sources of incomes from elsewhere – but still, farming should be a business, shouldn't it? The traditional hill farm subsidy was to keep us in the hills, wasn't it? That's what it was there for. The likes of NFU hasn't helped – look after the bigger low man, doesn't matter about the hill man, as far as they're concerned, I think.'

Public perception of common land

Sarah: 'I don't think they really understand it, anybody out of farming. Even people in Sedbergh that I'm friendly with don't understand the concept of commoners and what we do up there, and how hefts work or why sheep are up there.'

'People passing through are very interested to know. And in summer the walkers are good, because if you've got a sheep up there and it's stuck on its back, there's quite a few been saved because walkers have turned them over, or called in to tell us.'

Relationships with other organisations

Sarah: 'We have quite a good relationship with Adrian at the National Park.'

Frank: 'He understands it, he's good to talk to, somebody in a position like him, it's good to have somebody that understands it.'

Sarah and Frank do feel informed and consulted about changes and policies, and feel positive about Our Common Cause. 'The commoners were definitely more open to that because it was more about what can we do together to keep the common as it is, rather than someone giving you some money to change something. One commoner, at the meeting with Natural England, tried to put across: If you think that the common's a beautiful place at the moment, why can't you come and work with us, to find out what it is that we are doing to keep it as it is now? Why do you want to come and tell us to do something completely different that you don't necessarily know will work?'

What if grazing ceased on the common?

Sarah: 'If it wasn't managed and it wasn't eaten, it wouldn't really be walkable. Where we have our allotment, there's an allotment behind that hasn't been grazed for years and a couple of years ago some of our hoggs went on to there and I went to retrieve them. When I first set the dog off round, he just did somersaults, cos the bent grass was so deep and thick, and walking in it, it was coming up to my knees. That dog, a couple of days later, I was stroking him and he was covered, head to toe, in ticks.'

Frank talks about the trees on Tebay. 'Going forward, those trees will become a nuisance, you know, getting sheep off, there'll be far more flies, welfare problems.'

Farm Assurance and recognition of quality

Frank: 'The smaller farms, with Farm Assurance they're penalised. If you're not Farm Assured it's 3-4 pound a head a lamb less, but for the smaller ones it isn't really cost effective to join up.'

Sarah: 'It costs about £220 a year. And it's the same price regardless of whether you're producing 150 fat lambs a year or 1000.'

Gathers and time on the fell

Sarah: 'We gather for tupping, and then gather for clipping, and spaning. When I spane my lambs I keep my yows in that I'm selling as drafts, so that's at the end of August, beginning of September. So that's four or five main gathers. And we gather at some point in October to tail and dose pre-tupping. And we'll go up at least once a week in summer, just to check round, generally making sure that they're where they should be.'

Close community

Sarah: 'We're very lucky, in the fact that it is a good community, whether it's gathering, the church, the village hall. The commoners that I work with on the fell, who are close to us, it's them that I work together with in the village hall, in the church. It's such a big area. I wouldn't necessarily know somebody in Ravenstonedale or Tebay or Bowderdale but you know people on different areas because of the sheep.'

Frank: 'In Foot and Mouth, working with Defra, they couldn't understand it, that we'd call people neighbours. And it's because we work together on the common. We're a wide circle, whereas towns hardly know their next door neighbours do they?'

December 10, 2018

Graham and Chris Taylor

Wenningside Farm, Clapham

The home farm, which is rented, has 450 acres inbye, with rights to graze on Clapham common. There is an HLS scheme on the common, but nothing on the farm. Graham keeps 800 sheep overall, most are Swaledales and he has around 200 Texels. He keeps some Swaledales pure and puts the other to the Blue Faced Leicester tup. Chris rents some land near Bentham and keeps round 120 sheep, including 10 Swaledale ewes; the rest are Cheviot mules and Texels.

Graham teaches agriculture part time at a further education college. Chris works as a freelance shepherd, helping out on several farms with gathering, shearing, lambing and other work. He gathers/works on Ingleborough, Hutton Roof, Clapham and Keasden Common, Lamb Hill, with the Ivesons up Higher Salt (5 or 6 fells there), and with the Dawsons.

Both Chris and Graham have seen a decrease in the numbers of graziers and feel that without sufficient income, it is likely that the current system of commoning will break down.

On managing to fund necessary work at home

Graham: 'This is one of the major issues for me really. I have enough work for Chris to work for me at home without him going anywhere else but we don't raise enough money to pay him, so he has to go out and work for other people. And I myself go out to work as well, I teach part time. Agriculture.'

More and more sheep are having twins

Graham: 'I think a little part of it is bringing the sheep off the fells, sending them away for winter. Then it becomes genetic: if you have a sheep that's a twin it'll tend to have twins itself. It's almost been bred into them now.' Graham talks about general thoughts that Swaledales may not be as hardy as they used to be 'because they have been brought off the fells and sent away for winter, because of the schemes.'

How the commons work (and the benefit of fencing)

Clapham common is enclosed: a fence was put up when the common went into a scheme to avoid sheep coming from other areas. And the fence has made gathering easier.

Graham: 'The fell brings sheep into the flock. We'd lose 200 ewes if we didn't have the fell. On our piece now we've only three active graziers. Myself and John Ellershaw and Sheila Mason, who's the biggest grazier. We work together well. We don't have a communal gather but we gather at the same time and keep in touch.'

Lack of young people

Graham: 'The biggest issue is we're not getting enough income to keep young people on the fells.'

How about the vegetation, has that changed?

Chris: 'It's got a lot lowker: long brown dead-looking grass. The only way you can get rid of it, I think, is you put a lot of stock on it and get it back green again, or you put some cows on it to break it up.'

Thoughts on agri-environment schemes

Graham: 'I'm not a big believer in schemes. I think it upsets the balance for farmers.'

He refers to land near the Big Boulder on the Bentham side, and changes in the early 2000s: 'There were twelve graziers when it first started, and they were getting into their late 50s, early 60s. With a scheme reducing the numbers they thought it wasn't worth turning sheep out at all, so it went from about twelve down to about five, four maybe.'

Relationships with the game keeper on Clapham Common.

The Taylors get on very well with the gamekeeper on Clapham Common and feel that grazing and gamekeeping work together. Chris says they know all the beaters – it's a sociable thing. The farmers are always told when the shooting days are so they don't gather.

Graham: 'If the sheep went, the ticks would go on the grouse. They need a certain amount of sheep, cos there's no deer. We put pour on our sheep, so if a tick bites it, it'll die, and not bite anything else.'

Chris: 'Where the sheep have been sat, you'll always see two or three grouse there, cos it'll be where the muck is and they'll scrat under the muck and the bugs will be there.'

Thoughts on the Single Farm Payment and 'subsidies'

Graham: 'Neither of us get our Single Farm Payment. I don't get mine but I don't pay as much rent, so I do get some of it in a way. This is my view – and I get on my soap box a bit here – that over the years, if you look back at subsidies, they distort what people do. Particularly headage – they encouraged people to keep more sheep and perhaps not look after them so well. So if you'd never ever had any payments, ever, then we would have had to have gone into the market place and produce what we could sell. And if we couldn't sell it, we'd have to produce something else. Now I know we're a bit limited in what we can do, but we've had to find a market. The idea was cheap food when it first came in. But if we'd never had any subsidies, we'd be in a lot better place now. Because farmers farmed.'

Graham says you can tell who gets the biggest BPS as they buy the biggest tups … and someone else that Chris knows had so much money, and had to get rid of it to avoid tax, so bought a house outright – an example of how the payment system can create some inequality. Chris: 'I can't compete with the people who have already got the payment and use that to extend their farm. They can put that bit more in, rather than me doing only what I can afford.'

Would you feel confident just to rely on the market?

Graham: 'No, not really. But I'm a big believer in the live auctions. In fact a lot of the Swaledales go to Marks and Spencers, it's the Swaledale Society that organises that. I take my lambs to Bentham, and I have to take the price I get for them. I've really very little influence on how that's dictated. This year, the first day's sale when we took about 200 gimmer lambs, my cheque was £8000 less than the previous year, so I had to make up by not buying tups, or buying cheaper tups.'

On education, and awareness of commoning

Graham teaches at agricultural college. Is there teaching about upland farming and commoning?

Graham isn't sure if there is teaching about uplands as part of the Countryside Management Course. 'If I said to my students, did they know what hefting was, there wouldn't be many that would actually know.'

Do you think it's important for them to know?

'Yes. I think it's important for everybody to know. I think as farmers we're very bad at public relations, and we should be better than we are.'

Social media and sharing images of farming

Chris: 'I often film the dogs working, when I'm on the fell, and put it on Facebook. And it's surprising how many non-farmers comment on it.'

Graham: 'That's a good aspect of social media, getting us out there. I know one girl that'd created a podcast, a blog, and she used to write in it every week. The more we can advertise what we do, whether it's being out on the common, or milking cows, it's getting people to be aware of what we do, and that we do it to the best of our ability – or most of us do anyway. If you look after the animals, they look after you.'

On affordability of farming

Graham: ' You've got to have another income. Most wives or partners go out to work, which they never used to do. It doesn't matter whether you tenant a farm, or own a farm, and if your son or your daughter wants to carry on farming, you can't generate enough income to buy a house in the area. So there's a lot of issues. And then there's the school at Clapham, has only about twenty something children, looks as if it might close.'

Do you think that's an impact of the number of graziers going down?

Chris: 'When I was at school, there was a minibus full coming out of Gaysden.'

Graham: 'Yes the farming families have gone or have moved away, doing something different.'

Succession and the challenge of getting started

Graham: 'If young people haven't got their own farms, I do wonder - there's no prospect of them ever farming on their own, is there? Unless there's a big change somewhere, but I don't know what that might be. If we lose the Single Farm Payments, I don't know what will happen. They'll have to realise that unless they want a mass exodus from the hills, they'll have to make some sort of support to keep people there. There's only a certain amount you can do. There'll come a point when you can't do any more. We're always tightening our belts.'

Can you see the commoning system breaking down?

Graham: 'I would hope not, but, yeah, probably. A young couple can't afford to go and buy a farm and stock it.'

Chris: 'It will either break down or the folk that are left will get bigger.'

What do you love about farming?

Graham: 'I just love being outside really. When I go to college, some of the classrooms have no windows in, and I feel like I've been in prison for a day. I like to go round my sheep before I go, or do something when I come back, cos that's what makes my day.'

Chris: 'It's the freedom to be your own self isn't it? On the bad days, the wild days, I like getting myself togged up. Get myself into my coat, and just do it. It's quite nice just to have my dog at my foot and away I go.'

What support may be helpful going forwards?

Chris: 'To support me to even start to do it, and go forward. Because there is nothing really. Everything you do now is all off your own back.'

Graham talks about the Hill Farmers Succession Group that was good, run by the Farmer Network.

There is no Young Commoners group in Yorkshire; and the young farmers group is reducing. Chris: 'It goes in waves, the Young Farmers. When I started there were about 30 or 40 of us, and my generation all have young kids now, so we'll have to wait until that lot grow up.'

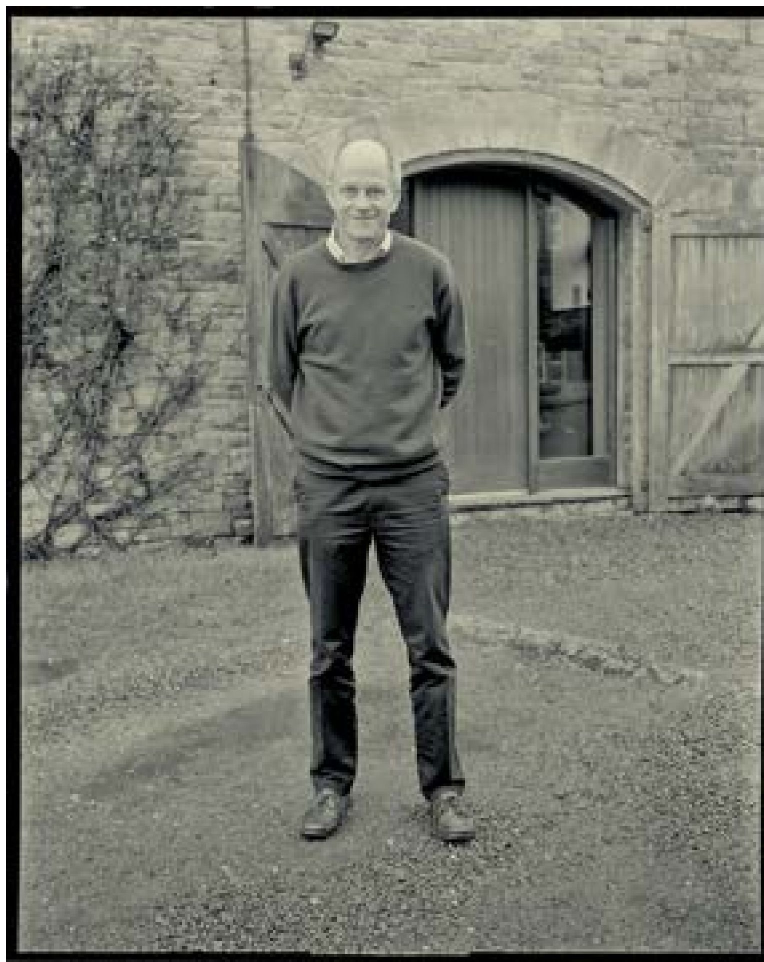
Graham: 'It comes back to our incomes really, and what we can make, to try and encourage people to stay. If we were generating a reasonable income, it would be easier to keep young people at home to help at home, and not have to juggle two or three different jobs.'

Chris: 'If we can make enough for us to live, and just live basically, I would be quite happy. As long as my stock is fighting fit (and I look like shit!), I'd be quite happy really.'

Graham: 'I think the biggest issue, and I've said this before, with farming in general, and particularly livestock farming, is if we could generate a reasonable income it would solve an awful lot of problems. If we could take the stock to market and have a reasonable price, then we wouldn't have to have a hand-out.'

Graham. 'I've seen my children grow up and I've spent a lot of time with them. But if I'd worked in Leeds, commuting, probably would have seen very little of my children. That's the biggest bonus of living where we live, and you can't put that into money terms. Also, a friendly community – we know most of the people that live here, all to say hello to, and some of them well. That's part of it. I've always lived somewhere like this, so I don't know any different.'

20 February, 2019



Brian Rycroft

Land Agent, Ingleborough Estate

Brian Rycroft has been working for five years with Ingham and Yorke, the managing agents for the Ingleborough Estate. Prior to that he worked on a consultancy basis with the late Dr. Farrer who was the owner of the Estate. Among other agricultural holdings the Estate encompassed the Clapham side of Ingleborough Common, including several farms here.

The job of a land agent, in relation to houses:

'With houses, we will let the cottage, do repairs, do improvements, collect the rents, do the rent reviews - a complete service. On the farms, similarly, we meet tenant farmers, do repairs, improvements, look at rent reviews, and deal with any landlord and tenant issues that arise.'

During Brian's time with the estate.

'I've been involved with Ingleborough for 10 years now, and there has been no change in terms of the numbers of graziers on Ingleborough. That's been very much the same and long may it continue. We have had the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme and quite a lot of money to for re-wetting and doing peat restoration.'

Negotiating stewardship agreements

'The Estate takes no money. Through a Participation Agreement, the landowner needs to agree and he needs to sign the Agreement. Where there are Higher Level Stewardship schemes, we've taken a sum of, say, £100 a year, as a recognition payment so we understand what is going on and monitor through to the end of the scheme. The Estate is not looking to financially benefit from the payments that are given out. In principle, we are happy for work such as rewetting to be undertaken on the proviso that the Commoners are all on board. If they are not on board, then we will back them. The graziers take the lead. The hard bit is the Graziers agreeing how they should administer the pot of money, and who takes what etc. There are some cases on other areas of common land, where non-active graziers want a slice of the cake and that can cause a problem.'

What do you think the level of understanding is among the public, about what happens on the commons?

‘Not a lot’ is probably the honest answer. It may be a glib statement: I think most people just go to the countryside to enjoy and consume everything they like about it and they won’t understand what it is they are seeing. For example, people like to run or walk up Ingleborough, but many will have little idea about hefting of sheep, and if they take a beeline off the path and go through the sheep, and upset the heafed flock, what impact that is having. Information is not always displayed when works are done to try and get some heather re-generation going, or restore areas of peat, etc. I think the people who walk up there would be interested to know more about the management of the land.’

Value of Ingleborough and common land in the uplands – is it valuable going forward?

‘Yes. Farmers will operate the heaf: if the farm has 200-300 acres and you have got the fell land to go with it, then you have got the capacity for more stock. Fell lambs are obviously smaller and the market price will be less but they will have had less input as well. So there is a balance.’

‘There is also the management of the habitat, the grass, the heather etc. That is an important part. I’m not an ecologist or botanist but if it is a well-run and correctly grazed, in balance with everything else, that must be what we are aiming to get. There will be some commons that are over-grazed, and almost like billiard boards, which is not a good thing. But grazing is an important tool: without sheep, you get wilding. I’d love to see the active management on Ingleborough continue and other fells continue likewise.’

A wish for a plan, and record keeping

‘I suggested to Liz *(Liz Sutton, Area Facilitator for Our Common Cause)*, it would be good if your plan has benchmarks. Sit all the farmers down, ask them to mark on a plan where all their heafs are, how many they have got etc. Then look at the succession - who is going to pick up the running of the flock when the existing farmers retire.’

‘It is often said the hefting of sheep is as much the hefting of the farmer because they have to know and understand the uplands they farm. We have one farmer who has got nobody obviously following on from him. He established his heaf on his own because the previous tenant sold all his sheep off. So he had to bring new sheep on, feed them, shepherd them and establish the heaf. That’s a big job. We need a managed succession.’

Future payments and possibility of farming continuing

With the Higher-Level Stewardship schemes, the land will be subject to prescriptions on use, stocking and work to the land and there may be payments made for reduced stocking and for capital works, such as gripping or blocking. Basically, it’s a compensation payment for reducing stocking or taking stock off at certain times of the year, but you have to make sure that at the end of the scheme and going forward there is still a farmer there who can continue farming, possibly without financial incentives. That’s the challenge ahead.

Going forward, if farmers are being paid less in terms of compensatory payments but more in terms of ‘rewards’ for improving environmental condition, would you be interested in being able to meet and learn from the environmental consultants that understand the value of the land?

‘I think the estate would. The estate is here for the longer term. So they want it to thrive, whilst accepting appropriate land management stewardship.’

Ingleborough Estate and the community

‘The estate has been around for generations. There has been a passion within the family to keep the Estate as a single body and connected to Clapham. The late Dr Farrer practised as a doctor and he was also very active on the Estate. The Community – there is more housing coming, and properties have been sold off but there are still about forty Estate houses within the village and the Estate includes Clapham Stores. The Community raised £40,000 to set up the community shop and the Estate helped with some building works. It’s working! It’s nice that people are involved, young and old: it is a ‘bringing together’ of the village. Long may that continue.’

On ESA and a lack of equity between farmers

‘Not all The Dales were in the Pennine Dales ESA. It was great for those farms in receipt of payments and at one stage getting 80% grants for doing up traditional buildings. I think one drawback is that the payments made through ESA were possibly more than ‘compensatory payments’ and those farmers in receipt were able then to bid for higher rents for additional grazing. So the farmers outwith, on the edge, couldn’t compete: they were disadvantaged. It wasn’t an even playing field. As a valuer, and doing rent reviews, it was quite interesting when we take into account doing the budget for a farm and being told that ESA payment is nothing to do with me or part of the rent, which it very much is. There were discussions and arguments!’

Issues around succession on farms

‘There are fewer younger farmers in the system, there isn’t the succession that used to be there. The way of life

– it's hard! There are probably lots of farmers out there who want the opportunity to retire but the economics of their retiring are a challenge.'

'Brexit is going to be a big change, undoubtedly. Sheep farmers have got their belts fairly tight at the moment. There is not a lot of slack if the market does change and they cannot sell. I think it is going to be a problem. The balance may shift on the hills to, say, hill sheep being more a mobile mowing machine, to complement more environmental schemes.'

'It is difficult, really. Whichever estate you take, you could probably get a patchwork of occupations and the map will probably look very different in 15-20 years' time. It will be interesting if Brexit rationalises farming. Bigger units, I guess. A lot of our farms are 200-250 acres, some with 90-100 cows and I wonder what the future is for those mixed livestock holdings? Demand for lamb at the butchers is stagnant, if not declining – could be better.'

On whether tenant farmers feel well represented

'Are they under-represented? I don't know. In terms of voices at the big table where decisions are going to be made I think they probably are. But the collective 'farming voice' is carring less clout than it has in recent years.'

We have heard that some people have a sense that DEFRA doesn't really know what Upland farming is.

'I often get that, a sense that they haven't got a feel as to how the uplands operate. It goes back to having some understanding and affinity with the farming community and trying to talk with them and understand what they are about. I've often said that if a hill-farmer makes a mess of things, it is going to be quite crippling, cash-flow wise. Whereas if a lowland/arable farmer puts his plough in and makes a mess of his winter wheat, it will soon rectify itself next year. It goes back to hefting, and the hills need a greater understanding than anything else. Hopefully, projects like this will help the Common as a whole, as well as the individual farmers. And try and get all to build for the long term.'

On registration of rights and collaborative practice

'We saw historic issues of registration from 1965 when some farmers thought they would double-up 'just in case', and they got awarded a lot of rights, and there were others who didn't and just registered their existing numbers: you got imbalance and jealousy. When we get pressure to get the stocking down, there may be two or three generations who are earning a living on that farm. Family farms have built up their businesses and the old headage payments encouraged the farmers to put the stock on the land. It is easy to look backwards, when we needed food, and subsidies probably achieved that – but hill farming needs a long term, more balanced policy.'

Commitment to good management of Ingleborough

'From an Estate perspective, we want the common to work so it is part of the whole farm system on the holdings where rights are exercised.'

Any experience of how shoot owners and graziers may get on?

'In some cases if the shoot owner wants to reduce the stocking, he is often met with a brick wall, and if they hasn't got control over it, they cannot do anything about it. Some shoot owners will be rich enough to buy out the rights, or will encourage graziers to go into stewardship schemes and manage it that way. In other cases where you may not be on an SSSI, for instance, and there is no incentive to go into a stewardship scheme, it is more difficult.'

On ground nesting birds

'It would be great to reverse the decline. Land management measures on both moorland and in-bye land will be required to improve the habitat and chances of survival.'

How it feels to be on Ingleborough

'It's on my doorstep. I often run up Ingleborough, together with my daughter from various points. It's a great place to be in all weathers and all times of day. It's a lovely spot; you can see forever. In this regard, I am a 'consumer' of all that Ingleborough has to offer – we just need to make sure those who are the stewards of farming and the environment have the correct tools and financial incentive to secure its long term future.'

March 12, 2019

James Postelthwaite

Brameskew Farm, Howgill

James Postlethwaite keeps Swaledales, Mules and Texels, in total just under 400 sheep. Around 200 go to the fell (Brantfell Common), even though he has rights (with his own farm and with some rented land) to graze 420. He has never had as many as 420 on the fell. The fell sheep stay out over winter, unless it's very snowy, and during winter months, from January, James feeds them haylage and beet pulp, choosing a different area on the fell for feeding each day. He has in the past had suckler cows, but decided to stop this in May 2019 following a few issues; any losses have a huge financial impact, and the cattle do not pay. He will, however, house his son-in-law's cows over winter.

James has been here all his life, and farmed the place on his own for 20 years. He and his wife Janet run a B&B from the farm, and have a holiday cottage: this business, he says, is as tying as farming, so the two go well together. The farm is on the route of the Dales Way footpath, so there are a lot of walkers passing by.

Brant Fell is not in an agri-environment scheme. There have been disagreements about tree-planting, in particular the areas for planting suggested by Natural England, and concern that fences pose a problem to horned sheep that can become stuck in them. There is also concern about horses and sheep from other areas of the common coming to the Brantfell side and increasing grazing pressure.

'I'm the 3rd generation and I think I could be the last. I'm sure I am. I've only got three daughters. One has married a farmer and they have their own farm. The other two, one's with a farmer and the other one isn't. But it is so difficult - when you look at the value of these places and how you could separate it all out between them; it's like putting a noose around their necks, isn't it, to expect one to pay the other two out and things like that. To be fair, I think we'll have to call it a day when we retire. We'll see!'

On a younger generation of farmers

'I'm 50 next year. I probably am quite a young farmer compared to most but I do think that maybe our generation has a slightly different outlook on life. We try to do other things and have outside interests, whereas the previous generation didn't try to make much time

to do anything else. Then retirement becomes quite difficult because they haven't got much in the way of other interests. So suddenly you've got all this time and not much to do with it. I think you've got to live a little bit while you are still farming, even if it is a full-time job, seven days a week. We do bed & breakfast here & we have a holiday cottage as well. If we didn't have them, our lifestyle would be a lot different to what it is.'

Good relationships among commoners

'It is to everybody's advantage to try to work with your neighbours because it's a lot of hassle if things get mixed up. Your day is spent nipping up there feeding your sheep, checking all is well and then coming back. If you spend half a day up there sorting everybody else's then time goes. It is in our interests to work all together and we do. That goes for gathering and shearing as well. We try to work with our neighbours so everybody goes at a similar time and we get a cleaner gather, and everybody gets what they want. Nobody has anybody employed up here. Everybody helps each other and helps themselves.'

How has it changed since your dad worked the farm in terms of how you work the Commons?

'We always used more or less a set time for shearing the sheep, for example, but everybody did work even more so together then. It was almost a rota of who was going to shear the sheep on a certain day: everybody went and helped and then you went and gathered next door's. That has drifted now but I think that's because there is electric shearing. You can do things slightly quicker, so you can do more yourself.'

'I think that's the thing: there isn't the same number of people. Numbers of people on foot is a lot less. Motorbikes compensate for that quite a lot. When I was young, there would be three generations here that would have gone to help at some point and that was probably the case in most of the family farms. I don't know if it is any easier because we've got motorbikes because I think probably most people's dogs aren't as good.'

'When I left school, I started working here alongside my dad and there was always two of us, and my mother would help as well. For the last ten years, it's been me and Janet, my wife. It is harder to do some things. For example in winter, once you've got your livestock fed in the day, you've not got many hours left before it is night. Hedge-laying always used to get done in winter. I look back and think how much we used to do, and how much I can actually get done now. It's a lot less. If you really did want to get everything done, you could employ somebody else, but financially it is not possible.'

Children coming through into farming

'When I left school, it was common practice, you would continue and farm like generations had done before. The farmers that have sons of my age in the valley, they tend to be doing other things now. It's quite sad, farming was a profession that you could make a good livelihood out of, and generations have done. There aren't many farmers that have diversified into tourism. They might be builders during the week, all sorts of different jobs, and quite often the farming gets put down to a weekend. I look at myself as a full-time farmer; I don't particularly think it is a good thing to condense your farming into weekends because everything needs attention seven days a week.'

Change in practice

'When I left school, which was 30-odd years ago, we only used to keep 50-60 sheep on the Fell in the winter period. We didn't have as many sheep then because we milked cows; we didn't have as much land either. We've probably got nearly twice as much land now. We used to go as far as we could with the tractor and I used to walk the last mile with a bale of hay on my back and a bag of cake to feed the sheep. I don't know how I did it - any youth of 17 would never do that now. By the time you've got to 17 now, you've probably been riding round on a quad bike since you were 12.'

Vegetation on the fell

'I think our fell is quite a well-grown fell. It has plenty of longish cover on it. It gets a chance to grow up in summer. A lot of people don't breed everything pure - we put some Swaledales to the Blue-faced Leicester so we have mules and the twins don't go up there. The number of sheep going up there in spring, with lambs, is considerably less than it used to be. Then more go up in later summer from the middle of July until September. But the grass does need that quantity of sheep up there to keep things at a level.'

'And bracken: there is probably more bracken than there was. But going back 40-50 years, most people used to go up there and cut bracken for bedding. That doesn't happen now.'

On not going into a scheme as a common

'Tree-planting was one of the bug-bears of most of the commoners here because if you start planting trees, you've got to fence them off. Suddenly, you get lines of different types of grass, because the grass has grown up where the trees are and, to be quite honest, I don't think they look particularly attractive on a nice open fell like ours. Most of the commoners, and myself, are

concerned that once you get wired fences on the fell, there are problems with the horned sheep getting stuck and possibly hanging themselves on the wire. Now we've got walls and they are not too much of a problem. It is also that the areas that they were suggesting for being fenced off were not very favourable: they tend to pick the areas where there is the most shelter or the best grazing and yet it didn't seem as if we were all happy about it.'

'It is almost as if Natural England – (as I said on our old scheme of five years) - they've just got a short-term view on everything. What happens to the fence afterwards? Most of the trees will not survive, once the fences have gone. They need to have a long plan - if they are going to plant trees on the fell and expect them to grow into mature trees and be of any benefit to anybody, they need to be looking at fencing for maybe ten years. If they are not planning on doing that, there is little point planting. Walling would be expensive and the problem would be getting the materials there, but that would be the natural way to do it, and less of a problem.'

Issues with horses coming from other areas of the fell

'If we go into a scheme, and we are not allowed to put stock on the fell at a certain time and we've got horses coming over from elsewhere, how are we meant to manage that? Natural England said it was up to us to manage. Well, physically, you cannot. We would have to have a team of people constantly on the boundary to send them back.'

Does that create bad relationship with neighbours?

'Certain graziers on the other side, it does. These horses are not really shepherded. Fairmile is part of our fell but people come along with a trailer and let horses out. It's a bit much. And it has been noted that they've been let out at this end and Sedbergh end just because there is a green lane. It is like an abuse of peoples' rights, really. It's a difficult one, because there is nothing to stop the horses coming over here. But when it comes to feeding time, for example next month, before we turn the sheep back to the fell, we will try and get behind the horses and push them back. You can take them a long way and it doesn't take them long to come back.'

On general understanding among the public

'We get quite a lot of people on The Dales Way and tourists staying at the holiday cottage, and they are very interested in what goes on, genuinely interested when I tell them. It is an insight into how we manage the fells and how the sheep are heafed. But it is quite interesting to know how little people do know of hill farming. I don't think it is getting any better.'

On using the common as an integral part of the farming system

'There was a few, over the years, dropped out of using their heafs; probably the ones that aren't as near to the fell. I'm not that near to the Fell. I have to work with my neighbours to get my sheep in and out. It's worked over the years and I hope it will continue.'

'Foot & Mouth made a big difference - a lot of people lost generations of their sheep and they didn't always replace them with the same breed. From Foot & Mouth, we used not to keep many mules but we had all these mule gimmer lambs that had been heafed on the fell so rather than keep Swaledales who had never got to the fell, we kept the mules. I think that is one thing that is very noticeable when you go round to the Auction Marts, especially somewhere like Hawes. Because people changed their farming policy after Foot & Mouth and realised that mule sheep were producing a better quality lamb, which sells sooner. Some people do turn some of them onto the common afterwards. I don't. It changed things.'

'Now, my Swaledale numbers, I wouldn't think they'll change much but the main reason for trying to keep maintaining that is so you can get some on the fell in winter - you've got ten weeks of the year you can keep them up there and their feet aren't toiling the inside ground up. And it's cleaner feeding for them - they do better for it.'

Perceived value of the commons

'Hundreds & hundreds of people walk up there and enjoy the views and the landscape. They are maybe not all that aware that the way it is managed with the sheep grazing is what allows them to do that. If you took the sheep off, it would soon get grown up: once you take animals away from any area, briars and suchlike soon grow and it becomes scrub land. It wouldn't be as accessible and it wouldn't be as nice to walk on. I do think that is something that is very important because it is an open place for the public to go and enjoy, and it is a working environment for us. I think the two things can work very well together.'

On payment for public goods

'The graziers that are using the fell are the ones that are managing the landscape. I can understand that it needs to be kept in a certain way; that they want the grass to be a certain length. If we are doing everything that they want us to do and we can tweak things slightly, I think we should get rewarded for it. Although it's difficult to know just what you could pinpoint as the things you could pay people on. As hill farmers and sheep farmers, we cannot

survive off what we produce ourselves: we need to have some form of subsidy. I think everybody is quite open to what might be coming and I think it is good that we are getting asked the questions.'

You said it was quite good you were being asked questions, do you feel that you, personally, and as a group of Commoners, have a voice at the table and you get listened to?

'Well we haven't really been in the past, I don't think. I sometimes think that there are independent agricultural bodies out there that don't get used enough. DEFRA is a prime example: their actual agricultural knowledge is very limited, it seems - we discovered that in Foot & Mouth and I don't think anything has improved much since. The NFU, for example, don't seem to get used to inform DEFRA or Natural England about how farming works. It would be great if they went to an area and said, 'Could you steer us towards a member that could just give us an insight into their farm and their day-to-day farming processes'. But I don't think they do. It just seems to me that an awful lot of legislation and rules and regulations are created in an office. The actual people that are having to put them into force or have to use them are never really consulted enough.'

You were talking about Natural England and how you have had conversations that made you think they don't know the land that they are meant to be consulting on.

'No. It was quite plain when we had a meeting and the Natural England representative was asked what he wanted to see on the fell. He answered he wanted to see the grass grow longer, and when he was asked how much, he didn't know because he hadn't been. Well that was a prime example of not doing your homework. Things like that disillusion you a bit. These people are supposedly working for the public for us all to enjoy the environment. It doesn't give you much faith in them.'

You are not a member of NFU?

'No. I just don't really feel that they are used enough and I don't think really, the NFU has much of a voice nowadays. They may be working away on our behalf on certain things but there is an awful lot gets thrown at us and you wonder, 'Why on earth has the NFU allowed this?' I just don't think they have the power to do anything to stop it happening.'

So, where is the voice?

'That's the problem. I don't think we do have one, do we? I'm a member of Cumbria Farmer Network. They are quietly beavering away, informing us what's going on, and get funding for training us with courses and things that are of benefit to us. I think they do a great job - a far better job than the NFU. I don't think everybody would agree with me on that, but I do think we've got a bit disillusioned by the NFU because they don't seem to have a voice.'

If there were a Commons Council, would you want that, or want to be on that?

'I think as commoners we would benefit from that. If we have any disputes it's a way of getting things sorted out.'

As a Common, might you consider another Scheme if the option came up?

'I think we're going to have to. It's difficult, we don't know with Brexit. We can't survive on what we produce from our animals, so a scheme up there would be great but I do feel that certain areas have been forgotten. There's a lot of money been spent in the likes of Swaledale - for things that we cannot get money for, like field barns. A lot of them can get grants for that but we've never had a chance. It gives a two-tier farming. I still feel we're on the edge of the National Park here.'

'The Howgill fells are so distinctive. They are quite different to anywhere else. You don't see fells like ours in the Lake District. They are not craggy, they are smooth and well-grassed over. They are quite unique. I call them sleepy elephants & you can see why. I do think they are quite undiscovered. The amount of people that we get coming through from The Dales: 'We've never walked these fells, we must come back'. It is nice to think that they have discovered them.'

The future - what is your optimism level in terms of the Commons still working in 20 years' time?

'It's very difficult to answer that one because, as I say, I would probably be classed as quite a young farmer at nearly 50. The next generation, it isn't there to come along. It is difficult to see what is going to happen in the future. If the fell gets into a very small number of graziers, they are going to have such a vast area to manage, it is going to be very difficult.'

'The whole point of breeding Swaledales is to have something hardy to go onto these tops. I think the actual breeds would suffer an awful lot - it depends on how much people want to preserve them. The thing is, if these fells are to be kept looking nice and lush in summer, and green and managed, they need to be grazed. We are going to have to keep these breeds going to do that. A lot of these, once they go up the fell, they are pretty organic, everything they eat is pretty natural. Whereas on the inside land, it is not always the case.'

10 December 2018

John, Judith and William Dawson

Bleak Bank Farm, Clapham

Bleak Bank has been in John's family for four generations. Originally the farm was tenanted, and the family bought the farm in the late 1920s. Judith and John married in 1990 – Judith came from a farming family, near Sedbergh. William is 21: keen to continue farming here. The three work together on the farm. Judith does additional work part-time looking after accounts for two local firms, and William works in the community shop in Clapham on Saturdays. The family is very involved in the local community

Unusually for an upland farm, the Dawsons have a herd of 60-75 dairy cows. Milk goes into the ARLA Cooperative: roughly 1500 litres a day, just over 500,000 litres a year. This is small in the wider context of dairy.

The farm sits at around 850ft above sea level. It has around 300 acres of land, adjoins Ingleborough common (3,500 acres of common land). There are 12-13 active graziers on Ingleborough Common, and there are set dates each year to meet and gather the fell. Much of Clapham side is owned by the Ingleborough Estate; the Ingleton side has an absentee landowner (who lives in the Philippines). The whole common is currently in an HLS agreement.

The Dawsons keep around 500 sheep, most of which are Dalesbred. They do not import feed for the sheep; just some mineral supplements before lambing, and a little wheat-based food for the twins.

Judith is secretary for the commons association, on the Ingleton side.

Changes in farm numbers

John: 'To put it in some kind of context, on the road that we live on, on the old Ingleton road there used to be 10 family farms, all producing a little bit of milk. Now there are only 4 farms in total and we're the last ones producing milk.

Most of the flock is Dalesbred, with a small number of crosses:

John: 'We cross the Dalesbred with the Teeswater to

produce the Mashams and the gimmers, which go all over the country. They go to Devon, to Cornwall, top of Cumbria, Norfolk. And they hopefully go on to have a long and happy, productive life. That's our cash crop, born in March, sold in September.'

Ingleborough Common

John: 'There's three and a half thousand acres of total common and it's split into two: Clapham side and Ingleton side. There is no boundary: there's no fence, no wall, it's really controlled by hefting, the sheep know where they live. We engineer it so that the sheep take their lambs up there in May and they teach them where to live. It's not always easy to explain hefting but if you think that I'm the fourth generation at Bleak Bank, the sheep go much further back than that. We've all inherited the flock, it's a continuation.'

The active graziers on Ingleborough Common

John: 'They're all family farms - all several generations of farmers. As dairy cows and cattle have left the hills, people tend to keep a more productive breed of sheep, which takes out the horned sheep: breeds like Mashams or mules, they don't really live on Ingleborough.'

So what drives your decision to have the horned sheep and to use the common?

John: 'We breed lambs to sell to lowland farmers. We have some quite productive lowland grass land so we can keep dairy cows to a certain standard. When the cows come in for winter the sheep come off Ingleborough and it lends itself quite well really. It's evolved over centuries.'

Judith: 'And I think for us that's part of it isn't it, the heritage, the connection with your ancestors, and that feeling of being rooted here and this is what happens here, you know?'

Ingleborough vegetation and habitats

Judith: 'It's got some very important blanket bog which is European designated SAC, and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. It's got some terrific plants, I've even seen a sundew on Ingleborough and I've never seen a sundew anywhere else. And white flowers around the pockets where there used to be mining for lead. You've got all sorts of different management that's required to protect different plants, and it's not always easy when you've got a common.'

John: 'We have an interest in the habitat, we're not just here to graze sheep and farm and produce food all the time. We have a good level of responsibility for what goes on Ingleborough, and take care of it. The last thing we want to do is damage it.'

Changes with reduction in sheep numbers.

Judith: 'There's a bit of heather generation coming back right on the Clapham side.'

John: 'From a farming point of view it's probably gone far enough. Now, whether that's far enough from a conservation point of view – there'll hopefully come a point where we agree that it's far enough for both of us. I don't know whether we've reached that point yet.'
Judith: 'A lot of your limestone pasture, plants will only survive if it's grazed. A lot of flowers get crowded out by the grass if it's not eaten. So it does need grazing.'

Public Goods

John: 'Public goods is one of those things, isn't it? It's very difficult to measure. I personally think the upland farms have a great role to play in food goods, not just public goods. I could talk for 20 minutes about food production on the hills, I mean there's nothing more natural and better for the environment than a lamb coming off Ingleborough, going through the food chain, and being eaten in Ingleton or Bentham or within 10 miles. That's a sustainable food process.'

Judith: 'The public goods thing is not new is it? The new bit is proving it, because the public goods have been there, traditional farming has produced a lot of public goods, hasn't it?

'Caretakers of the countryside, that's what a lot of farmers do without thinking about it. Most are quite keen to look after the land and to hand it on to the next generation in as good a state if not better.'

William: 'although there are some who don't.'

On criticism of farmers

William: 'Well it's definitely more prevalent at the moment with more people interested in veganism and vegetarianism. They don't necessarily know about the way we do it, because they only see the farms that are industrial, high output. They don't see little places like Ingleborough, for example, where a lot of the farming is sustainable and it is less vigorous. I think it's good that they can have that debate, so long as they can understand both sides.'

John: 'What we like at Bleak Bank is the sustainability aspect of it, the heritage that was behind us and what might lie in front of us.'

Judith: 'Traditional management with a modern twist.'

John: 'For instance, if my great-great grandfather came back now and we were gathering Ingleborough he would instantly recognise what we were doing. We're managing Ingleborough in a way that he would recognise and that's what I like. And this has to be here for future generations doesn't it? Whether its Bleak Bank or its Ingleborough, we have a duty of care.'

Judith: 'I mean it may change, you know. We've been fortunate to be in schemes. If that support goes, then there might be more pressure to farm more intensively. And if making money means you have to go find a job elsewhere, then the farming doesn't get done - there's no walling going on, there's no draining going on, and there's no care.'

Public understanding

John: 'The rift between food production and the general public who eat the food has got wider and wider.'

Relationships between commoners

Judith: 'There are differences of opinion but generally everybody goes the same way, don't they?'

John: 'Yeah, there are differences of opinion.'

Judith: 'They can get to shouting, a little bit.'

John: 'But, if there's a little bit of goodwill, and I find that we can get stuff done can't we?'

Do the commoners as a group talk about what might be coming up and whether your voice is being heard or how you have a say in what's happening?

John: 'I can see difficulties coming probably between individual grazers. Some have never liked the scheme, some love the scheme, some say it's not bad but there isn't enough money.'

Judith: 'I think most people that are involved will look back and think 'well, it's been alright really'. It's helped us to keep farming for the last 8 years and the money's been ok for what they've wanted us to do. There is one or two that might disagree with that and possibly wouldn't want to enter another scheme, and would prefer to farm how they want to farm, if they can afford to do that without any support.'

Ingleborough estate, and your relationship with the estate

John: 'The Ingleborough estate is generally a good thing. When we went into the scheme, for instance, they were keen to be involved and quite supportive of it as well.'

Judith: 'They let all the money filter through to the farmers as well – often estates or land owners have decided they want a cut.'

Value of commoning

John: 'The commoning system is probably less important to the rural economy than it was, probably because the decline of small family farms. Even in my lifetime there would probably be twice as many farms grazing Ingleborough, and each of those would have a family that would go to the local shop and the local school, the local church, the local pub. So it's probably less important now than it's ever been, a little bit less understood as well. I'm thinking maybe 100 years ago when it was more of a subsistence thing, a way of life.'

Judith: 'It has a great importance for walkers, although if it's not grazed and managed then some parts of the fell are very difficult to walk on. It's no wonder people value being able to visit places like these and have a walk up Ingleborough and think, Wow. And there is room for grazing management in keeping that value for the visitors.'

William: 'I suppose to farms like Bleak Bank as it is now, the fell is very valuable because it's where the sheep live. But if there aren't farms like Bleak Bank, then the agriculture of Ingleborough becomes unimportant - without farms like Bleak Bank it loses that agricultural purpose.'

Looking to the future

John: 'I can only ever see a decline in the upland farm at this stage. William is quite unusual in that he looks like he wants to be the next generation at Bleak Bank. The last two farms that a farmer has retired, the land has been split up between the other farms to make them more viable. I can only think that's going to happen again, looking at the tenants' situation.'

John: 'I remember Ingleborough being gripped to drain the water off to make it more use for grazing, now the grips have been filled in, four or five years ago, for more blanket bog, which is good – it stops the village flooding – it did flood quite regularly. Now it's gone completely the other way. It sounds a bit harsh but my view is that the upland farmers are a bit irrelevant – they don't produce huge amounts of food, from a farming point of view. From a public goods point of view I think we have huge relevance. But if Bleak Bank dropped off the face of the earth tomorrow it wouldn't be missed by – only Barclays I think would miss it!'

John: 'I do know Ingleborough, or our patch of it. And it gives me enormous pleasure to know that our forefathers

have done the same. I'm coming at it from a different aspect than a botanist. I'm coming at it from a heritage point of view, I'm coming at it from the point of view of a farmer, and protecting it for future generations.'

Do you feel people listen to you and you have a say in what goes on?

John: 'I don't feel that, no.'

William, shaking his head: 'I don't think that they do. I don't think that's exclusive to agriculture – I think that's just the way they operate.'

John: 'Yes, the information chain is a bit broken isn't it?'

William: 'It would make sense for them to maybe go a bit deeper into things.'

John: '- for the decision makers to have a bit more knowledge, and to be open minded about it as well.'

When you go to meetings do you feel listened to, and that your opinions are respected?

John: 'Usually the meetings I've attended and spoken at have been organised by the National Farmers Union, so it's a slightly different aspect, as we're members of the National Farmers Union. It's a farming thing, so you are given more time to speak.

With regard to meeting with the National Park: ' I have a lot of time for people like Adrian Shepherd who has an enormous amount of knowledge, from both sides, for conservation and farming for the future.'

John was invited to consult on catchment sensitive farming – and he was paid to go to those meetings. Yet he talks of a familiar experience among farmers: 'It's the same people, though, those that have time to be involved. Those who don't have time to be involved, well they don't get involved! So you end up with a lot of people who like going to meetings.'

What makes you smile when you're out on the tops?

John: 'It feels satisfying. You feel you're doing something good. It's quite a noble cause, is feeding the nation, even on our small scale, and looking after the landscape, looking after the farm, following in the footsteps of those who have gone before.'

William: 'It is satisfying. I mean some farmers will go up there and they're only focused on getting the sheep down, and couldn't care less about what's going on around them – I like to think we're not like that. There's another aspect to life isn't there, than work.'

John: 'I think the thing that I would like to reiterate is the fine delicate balance that exists and how it has evolved. And don't just think, right, Ingleborough needs this, now, let's do it – I'm talking as if I'm a government official – cos it hasn't just happened. It's taken hundreds of years. We as farmers and graziers on Ingleborough, we have a duty of care and we should be listened to. Because we know what makes Ingleborough tick.'

December 6, 2018

Malcolm and Louise Robinson

Scalemire Farm, Clapham

Malcolm was born and has lived all his life in Scalemire Farm. His Grandfather bought the farm in 1945 and moved down in 1946 and the family has been there ever since.

The Robinsons have a flock of around 200 Swaledales, 100 of which are on Ingleborough at different times of year (they have rights for 170 on the fell). They have some cross-bred sheep as well, which stay on the lower ground: approximately 210 acres of inbye (120 on the farm and another 90 on the other side of Ingleton).

Louise (age 33) is one of Malcolm's five children (all daughters) and is taking over from Malcolm in caring for the fell sheep.

Changes on the common over the last 20-30 years:

Malcolm: 'A lot less sheep turned up, and a lot less graziers using the grazing rights. It's because of the economics - there is not a lot of money in it. There are people that have given up farming, or children haven't taken over the sheep.

We used to turn more sheep up in the spring. Now we keep them off in the winter and the back end. Once upon a time, a lot just had single lambs so they all went up in May; now sheep with twin lambs are kept in land until July. At the end of the day, two lambs are better than one. The problem with them having more lambs is we don't need so many sheep on Ingleborough to keep replacements going. They are still hefted up on Ingleborough, although as people have given up, taken sheep off, the hefts have expanded. If it wasn't for Louise taking over, I probably wouldn't turn any up Ingleborough.

When we used to have a dairy herd, we used to put sheep up there in early May. We don't use the common as much early Summer as we used to, but August, September, October we do turn sheep up there after lambs have been taken off them. It takes pressure off the land down here. Apart from that, when they've got lambs, we tend to keep more and more in-land, because they do better. Up there, they won't thrive as well. Having said that, there's not as big a pressure to turn sheep up there, as the land that was grazed by milk cows is grazed by sheep now. We are not necessarily trying to breed

fell-hardy animals; they all finish up in the fat market, as fat lambs. And that's the worrying thing about Brexit - what will happen to the fat lamb market next year? We rely on a lot of lambs going to France and Europe; it's our main market. If we have no market …

Louise: 'We have just been talking about the Swales and what type of sheep to use and thinking we are going to carry on with the same kind of sheep. The mule gimmer lambs have not made as much this year and we are not sure they are going to in the future. When I took over the sheep from Dad, I think I made less money from the sheep than I did charging Dad for the hours I spent with them. For the time you put in, you don't get a lot back.

So what is it that makes you want to take that on and keep it going?

Louise: 'The Fell Sheep – that's the basis for the rest of the sheep because then you breed your own mules. We had some gimmer lambs that were doing quite well and you get better lambs off the mules. They are the starting point and there is a place for them and it seems to fit in well. That's why I want to carry on and take in more sheep.'

'And I don't like being inside. When I worked at the hospital, I used to clock-watch. When you are farming, it's the opposite way of thinking - 'It can't be that time already, I've got to do this and do that,' and you get to the end of the day and you feel like you've done a good day's work; you can see the work that you have done and your animals doing well, and it is rewarding. The social side of going on to the Common, and doing work elsewhere, that's good because I don't think it would be good for my health just to be on this farm all the time and not get out and see and talk to other people.'

Dairy farming

Malcolm: 'We used to milk about 70-80 cows, which was not a bad number for one person. The way things have gone since then, 200-300 milk cows is the norm now. We didn't have enough land here, and the spring is about a fortnight later than down in Bentham, about 5, 6 miles away. I've seen us get snow and drifts up here while three miles away, there is nothing. I gave up milking about 12 years ago. We wouldn't go back to milking, not here, anyway.'

Louise's choice to farm

Louise: 'From a young age, I used to help out but I never had the plan that I was going to go into farming. I went to University to do biomedical science and then, as I was finishing, Dad was having an operation. I did the milking for the last few months before he gave up milking. I worked in the hospital for six months but it was only a part-time job so I was looking for extra work. A dairy farm nearby was looking for someone and so I got a job there, and I've never looked back. I do quite a bit of relief milking - I do three milkings at one farm and on average about six at another, each week. It used to be three afternoons a week, but it is just two at the moment, and I just do whatever is going on, walling or whatever. Sometimes, I end up doing more. And then there is another farm where I help out quite a bit - I have a quite a few jobs. It suits me well.'

Changes in gathering on Ingleborough

Malcolm: 'The problem with Gather Days now, with being less and less people up there, we have to spread out further and you don't want too many people missing, as it gets harder. I can remember twice as many people up Ingleborough on Gather Days, and twice as many sheep.'

Louise: 'It didn't matter being twice as many sheep as long as you have the people: it's the space in between. If you are covering a massive amount with a few sheep, it is still hard work because you've got to go round. Then once they are going down, it doesn't matter whether you have two hundred sheep or a thousand.'

Malcolm: 'I just do transport now, taking people up in the Land Rover. I couldn't walk to the top; well I could but it would take me a long while. We employ Chris. I pay for him to come on Gather Days because he has two good dogs, he knows the land, it helps a lot. The less people you have on there, the more critical it is to have people with good dogs.'

On grips: changes on the fell

Malcom. 'There used to be grips. I can remember them being made: gullies to get water off quicker, which was fine but it took it too quick, I think. I can remember soon after they had done it, the beck at Clapham used to become black & trapped with a lot of peat. They filled the grips in a few years ago.'

Numbers of visitors to Ingleborough

Malcolm: 'That has changed: there are a lot more who walk up over Ingleborough than used to, and there's the Three Peaks Walk. We're under Ingleborough, though, you cannot see it.'

Louise: 'My friend has done the Three Peaks several times and she has said last time she went, it was absolutely horrendous, you couldn't walk, you couldn't get anywhere, you couldn't pass anybody. You can't believe the number of people up there, it was like walking through a city.'

Malcolm: 'Yes, they have to make paths and put slabs down. It was wearing; it still is on one stretch because peat has been worn away and rain washes peat off. The National Park has spent quite a bit of money renovating paths and tracks.'

Do you think that people, not just general public or tourists but locals as well, have an understanding what Commons do, what Commons are all about?

Malcolm: 'Probably not, No. Commons now are free for people to wander anywhere - they probably think that's what they are.'

Louise: 'On a scale of 1 to 10: 1!'

On payment for public goods

Malcolm: 'On Ingleborough, it probably will get to the stage that you will get paid to protect the environment: because otherwise you wouldn't really farm it, I don't think, how things are at the moment. Unless you got paid, some sort of rewards.'

Louise: 'Like you say, it has to change, and having sheep on there is less and less worthwhile anyway.'

Malcolm: 'A lot of people say you could take sheep off all together. Then what would happen? It would become scrub land. Grass would grow, keep growing, then dying back. Then you could see a lot of dead grass and in a good dry spell it's tinder dry, and burns.'

'It was overgrazed at one time. The danger is that it will go the other way and be under-grazed. It will create other problems. If you don't graze it, then you get more weeds taking over. Whether it would be a good or bad thing, I don't know.'

In 20 years' time, if you could imagine ahead, do you think will there be the same number of graziers using the Fell?

Both: ' I think there will be less.'

Malcolm: S'ome graziers there now are well past retirement age because there is nobody in the family that wants to take over. So when they pass away, I presume the flock will be disbanded.'

Malcolm: 'I've always looked upon Ingleborough as being part of our farm and system and I think it always will be.'

Schemes and paying non-graziers

Malcolm: 'If you pay them that aren't putting sheep on - and I think there is one scheme where you can get something like that - if they get just as much as those who are putting sheep up, you think Why bother? If I get more money for not putting sheep up at all, what's the point of putting any up?'

'We have an agreement on Ingleborough, which is joint agreement with all commoners, but our land is in between lowland and top land. So there is no scheme on this land - it is not like land that you might want to let heather grow or anything like that. We have had basic level scheme for walling and keeping it managed, but you can't put this land into major schemes. I just get Single Farm Payment, that's probably about it. We do paid a bit for Ingleborough but apart from that, what we earn off the land is what we get.'

Louise: 'I know some hill farms that are in loads of schemes. They get paid a fortune for not really doing anything on what's awful land anyway. If your sheep aren't making much money you would maybe not be as willing to farm it anyway, so that's a natural progression, yet they are being paid to not put sheep on. There's some people at the bottom who are working hard and not making a lot of money, and there's some people at the top that are getting a fortune for not doing a lot. It's an imbalance.'

'It's the people right at the top, sometimes, that miss big things. We went to a meeting about the new schemes, and they say they want to pay farmers to look after the environment and they want to make food cheaper. You can't have farmers looking after the environment and producing more to make food cheaper. You can't do both at the same time. Either you look after your environment or you push productivity, don't you?'

And when you said that on a scale of 1-10, the public's awareness was about 1, if you had a wish list, how would you like that to change, would you like to be involved in that in any way?

Louise: 'I haven't thought about it very much. There is a lot of bad publicity out there that distorts. You get the worst farmers who are doing bad things and that all gets publicised. There is not as much about the majority of people who are doing right.'

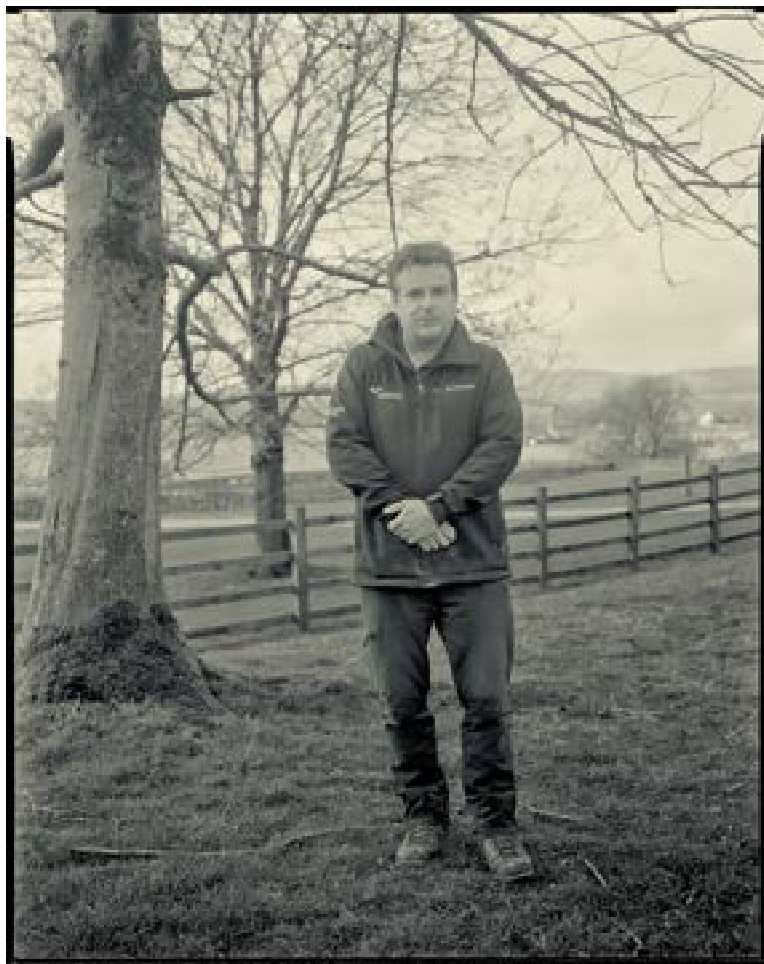
Learning and Training

Both find the Sheep Package useful, and learning from the vet, for instance about changes in worming routines. Louise is interested in training opportunities, and is beginning to go to more meetings.

On preferring to walk and the value of a quad bike
Malcolm: 'I prefer to go round with Land Rover, park up,

and just walk round. It's good exercise. When I've had a walk round and got back, I feel a lot better for it. A quad bike would get round it a lot quicker, but I sometimes think, when you walk quietly you see problems better because you are not rushing round. A lot of hill farms, with the size and scale of them, you have to have a quad bike to get about. Once upon a time, we used to call hill farmers lean and mean but now they call them mean because they've all got quad bikes and are not lean anymore! They are not as healthy as they used to be because they don't do the same amount of walking.'

December 6, 2018



Phil Richards

Area Ranger, Wharfedale & Littondale, Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority

Phil has worked with the YDNPA – the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority – for 'a very long time' and since 2000 has also been Secretary for the Grassington Moor Management Association. The Association is made up of the graziers, people with sporting interests, local parish councils and the national park authority – Phil represents the authority under Section 9 of the Commons act – to make sure nothing untowards happens, no damage, and as secretary his role is much more about bringing people together – arranging meetings, doing the background work.

Phil was born here and has always loved the countryside, right back to when he was a small child. Among his recollections of time on the moor, he talks about cutting peat and stacking it to dry – something that's hardly done any more.

On Grassington Moor not being owned, and the formation of the management association

'Grassington Moor is relatively unique in the fact that it doesn't actually have an owner.' This was discovered in the 1980s when no evidence was found to support legal ownership by the people who at the time were the perceived owners.

'Getting people together, through the management association, is really important. It's about trying to work together and getting a consensus on anything that is undertaken related to the management of the moor. There's the grazing, there's the access issues, there's the sporting interests.'

'There are always frank and honest discussions about issues. Of course like with anything in life, some people agree with certain things, some people disagree, but I would say generally we work together pretty well and all have the common aim of in terms of protecting the moor.'

Relationships between Phil (YDNPA) and the game keeping estate.

'We have a very good working relationship. I think that's great, and it's really important: on a personal level, and in terms of the Moor and trying to manage it properly. We do sometimes have different views on things – we're

bound to do, we all have our own interests – but, you know, in order to progress things and move forward it's important that we work closely together and that there's an understanding between people.'

Relationship between Phil (YDNPA) and graziers

'In terms of my relationship with the graziers, it's great. I was born just a couple of miles down the road, so the graziers are people I've grown up with, I know them very well.'

Thinking about the future of the common in terms of graziers

'I keep using this word 'balance' and it's about getting that balance in terms of the different aspects regarding managing the moor, whether it's for sporting rights, whether it's for grazing. It's hard to say, in future, what the level of grazing may be up there.'

Do you think that grazing is an essential part of managing the moor?

'Yes, of course. It has to be. I'm sure that George {the C&G Estate gamekeeper} would feel the same in terms of what they're trying to achieve up there: there has to be a level of managed grazing.'

Environmental condition, habitats, birds, and the importance of working together

'And there's the conservation aspect of the moor, and how it's looked after from that point of view. This includes wild birds like merlin, curlew, plover. And Ring ouzel – wonderful birds, but they're declining. You used to see lots, on Hebden Moor, certainly on the edges of the moor, but you very rarely see them now.'

'Nationally there has been a big decline in curlew, and lapwing, and other ground nesting birds but I think generally the numbers are stable at the moment, we're doing quite well when compared to some other areas. But these are important birds, and management of that moor comes back to people working together – if you work as individuals, you never achieve anything, it just never happens. Working together is crucial.'

Do you think the commoning system is essential to this working together?

'I do, but there has to be a willingness for people to continue to do that.'

'It's interesting, where farming and agriculture is going. Because the farmers are an integral part of that, and if farming disappears or it's reduced for whatever reasons, that may be a big threat to how commons are managed in the future.'

If the commoning system were to break down, what would be lost?

'The loss could be many things. Ecologically, if a chain is broken, the impact can go right down the line, so it can have an impact on the nesting birds, the landscape itself – if it isn't managed, what does it become? Some of it becomes scrub, that type of thing. If there's no involvement from people managing it you could end up with an entirely different landscape. Then of course there's the other threats that we haven't talked about: whether we like it or not, it seems very clear that climate change is now here with us and for Grassington Moor along with many other commons, the blanket bogs, the peat moorlands, they're really important, and it's important to maintain them.'

Level of understanding about commons

'I would say that your general public would have very little idea about what common land is, what it relates to, and its history – and that would include local people as well, people who've lived here all their lives would have little idea about common land, some of the complexities behind it, and the uses of it.'

'I think it's very important that people understand. What you would hope is that while people are up there, they can build a relationship with that landscape, rather than, for example, just going for a walk, and seeing this as just another moorland. To have knowledge is a great thing. It links things together. It's easy to look at things in isolation but to look at the uses in the past and understand how the moor is managed now by the people who have sporting rights, and the graziers, is an integral part of the future of the moor and people living and working with it.'

How do you feel when you're out there? Landscape and the making of people

'It's a wonderful feeling, it's something that's always been very close to me and my way of thinking. It sounds a bit clichéd, but you're very privileged to put something back into what is a wonderful landscape, part of the Dales. I never take it for granted. Each day you can look at the landscape and it looks very different.'

'It can be snowing, it can be windy, it can be lashing it down, but that's part of the character of the Dales and part of the character of the landscape, you know. And that can make people as well.'

Education

'If people don't know about something, how are they ever going to become interested in it? I think it's really important that we do give a message out, and look at how we promote the work that's carrying on up there, that's gone on for many years and hopefully will continue to go on. The way we promote that is really important, so at least people have an opportunity to be able to understand it.'

'It's about educating people. And of course, like anything in life, there'll be some people who aren't interested – but give people that opportunity to begin with, because you miss a trick otherwise.'

Considering the way people work together, and the benefits of Our Common Cause.

'I think it's important for people to continue working together and I think this project, in itself, is really good. The feedback that I'm getting is really positive.'

'I think it's important because it's getting something that actually, physically, you can do on the moor, whether it be restoring some of the lead remains, whether it's some bracken control, draining on the moor, those type of things – work that is going to benefit the moor. I can understand some of the frustrations in the past when there's been quite a lot of talk about what we might be achieved up there, and nothing has ever happened. I do think now there's an opportunity, certainly with this project, to put some money into actually achieving some of those objectives that are needed on the moor. Hopefully this project will be successful in obtaining the funding, but equally important is telling that story so people understand what it's all about.'

'The common's been there for hundreds and hundreds of years, and it will be there for many years to come. It is important that the next generations understand that. I think far too many times we can do something, just for one point in time, but for me it needs to have a long lasting legacy, it's vital.'

On grazing animals as part of the management of the moor

'Farming is an integral part of the Dales. Wherever funding goes in terms of the future for farming, it's vitally important that they are supported in continuing to do the work, in looking after the Dales, looking after the commons. Things will change, they have to change, there's no doubt about that, but we've got to have farmers on board, it's really, really important.'

5 March, 2019

John Metcalfe

Manor House Farm, Ingleton

John is a fourth generation farmer. Prior to returning to Manor House, where he was born, he spent twenty years working as a chartered surveyor, living away. He keeps Swaledale sheep, some of which are bred for Mules, and a number of rare breeds, and has grazing rights on Scales Moor Common. The family milked cows until the 1960s, when bulk tank collections were introduced; John now keeps a small herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle. John is a member of The Farming and Land Management Forum at the Yorkshire Dales National Park, is a Chairman of the Federation of Yorkshire Commoners, and Chair of the Parish Council.

With reference to Our Common cause, John was consulted about the project, through his involvement with the Federation of Yorkshire Commoners.

'I had my doubts about the project because I could see it as a little bit like all these Heritage Lottery funded projects where the people who the project was designed to help don't see a lot of money at the end of it. I happen to think that with the Common Cause project, I was wrong. The project would appear to be using places like Ingleborough and Brant Fell to demonstrate to the powers that be in Westminster and Whitehall, common land does matter. And I think that if the project does what it's set out to do and feeds back the information that you and your colleagues are collecting then I think that would be a really good thing.'

'It's a little bit like having a lobbying voice in Whitehall. If for no other reason there will be a piece of information, say 200 pages thick, which will be put in front of MPs, to say that's this is what we've learnt from the Common Cause project, and that's the help that the farmers need, and that's the help that the public need. It's all going to be about education: that's where I think this is going to go - we need to educate the farmers to deal with the public, and the public to understand the farmers in the uplands. I'd like to think that's what's going to come out of this.'

'I could show you our old minute book. We used to hire a shepherd. Every common used to hire a shepherd, and that shepherd would probably work for four or five different commons. That is a skill, running three or four hill dogs on different commons, keeping the sheep heafed. That's the kind of thing you think, that would be

great. But there just isn't the skill level out there, and the problem with the project is, in three years' time the project comes to an end. Whatever money we might have been able to devote to hiring somebody to do that, the farmers would then have to take on, and they won't.'

Perhaps training for shepherds, and financial support for them, could be written into future schemes?

'That's another outcome I'd like to see under this project – the general public have a right to roam on open access land but it does not give their dog a right ….' He talks about the need for a dog to be under close control i.e. six-feet from the owners, or on a lead. He says a lot of people allow their dogs to worry sheep. 'We probably have 3 or 4 abortions a year that I can't account for. Probably because they've been chased by somebody's dog, or stressed by a dog that's running around.'

'People shouldn't need reminding, but they do. I bet if you went into 95% of schools in this country and asked them what the Countryside Code is, they wouldn't know. If we're going to get this back to the ministers, and ministers are going to make decisions, I'd like there to be a reminder to the general public of their rights under the Act.' {ref Right To Roam Act}

John is very keen that there is useful signage on visitor paths in the area to inform people about the commons, and encourage them to stick to paths and to keep dogs under control.

Concerns about Brexit

'We're probably going to be farming rare breeds and trees in 20 years' time and if we get a No Deal Brexit, then 40% of hill farmers will go out of business. There will be no market for the upland lamb. The lightweight lamb, it's a staple diet in Spain, Greece and Turkey, and they can't produce it in the numbers they need to feed their population. It's not a staple diet in this country. So if we have a No Deal Brexit, we'd be looking at dramatic change in upland farming.'

'I don't think the commoning system will break down but what you would see is ranching. At the moment, with a 250-300 acre farm, I can walk round it and maintain my own boundaries. In years to come, the boundaries will move to bigger fields, as they have done with the arable enterprises. In a Dale, where there are 5 active farmers with Rights on the Common, there may only be 1 or 2 in 20 years' time.'

'It is all about Community. If we lose the farming enterprises, we lose the spirit of the Community. Now Chapel Le Dale; if there were only 2 or 3 farms in the Dale, the community spirit would go. It is not as bad as it has got in the Lake District, where there are so many second homes, but people move into the area with no attachment to the countryside: they are simply moving into an environment that is there and they are enjoying it, which is great, but it would be even nicer were our own families to be able to stay here and enjoy the countryside and look after it. But most families will tell you their children, the next generation, cannot afford to live here because a) the properties are too expensive, and b) the work is not there.'

Manor House and on the common – past and present

'I was involved in the farm all my childhood, from being a toddler sitting on the tractor, to bottle-feeding lambs to catching sheep in my early primary school years and then spending weekends at home from school & college. It was in my blood.'

'We lamb just short of 400 sheep and we keep a small herd of pedigree Aberdeen Angus cattle. We still have 8 Shetland sheep. Every 2-3 years, I've got to buy a Shetland tup. I can trace their ancestry back to my Mother's first purchases. We also have a little flock of a dozen Herdwick Sheep. That was my Father's interest. I always remember going with him to buy the first ones. Again it would be 1969-1970. We went to a chap called Teddy Tyson, who was Beatrix Potter's shepherd, and these sheep came from Beatrix Potter's flock.'

'In the late 19th Century there were possibly 15 or 16 graziers on the Common. There are now only 4 of us. It is not unlike the farms in the Dale: there are now possibly about 6, whereas there would have been 20-25 back in 1900.'

'Having started when Manor House was 91 acres and fell rights, now we farm three times as many acres and fell rights. I farm by myself. I have help for tasks on the farm and on occasions I get contractors in. Mostly, though, it is down to me. We have a 300-year-old Grade 2 listed house, we have five SSSI's and two Scheduled Ancient Monuments on the farm, and on a bank holiday weekend, we get 5,000 visitors across one of our fields.'

'Our daughters were brought up here and their attachment to the house, the farm, the countryside around here. I think we are fairly reassured that they will be here but it will be farming in another way. Much the same, as probably I did, working part-time. But who knows, in the same way that through your new phone you can control your lights and your security and your house, they may be out doing their office job or whatever they are doing and have a robot or a drone that is checking their cattle and the sheep, or releasing feed for them. Who knows? It would be a shame. Going

back to my father's generation, he knew every sheep on the farm virtually by name. I don't. I recognise about 10% of them. One neighbour, he farms 1000 sheep, he recognises them all, and he is my generation. I think that is fantastic.'

Looking at the environment that the farmers are part of, have there been changes over the last 20-30 years in habitat, condition of the land, that you are aware of, what changes have you noticed?

'Thirty years ago, we probably had a big flock of lapwings that visited regularly in the Spring. If we see a pair now, that's it. I'd like to think that we've still got the same environment to welcome wild species that we always have had. The one thing that maybe has changed in terms of farming which possibly has impacted and that is the livestock that we keep now are so much bigger. It doesn't matter whether it is a sheep or cow or pig, everything is bigger than it was 20-30 years ago. If I take you into the old shippon and I show you the stalls where we used to tie the cows up; my cows wouldn't even go in there now. Two of them wouldn't even fit through the door. Dairy cattle, the same. You might keep the same numbers of sheep on the fell, but they are bigger, longer animals, so they are grazing more than they were 20-30 years ago. Having said that, because of the arrangement we have on our Common and on Ingleborough, there are less animals there. We are seeing the return of some heather. We've seen areas of the limestone pavement on Ingleborough and on Scales Moor which is now overgrown with grass. Which is no bad thing, we are gaining grazing and the limestone pavement is still there; it is just protected beneath the turf now.'

'I don't want to blame the visitors, but I do think the Countryside and Rights of Way Act was ill-thought out. It has given people a Right to walk all over the Commons where we had 50-60 nesting pairs of skylarks, on our Common. In the Spring and you could go up there and it was fabulous. You could sit on a rock and listen to them and watch them. Now we've got 15-20 pairs of skylarks. I don't think that's down to the grazing, I think it is down to sheer numbers of visitors.'

What do you think public perception is of change in wildlife and habitats?

'They are laying the blame at farmers' door, mostly, because they are told farming methods have changed and it has impacted on wildlife. And that is what they are told, constantly. But it is not true. The farming methods have changed, sure, but we're looking after the environment, that's why we do this job, because we enjoy the environment we live in, so we are not here to spoil it.'

Relationships with Natural England and other organisations

'Natural England staff, like the staff in many big organisations, move on. There's a guy based at the Natural England site at Ribblehead, who has been with them quite some time now; but almost all the rest of the staff at Natural England keep moving on.'

'It's not all down to the staff. Some of it is down to Brexit, because they have been allocating staff from Natural England to other duties, and some of it is down to the fact that they are transferring a lot Natural England staff across to the RPA (Rural Payments Agency). And those RPA staff are coming out of universities and colleges with degrees. They believe they know what is good for the countryside and spend no time out here. The number of times, I've said to people at the RPA, DEFRA, you want to know what's going on, you come and see me. I'm happy to take you round my farm. Nobody has ever come here. Sometimes, these organisations just need to come out and spend time with the farmer and realise that we actually do have the best interests of the countryside at heart. We are not here just to make money out of farming; otherwise we all would have stopped years ago. A lot of it is that we are doing it for the love of it.'

On farmers being heard in wider discussions

'What's happened, particularly in the last five years, is there are more farming groups. At one time it was just the National Farmers' Union; now you have the Northern Upland Alliance or Northern Upland Farms Group, the Foundation of Common Land, Yorkshire, Cumbria,and Dartmoor Federations of Commoners. You've got the Tenant Farmers Association, National Sheep Association, National Beef Association. They're all in some way represented on committees in London. But the people who shout the loudest are people like the Open Spaces Society, and the RSPB: the organisations who are really looking after the interests of 'Joe Public' in farming, as opposed to those who are looking after the interests of farmers in farming. They think they know best because the Open Space Society walks around farmland and sees what's going on. But they don't stop and talk to the farmer who actually does the job.'

'One of the biggest issues with farmers is time. All these meetings, even teleconferences, I find it difficult, with meetings usually in the middle of the day. Invariably they take place when there is something more important to do on the farm. We are fortunate in that there are some really good farmers who have sons coming along and who are running the farm enterprise for them and they are able to devote some time to getting involved.'

February 21, 2019

Robert and Joanne Stockdale

Ranelands Farm, Hebden

Ranelands Farm has been in the family for 200 years. Robert is the 6th generation to farm here. It encompasses 700 hectares (150 of which is 'good') plus rights to graze on the common, only 60 of which Robert rates as good. The farm has land in Conistone, Grassington, Hebden and Hartlington parishes, much of which borders the bottom end of Grassington Common. It supports Around 700 Swaledales, which are mainly bred for replacements and some go to the Leicesters to breed mules. Ranelands has rights on the common for 119, plus another 70 granted to the Stockdales by the shooting estate.

The farm has around 40 Aberdeen Angus, which go to Dovecote Park abattoir in Pontefract and from there to Waitrose; a scheme that began in 2001 post Foot & Mouth (Prior to this the Stockdales kept Charolais). The cattle are not on the common, but do well on the rough walled in land.

The Stockdales are aiming to go into a farm-based Countryside Stewardship scheme, not a scheme in collaboration with other commoners/rights holders. When we spoke they were awaiting confirmation of the next 10-year scheme.

Quotes from Robert except where Joanne is marked

Changes in numbers of sheep on the common

'The common is becoming less important as a management tool. Less and less sheep have been put on that common in my lifetime of farming. Most are in the enclosures – it is fenced moorland, it's rough. Twenty, thirty years ago the sheep would be out now, perhaps until end of January, depending on how bad the winter was. Nobody puts sheep out with lambs or hoggs any more in Spring; partly because they just don't come back - they just disappear, we don't know where. (Robert talks of a time a few years ago when between them, he and his neighbour lost around 50 sheep – and this year has been 'quite good' with only 10 missing). Effectively, I use the common from summer until tupping time.'

'When I first started there would be six or seven different people with sheep on that Moor. Now there are three.'

'It is almost not stocked enough, I would say, at certain times of year. I cannot say that it looks different or I've noticed – it's just a general feel. Does it get more

overgrown? – possibly. The sheep don't thrive up there anyway. It's such poor land.'

Changes in the local community

'With another hat on, I am a school governor. Pupil numbers in Burnsall have gone from 60, when my kids were there 10 years ago, to 20. The school is under threat. We now have a federation of four schools in Wharfedale to try and make budgets balance. So you could say perhaps the decline in farming has had an influence on that, but the bigger influence is young people not being able to stay in the area. The cost of housing is the big thing - £650,000 in Hebden for a decent sized house. That's what young people are up against.'

Increase in tick problem

'When I first started, I'd never seen a tick. Now, I see them regularly. A couple of years ago sheep got tick fever and quite a few died. Maybe the weather has something to do with it, mild winters. Possibly the biggest thing is that compulsory dipping has stopped.'

On wanting to farm

The Stockdales have a son who has trained and worked in joinery, but really wants to farm and will probably come back to that. They are pleased he has gone away and tried something else before committing to farming.

'I did an agricultural degree. I think a University education encourages you to be able to think for yourself. It isn't actually what you learn, it's the fact that you have the confidence to look at something. If a salesman comes here you can ask questions, you've a bit more knowledge to judge whether they are just trying to flog you something or whether it will do the job. Yes, it helps my critical thinking. You do need to be creative; you've always got to look at what you are doing, and new, easier ways of doing things.'

Talking about Tom using the common as part of his active grazing:

'I think he will. He's quite happy to go up there with his dog and he goes beating up there on shooting days. But a lot of people don't want to do it. It's hard work and it is very unproductive. It's a lot of effort for not a lot of gain.'

Joanne on enjoying farming: 'I'm also a part-time nurse at Airedale (General Hospital). But farming is a way of life - you don't do it for money. It's wonderful. It is surprising when I talk to the girls at work about stuff we do on the farm, I realise how little people who don't farm or live outside the area know. One of the consultants asked me about milking the cows and I said, we don't milk our cows. He said he thought all cows were milked. No, I said, they are beef cattle. He said, 'But don't they have milk?' I was trying to explain.'

Mosaic of habitats

'On my bit of the moor which borders Grassington, there is a lot of peat restoration going on, grip blocking. Managing land for breeding waders involves mainly rush control - creating a patchwork and mosaic. Up to now, I've tended to go and spray, in strips. Rushes will come back, maybe not so dense, in 3, 4, 5 years, and then you can spray them again. I have sprayed up to now because some of these fields haven't been in the scheme. Next year I'll have to revise, maybe a bit of cutting if I cannot spray.'

Getting a scheme agreed – relationship with Natural England

'I found them fairly good, really. They can be quite helpful. The old schemes, Natural England ran them and you had a bit more leeway. This year it is run by DEFRA and it is 'black & white'. They are a lot more rigid. If I miss a deadline, I wouldn't be in the scheme, but they don't have their own deadlines to work to. But that's the way it is.'

On sharing management of the common with the shooting estate
(In the context of getting on better with the estate manager in place now; previously there were some difficulties).

'There's always been a bit of friction between gamekeepers and farmers because they want different things. It particularly comes down to the amount of heather and the number of sheep on that land, particularly in winter.'

'I guess they maintain the tracks a bit, which is helpful but the land itself ... even if you are a sheep farmer you have to still burn heather. A farmer would burn a big area of heather whereas a shooter would just burn little strips.'

Looking ahead, post Brexit

'I think the trend, up to this point, will continue as old farmers retire and there will be less people taking it on. Will the British Government support hill farmers? No, not for production. It will support uplands for carbon, water storage, sphagnum moss and that sort of stuff but I don't think it will support farmers for production. I think there will be less money for uplands. But I'm hoping this sort of land will attract payments because of

the breeding waders, SSSIs, water and carbon, the peat moorlands, blanket bog.'

'I think we've got to accept that this Government are not actually interested in trying to get maximum production out of every area acre of land. It will be more about how we keep biodiversity rather than creating big monocultures of heather moorland. There has to be more variety, but I don't think that has to be to the exclusion of sheep and farming - I think there is a happy medium somewhere. A lot of problems arose from the Headage Payment and the land was overstocked at certain times. But they have got to be careful not to go too far the other way. I can foresee, maybe 10-20 years' time, there will be payments for grazing sheep on this land. In the late 70's on Grassington Moor, they were paid to grip it; now there's money for blocking grips.'

Being heard

Do you think your opinion is heard, on how things are run, keeping certain levels of stock?

'Probably not. I don't think people listen, No.'

Would you want to take part in conversations more?

'I just think a lot of this stuff is all talk, it's just talking. I don't know how many people are listening. It's about devolving power to the people who actually live in the areas. Not just power, but the voice too - but then the people who are making the decisions have to actually listen.'

Robert:'I would never say I know everything.'

Joanne: 'But I think because you live and you work in the area and you farm there, there has to be a voice from that side of it. People on these committees, half of them haven't got a clue about what it's actually like.'

Robert: 'We should, as farmers, as residents of this area, be prepared to speak and champion what we think. But then we'd be up against, for example, the re-wilding group. And it seems to be that they think they have the upper moral ground, somehow, because they are champions of the natural world. I feel it is always reported like that on the news. Farmers are always been seen as against wildlife, against animals or the environment. It's not accurate.'

Level of awareness among the public

'Very little awareness, I would say. I think more and more people nowadays are more than one generation removed from the land and don't have a clue about what goes on in the countryside.'

Joanne: 'I'm quite happy for people to come and have a look. It's very important, as farmers, to engage with people. We have a footpath through the farm and when people come, I always make a point of being friendly to them because I think a lot of walkers think farmers are curmudgeons, 'get off my land' sort of thing. They can be quite shocked when I speak to them. I always go out of my way to say 'Hello'. At lambing time we'll say to kids 'Would you like to come and look at the pet lambs?' they absolutely love it. They'll remember that.'

What is it that you love about farming makes you smile?

'I think just being outside, being with nature.'

Joanne: 'We often discuss this. If I'm at work and it is stressful, the minute I turn off to come home, I can feel everything calm down. We don't go away very often. It's about being happy where you are, it isn't about the possessions you have. I think it comes from being outside every day, and other things relying on you to look after them. It is just a really happy balance in life.'

Although there are stressful moments that Robert talks about, he says usually it's a good balance. 'The type of land that we farm is very unproductive but to be fair it has attracted good environmental payments over the last ten years and we have done alright. Not least because we own most of our land - I am lucky and I do appreciate that. Some people are not in that position.'

Joanne: 'But logistically it is difficult when the bad weather comes and you have to trail up there. I can leave Airedale and go through three different weathers before I get home. My Mum and Dad live in Skipton and they always say it is two coats colder up here and when you go up to the top land it is a different world. A few years ago when the snow was bad, we managed to get the tractor up there and then walk with bales of hay on our backs for another half a mile or so to feed sheep - you don't want to be doing that so many days. But I wouldn't swap it for the world.'

January 26, 2019

George Hare

Gamekeeper C&G Estates, Grassington

George Hare works with C&G Estates, which has shooting rights on Grassington Common, and is involved in Grassington Moor Management Association alongside graziers and representatives from local parish councils and the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority. George is relatively new to the position.

At his request, this interview was conducted via email, using written questions and answers, which are shared below.

C&G Estates and Grassington Common

From the point of view of C&G Estates, what is the historic involvement with this common?

The current management has only been involved with Grassington common for around 2 years, although we have data such as shoot records dating back to the late 1800s / early 1900s. The shooting on Grassington moor was originally ran separately to Conistone moor. I believe in the 1980s the family that ran the shoot at Kilnsey and also had the grouse shooting on Conistone moor took on the shooting on Grassington and the 2 moors have been shot together since.

With reference to Grassington Common, what changes have there been in the last 20-30 years? This may be in terms of who uses, manages, or is involved in management/use of the common; or in terms of agri-environment schemes affecting use.

Other than 2 changes in ownership of the shooting rights, little will have changed in a great way. A change in shoot management in 2006 bought a lot of fresh investment and an increase in gamekeeping efforts. Since then, ongoing investment and hard work has led to an increase in wildlife as well as grouse numbers. I would guess there may have been an increase in tourism on the moor when the 'lead mine trail' was established as a lot of visitors to the moor follow the trail. I also believe there is less active graziers than there will have been 20-30 years ago.

In what way has the environmental condition of the common changed, if at all, in the last 20-30 years?

As I have not been here long enough I don't know for certain but I don't believe much will have changed environmentally in that short a period. The southern half of the common will have historically been heather moorland but since the mining began this will have turned to grassland, and due to sheep pressuring more of the southern part of the moor no longer has good heather coverage. Although we are working with graziers to try and rectify this.

Are there archaeological features on the common and if so, in what way does the estate's management practices bring these (preservation/visibility) into consideration?

Much of the southern half of the common is covered in historic lead mines, spoil heaps and buildings. This is all protected as a scheduled monument therefore we have to be careful not to damage any of it. Luckily nearly all of our work is carried out to the north of this area so it causes very little problem to us.

Valuing uplands and common land in particular

What is the value of having common land in the uplands, would you say, in terms of the environment and social cohesion? You may perceive positive as well as negative aspects to the system.

In years gone by it may have been valued more by the local community, but as there is fewer active graziers now, and so much more of the countryside is open access, people probably don't know what common land is.

Gamekeeping

What attracted you to the role of gamekeeper?

I have been gamekeeping from a very young age, I was bought up around shooting and gamekeeping, studied it at college and have only ever worked as a gamekeeper. Taking the role of head gamekeeper on Conistone and Grassington was a natural progression from the role that I was previously in and it is a great opportunity to continue and improve the work that has previously gone on here. It is also a beautiful area of the country to live and work in.

Can you describe what you feel when you're out on the common?

Grassington common has 2 very different side to it. On the southern end, it has a very industrial feel due to the historic lead mining. There is often a lot of members of the public, hill walkers etc. on the southern part and it is much more easily accessed. Whereas the northern part of the common is higher, heather covered moorland and

is a lot more wild. Up there I feel more secluded and at home.

How do the land management practices associated with a shooting estate impact on the environment (e.g. habitats, diversity of bird species, soil quality)?

The main land management practices associated with the shooting estate are habitat management in the form of heather burning and predator control. Both of these practices benefit the overall biodiversity of the area hugely. Heather burning creates a mosaic effect of heather in different heights and ages. Young, fresh shoots of heather providing better food for both grouse and sheep, with the longer, older heather providing nesting cover, protection and food during periods of deep snow.

Due to the mixture of ages of heather on the higher ground and the wetter grass/heather mix on the lower ground, not only does this benefit the red grouse, but we also have a large number of struggling birds species, many of which are 'red listed' birds, such as golden plover, merlin, lapwing, curlew, oystercatcher, grey partridge, red shank, black grouse. The vast majority of these birds successfully breed here due to the legal predator control that we carry out. We also provide feed for the grey partridges, which is also taken by song birds, around the edges of the moor. This is done purely as a conservation practice rather than to provide any shooting benefit.

In what way, if any, is gamekeeping integrated with a culture of grazing on common land? Where the two co-exist, what are the benefits and disadvantages from the point of view of gamekeeping?

In the past, there has been tension between sheep grazing and gamekeeping on common land. Fortunately most of the time, the two parties can work hand in hand. One advantage to the shooting estate that sheep grazing brings is tick control. Controlling ticks on the sheep by way of dipping or drenching is by far the most effective way to ensure tick numbers on the moor are kept to a minimum. One disadvantage of grazing on common land is when the ground is grazed too heavily, resulting in the over-grazing of heather. This is more problematic on common ground where there is multiple graziers that may have different views on how the common should be grazed.

What key changes have there been in gamekeeping in the last 20-30 years, if any, in response to environmental, political and social change?

Environmentally, not a huge amount has changed. Advances in equipment, more investment and industry training/codes of practice means that heather burning is much more controlled than it has been in the past, both physically and legislatively. The blocking of grips (drainage ditches) that were mainly dug in the 50s and 60s to increase sheep production are now being blocked in many areas (although currently not on Grassington) to stop the drainage and to retain water on the moor, mainly to benefit sphagnum moss and the overall carbon storage of the moor.

One of the biggest changes socially in the past 20-30 years is in the attitude of gamekeepers and what we do. Due to social media, wider news coverage of moorland management etc, gamekeepers can no longer shy away and keep quiet about what we do. Many gamekeepers now feel we need to tell people what we do and explain the huge benefits that moorland management brings to the countryside. In recent years, the formation of regional moorland groups (Yorkshire Dales Moorland Group) are a way of trying to create positive PR and show the general public, many of which know nothing about moorland management, what role the gamekeeper plays in the countryside.

What appetite is there among the younger generation to take on gamekeeping as a career? And what level of support and training is there for this?

Gamekeeping is still a popular career for young, mainly rural, people to look into. It is obviously something that cannot be taught in a classroom, but there are land based colleges up and down the country offering both full time courses as well as apprenticeships in gamekeeping and game and wildlife management. Many gamekeepers and moorland managers understand the need to continually bring new people into the industry and when possible offer work placements to gamekeeping students.

Relationships and communication

How are your relationships with the commoners (both graziers and non-graziers)? Please let us know what opportunities there are to meet and discuss things (this may be schemes, or other matters); as well as ease or difficulty in communications.

My relationships with the commoners are good. We both have our separate roles on the moor, but can both benefit each other. We have a graziers association, chaired by a neutral party and have regular meetings to discuss any problems or on-going activities on the common.

As a shooting estate, what kind of communication do you have with other estates and/or gamekeepers in the Yorkshire Dales area (e.g. frequent, infrequent, in person, via letters)?

I am in regular contact with my neighbouring estates, due to work related reasons. We share seasonal staff during the shooting season and also help each other out when needs be, so it is vital to have good communication with each other. I also stay in contact with many further away estates, mainly via the regional moorland group (Yorkshire Dales Moorland Group) both socially and on events which we attend as a group to promote the benefits of moorland management.

How would you describe relationships with the National Park Authority and with other stakeholders, such as Natural England, the Wildlife Trusts, NFU, National Trust (whichever is relevant in your case).

Although new to the area, I have a very good relationship with the National Park Authority. I have had no dealings with any of the other local organisations.

To what extent do you think that existing systems of meetings and communication support or inhibit relationships between different user groups?

I feel that the current systems of direct communication between myself and the National Park Authority works very well. Although I think that may be due to the local staff being very easy to get on with. I have heard in different areas communication and relationships may not be as good.

Public perceptions

Among the 'general public' what would you say is the level of understanding about common land and commoning?

I would say the understanding is probably not great. I think most would just see the land as being owned by a farmer or the shooting estate.

Among the 'general public' how would you say gamekeeping is perceived?

Before working at Conistone and Grassington, I would have thought more of the general public looked at gamekeeping in a bad light, this was completely due to working in areas where I had little to no interaction with the general public and the fact that people against shooting have a stronger social media presence than we have.

Since moving to C&G I regularly speak to members of the public and the positive feedback massively outweighs any negative feedback I have received (which is nearly non-existent). This is another reason why we as an industry need to improve our PR front, and explain to the general public what we do, and the benefits we bring. Although not perfect, I believe moorland managed for grouse shooting offers the best habitat for the majority of ground nesting birds we find in the British uplands and there is science (provided by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust) to back it up.

Into the future

In the context of payment systems becoming a 'payment for Public Goods', what 'public good/s' does your method of management offer?

I think our method of management provides, during spring time, densities of breeding upland birds that is offered nearly nowhere else, other than on grouse moors.

What future do you see for grazing on Grassington Common and, more widely, in other upland areas?

I think there will always be a future for grazing on upland areas due to the low input method of farming involved. Although if the current subsidy/stewardship payments come to an end, I can see there being a major drop in farming in general in the uplands.

What future do you see for gamekeeping?

Providing we continue to promote the good side of gamekeeping and continue to improve on the not-so-good side, I see a strong future for gamekeeping. Gamekeepers are constantly learning and having to adapt to new codes of practice and legislation, so hopefully it carries on well, as the opposite result would not be good for upland birds.

What future do you envisage for the practice of commoning?

I think most farms stay in the family so I see a future for commoning, although as stated, if the farming subsidies stop, I can see a decline in upland farming.

What are your expectations of the future environmental state of Grassington common?

As long as there is good gamekeeping and farming practices, the environmental state of Grassington common should stay good or improve. I would love to see some of the southern area of the common restored back to heather moorland again, although this would be a costly regeneration project.

What, if any, support or training or opportunities might be useful to support improved relationships and better mutual understanding between different user groups on the common?

More signs and more importantly better understanding of dog walkers amongst the general public would help relationships between gamekeepers/graziers and the public, due to sheep worrying and ground nesting bird disturbance. Although I feel it is not a massive problem, but one which will never be fully resolved.

March 22, 2019

Pippa Merricks

Lead Adviser, Natural England Upland Peat Team

Pippa has worked in the Dales for twenty years and is now a lead adviser in the Upland Peat Team. Her experience is mainly in the northern part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, on commons surrounding Swaledale that are dominated by grouse shooting interests. Over the last ten years she has been working with groups of graziers, and trying to dovetail the needs of graziers and shooting interests with environmental priorities and get them into a position where they could benefit from HLS schemes / countryside stewardship schemes.

Emily has been in her role for the last year, as another lead adviser for the Uplands Peat team.

This is a partial transcript from a recorded telephone conversation.

Pippa, on her work with commoners

'It is quite complex as you can imagine. Before we had Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) schemes (which started around 10 years ago), we tended to have involvement with individual commoners and talk to them about ways that we might like individuals to manage their grazing on the moor, for instance to address a localised problem of grazing pressure. Or how we would like an estate to manage their activities on the moor, and we weren't at all talking collectively with people. Then with Environmental Stewardship, the HLS agreements worked in a very different way because it was based on a single agreement for a whole group of people.'

'To be honest, I don't think that was facilitated as it should have been. That wasn't really something that we had the luxury of the time to do, or the skills/experience to do. When we worked up the HLS agreements we had to very rapidly get some of these areas into agreement, due to various political pressures at the time. So we had to specify grazing levels, and what we wanted to see in terms of the burning management, and secure agreement for capital works such as grip blocking. We had to try to get everyone to agree on our proposals, which didn't feel very comfortable, but because there was quite a lot of money on the table, people did work together to try and make that work. We found that typically the graziers were particularly interested in trying to access the funding; some estates were more interested in not being restricted in terms of their shooting interests, and not always motivated by the financial element.'

'The other thing that's important to note is that where peat restoration capital works are needed as part of Higher Level Stewardship, or Countryside Stewardship, the only mechanism that we've had available is through these schemes which involve an agreement collectively with all parties. There are a lot of complexities associated with getting those agreements up and running; governance for commoners associations, internal commons agreements, land parcel registration, record keeping, issues with contracts for the peat works, overseeing the work and bankrolling the substantial costs.'

On the need for facilitation, from an independent person

'With Countryside Stewardship, it has become essential really for any group of commoners to have somebody to facilitate with them. It's not strictly a requirement of the scheme – the scheme just requires them to have a single named contact. Sometimes in the past, particularly with the HLS agreements, we've had farmers who've done it. They've seen it less as a facilitation role and more as the role of being the contact for the application, the person who receives the money and distributes it out.'

'I feel commons have got into quite a lot of difficulties with that because they haven't had an independent person facilitating. And the farmers don't necessarily have the time, the skills or the inclination to carry out that role. And if you're a farmer who's dealing with a grouse shooting interest who's maybe your landlord or a powerful presence in the area, that's potentially a difficult relationship anyway. I think having a separate person facilitating is critical.'

Division caused by schemes management – has there been any evidence of that?

'Yes, I think it can work, but there's a lot of potential for things to go wrong as well and for people to feel that it's not been done fairly. They may not have any recourse if they don't think it's been done fairly, especially if they're a small player within a group of commoners where others hold more power, through a much bigger share of commons rights, or as a landlord.'

'It worries me a lot that these agreements have the potential to cause tension or rifts in small communities where it's so important that people do get on for all sorts of reasons, not just for the sake of their business.'

Does what you think and find get fed forward to Michael Gove and the determination of new policies?

'A good question. I'm not aware of means by which that is being fed forward. I would hope it is but I don't know by what mechanism.'

Monitoring

'We are still charged with responsibility for going out and doing assessments, particularly where land is a SSSI, and it would be our job to go out and look at the condition of it. But it hasn't been top of the priority list for some time with the pressure on us as an organisation, with what we have to do and the staff numbers that we have. And anyway that's only part of it, going out to monitor vegetation; we're not really monitoring the effectiveness of the delivery of an agreement on a common. We'll sort the agreement out, breathe a massive sigh of relief that it gets signed, then the payments are claimed annually by the graziers. It is increasingly difficult for Natural England to maintain any overview of progress and effectiveness across all of the many agreements we have in place.'

Over the last 20 years what changes have you observed and monitored on the commons?

'We've modified grazing regimes on the assumptions that we were doing something that would benefit the environment and in some cases I've seen evidence that that has had an effect - normally a good effect. We've also done quite a lot in terms of capital works on peatland sites where grips have been blocked and there's visible evidence of the land rewetting and the vegetation changing in response to that, so that's good in terms of restoring blanket bog.'

'What's dictated where our work has been over the last few years has been where agreements are expiring … so less time than we would like is spent on monitoring and review of existing agreements.'

General public – would they appreciate what money goes towards?

I think so. But it comes down to the level of public understanding of what they're getting. At the moment, a lot of people who visit an area like the Yorkshire Dales are seeing a landscape, they're not necessarily understanding that landscape, or understanding the services that area can have the potential to provide for society. That's a very different idea.'

'We need a bit of both. If you look at upper Swaledale, people on the whole probably want to see that maintained as a hill farmed landscape, lots of dry stone walls and hay meadows, with open heather moorland. It's not necessarily an area where the public would support a move towards a more natural system, whereas there are other areas where I think they would. I'm interested in how much these things are compatible really. Something that hasn't really been explored – you can certainly restore the peatland areas with the right interventions and management, but that might ultimately make them much less suitable for farmers to graze sheep on if they were fully restored, which might in turn affect the inbye landscape and the viability of farms to survive. So whether people would be comfortable with all of that, I don't know. It's a complicated picture, and it is likely that there will be different overriding priorities and different solutions in different areas.'

How much contact is there between Natural England and staff from the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority?

Pippa says it's not an easy question to answer. The Yorkshire Area Team structure has changed to become thematic, around peatland, rivers etc. and the Peatland team, for instance, works across the whole of Yorkshire, approximately fifteen people spanning the north York moors and the south Pennines as well as the Yorkshire Dales. Most discussions are with moorland owners rather than with graziers. 'That's not because we're aiming to ignore the graziers, it's because our team's immediate priority is dealing with a legal situation to do with burning on blanket bog which is subject currently to an infraction case with the EU, and the people who hold the permission to do that burning are generally the estates. I'm acutely conscious that if the estates stop or modify their activities there will be implications for the graziers, but at the moment the estates are the main focus of our attention.'

'There are other people in other thematic teams who will be talking more to farmers rather than moorland owners, and our work on HLS and Countryside Stewardship delivery within YDNPA spans more than one team.'

Biodiversity on grouse moors and other species that benefit.

'There's quite a lot of evidence that the gamekeeping activities associated with grouse moor management means higher levels of wading birds and successful breeding among waders, curlew, golden plover etc. These species may struggle to persist in any numbers in areas where there's not active keeping going on. Obviously there's a lot of publicity around the fact that raptor numbers, birds of prey, are not present in anything like the numbers they should be, in areas like the Yorkshire Dales and the Peak District, so there's a lot of concern that grouse moor management activities are affecting these species.'

Looking into the future – 10, 20 years' time

'I think there is so much uncertainty at the moment, what a future environmental scheme might bring, how that might address the shortfall in funding for hill farmers, assuming that Brexit does go ahead and we have no Basic Payment Scheme in four or five years' time. There are so many things.'

'There is an intention to try and develop long term plans for moorland areas but ideally these plans should not just focus on shooting estates, but should also involve the graziers. To see 12 or 18 months ahead seems tough enough for farmers at the moment, so it is difficult to discuss long term objectives.'

Do you think that grazing sheep on the hills is a good thing to carry on, going forward?

'I do personally because I think some level of sheep grazing is inextricably tied up with maintaining communities, social communities in many hill areas. I think environmental and other priorities could be delivered more cost-effectively with many less sheep than are currently out there, but it all depends on how payments are structured and whether people and businesses can survive in financial terms with less livestock and/or different enterprises.'

How does it feel, what do you feel out on top of the commons?

'To me, in the Dales, it is that sense of history of the landscape. It's not just about 'wildness' and 'nature' it is about the history that goes with it. A lot of people will be aware of that in the back of their minds but perhaps don't really express it. It's not quite the same as being somewhere completely wild or remote, it's a different feeling. Somewhere like the top of Swaledale, you may be on top of the moor but you're still seeing a landscape that very much bears the marks of man's intervention when you look around you. I think that adds to it, rather than detracts from it.'

March 22 2019

'… management of the moor comes back to people working together – if you work as individuals, you never achieve anything. Working together is crucial.'

National Park Officer, Yorkshire