



SHEPHERDING ON SHROPSHIRE'S LONG MYND.

- *An Interview by Austin Bennett with some of the farmers who shepherd the Long Mynd.*
- *At the end of this article, there are some photographs of one of the gathers where sheep are collected from the vast area of hill and moved down the hillside to the lower ground.*

The Long Mynd in South Shropshire is a hill of wild and diverse beauty that stretches seven miles from north to south and varies in width between one and five miles over its length. Viewed from the west it looks a huge, smooth whale of a hill whilst from the south its more obviously picturesque and varied topography has led the small market town of Church Stretton, rippling out from its base, to be labelled Little Switzerland. Most of the long, high plateau that characterises the Long Mynd is above thirteen hundred feet and it reaches just under seventeen hundred at its highest point. It is riven all around with steep little valleys known locally as batches, their slopes clad in various types of vegetation depending on their particular aspect; heather and bilberry predominate on the upper reaches but bracken, though spectacularly rich in colour in the autumn, makes aggressive and unwelcome attempts in places to engulf all. The plateau is open heathland, impressively serene beneath high summer skies, magnificently bleak and challenging in the winter. Because of the high number of ancient burial mounds, earthworks and evidence of extremely early farming and settlement, the hill has long been of particular interest to historians and geologists.



The Long Mynd was formed in the early Precambrian period 570 million years ago making it one of the oldest rock formations in the country. For thirty-five of those years I've risen early in the morning, collected the dogs, and climbed to the top. One of my garden gates opens straight onto its base and nothing stops us making the ascent every day except a prohibiting fall of snow. About half the hill is owned by the National Trust and it's onto a chunk of their property that I step for the first leg of our climb. Alan and David Jones, my farming neighbours, have local grazing rights for some of their large flock of Welsh Mountain ewes, some of them above Asterton where we live and I happily act as an extra watchful eye on their existence.

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On my daily route I step across the Portway, a track established some 3000 years ago that ascends the hill from its northern end and descends into Church Stretton on the other side. It was used by Bronze Age (2000 to 700 BC) traders and much later on by cattle and livestock drovers and many of the old packhorse routes and trackways link into it. One of them, thought to be prehistoric in origin, traces the modern Burway, the little single track road that now brings increasing volumes of visitors on their precipitous, motorised visits to the hill. The original old Portway and its tributaries were still being used to ferry goods, produce and livestock to Church Stretton market during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The grazing of livestock on the Long Mynd goes back a very long way indeed. Evidence of the method and extent during the early Bronze Age is sketchy though outlines of Celtic field systems, together with signs of permanent domestic establishment, clearly reveal that active farming had been taking place for a long time by the late Iron Age (700 BC to 43 AD). More indications of Iron Age settlement and stock management exist on other parts of the hill. Centuries later the conflicts and subjugations involving the Celts, Angles and Saxons and Normans saw major changes in the development and grouping of settlements but it was the establishment of the manorial system by the Normans that had a radical and telling effect on the poorer farming population. Under the feudalist system the land, held in tenure by landlords who were tenants under the crown, was worked by labourers who, though they had their own tenant rights, had to hand over a proportion of their output to their masters. The common rights of these workers also extended to poor quality, difficult land and the Long Mynd, like many upland areas throughout the country, had plenty in this category.



It was the controversial and fiercely resented system of land enclosure starting in the 16th century which most threatened common rights and the procedure, both legally and illegally applied, continued right through to the Act in 1876 by which time close to 7 million acres had been enclosed. The system had major ramifications in terms of the ability of peasant farmers to survive economically and many simply moved from the land to the burgeoning industrial

cities, or died of starvation. The rights of commoners to graze their stock on specified poor, or waste, land did, however, survive threats of enclosure despite numerous attempts by manorial lords to wrest it from them illegally. Indeed, their determination to deprive local tenants of Long Mynd common land sparked a riot in Church Stretton at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

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While Shropshire's medieval peasant shepherds struggled to make ends meet under the restrictions imposed on them, their landlords built themselves into some of the richest wool merchants in the country and Shropshire into one of its most important European wool traders. Large flocks thrived on the rich, lowland pastures and were frequently driven in huge numbers onto the Long Mynd, especially by the monks of Haughmond Abbey, though Henry the eighth's dissolution of the monasteries eventually put paid to that. In the ensuing centuries the look and wellbeing of the hill have been influenced by the ups and downs in economic and farming fortunes and, most recently, by the National Trust whose aim is to maintain it as an environmental delight while still making it useful to the local sheep farmers. This cannot always have been easy and there must have been times when good intentions, tradition and common sense all seemed at odds with one another.

However you look at it, the aim of establishing stock levels on the hill that are willingly accepted by its commoners but commensurate with its environmental security, is a tricky one. It's as well that those able to exercise grazing rights have reduced hugely over the years but, even so, European Union subsidies paid to hill farmers in the 80's saw levels equating to 5.5 sheep per hectare, far more than deemed sustainable. In 1999 the National Trust entered into an agreement with the Long Mynd Commoners Association to reduce the grazing and, with European support under the Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme, this was substantially reduced, though insufficiently to meet the regenerative aims of the National Trust. A subsequent agreement between the Commoners Association, English Nature and DEFRA has seen the level of grazing sheep reduced to just twenty-five percent of levels in the 1980's, those numbers reduced by half again in the winter along with the cessation of supplementary feeding. The results might be encouraging to the Trust but how do the commoners feel?



There are currently around seventeen farmers exercising their common rights and one of them, David Davies, owns a hundred and twelve acres in Minton Batch. To reach him you take a little single track road that sets out from the signal box and level crossing at Marshbrook. A strip of wood with Minton hand-painted on it indicates the direction, modest assignation indeed given the



ravishing beauty of the destination. The pretty village of Minton provides, I'm told, as much or more second home and holiday accommodation as indigenous domesticity but as you push on deeper to Minton Batch there's a definite working purpose to the few buildings you see. A narrow, bumpy track leads to David Davies's home which sits at the base of the steep slopes from Shooters Knoll. It's a spot of extraordinary tranquillity, wedged between hills and with nothing to exercise ears but birdsong and the babble of the brook; except, of course, the bleating of David's sheep.

Like many Shropshire border families, David's ancestry is predominantly Welsh, his father's side completely whilst his mother was half English. His father and brother were farming in Wigmore, Herefordshire before they moved to Minton Batch in 1946 and they purchased the farm in 1953. The intention was to buy more land but it didn't work out that way and David, who lives alone, retains the original 112 acres and rents a further 75 acres of grass keep. His rights for hill grazing are substantial; six hundred ewes, thirty-five ponies and twenty-five cattle though, under the various agreements and schemes mentioned earlier on, his rights could be seen as theoretical. Indeed, no cattle at all have been grazed on the Long Mynd for many years now and only one farmer, by general agreement, keeps a very limited number of ponies. Under the current scheme David now lets out two hundred of his three hundred and eighty sheep in the summer, reduced to just eighty in the winter. I wondered how he felt about the arrangement.

'I don't think it's bad; it's working quite well. They're very lucky they haven't got everyone with rights keeping sheep on the hill because, if they did, it would blow the scheme. There's a number of what I'd call viable units who could turn sheep out and if they did it could make a mess of things. As it is it's working quite well; we get a payment that helps with the loss of income, it's a bit less work and the stock do well because there are less of them up there.'

David's sheep are mostly Welsh Mountain with some Beulah. He finds the Welsh ewe as tough as any hill sheep and they produce a tough lamb, too. A Welsh or 'peckled' tup is used for replacements and a Suffolk as the terminal sire for the in-bye ewes. The health benefits of the hill sheep are considerable.

'There are quite a few bonuses with hill sheep', David explains. 'You don't get foot rot for one thing because it's dry land and you don't get worm problems because they're not mixing all the time to spread them. People who are lambing big flocks indoors have to guard much more against things like joint ill and abortion; there's not the same sort of density on the hill so germs don't get spread the same way. They're all useful pluses.'

Despite these advantages, hill ewes are still less profitable than their lowland counterparts but they continue to be an important aspect of the sheep farmer's economy and one which remains attractive because of its less intensive nature.

One of the major changes David has seen over the years has been the big increase in the size of farms and he admires those who have turned modest little holdings into significant enterprises. 'The best men have gone forwards', as he puts it. Bigger and better machinery has helped them to do so but the size of the hill remains the same. Nowadays, ATVs might dump a shepherd up the slopes but



plenty of climbing and scrambling still has to be done by men and dogs to gather flocks and keep them in order. Noticeably fewer young men do it and one wonders, given the rewards and declining levels of enthusiasm, how much change an unchangeable procedure can take. Fewer participants means less dogs, too, and, as David ruefully observed, he wouldn't get very far without one.

The inexorable demise of the working dog, so noticeable in many farming situations, is firmly kept in check in the UK's hilly regions because, as long as sheep are grazing them, they're indispensable. The Lloyd family, who live in enviable tranquillity well off the lane to Minton, are fully aware of that and they have seven of them at their farm, including a young pup and a pensioner. Brian's son, Tom, represents the fourth generation to have farmed their in-bye land and worked the hill and their mix of Border Collies and Kelpie crosses are well trained to cope with it all. The structure of the farm lends itself to running both lowland and hill flocks and, to a large extent, they're kept as separate entities. This changes in the winter when half the hill flock is brought down in line with the various environmental schemes, some being kept on their own land and some wintered elsewhere. On their return the hogs go back to the hill where they are joined by the lambs from the ewes that wintered below. Although a flock of mules is home bred and put to a terminal sire the hill sheep are pure-bred Welsh with all the advantages that this resilient little animal can bring to its upland environment. Again, their high and healthy existence means they make a relatively trouble-free, low maintenance contribution to the business.

'We don't look to increase the size of the hill sheep too much', explains David, 'because the aim is to keep the lambing easy. In all the years we've been on the hill we've hardly had to pull more than half a dozen lambs. It's surprising how nature can cope when it's not interfered with. The quest of farmers to increase their profits by increasing the size of their lambs is fine if there's time to give the sheep the attention they deserve, but if the workload means you can't, you're probably better to look back a few years and go the natural way. It's less trouble and less cost so the hit you take on smaller lambs doesn't come quite as hard.'

Brian has interesting views on the perception of this famous hill, both in the eyes of those that visit it and those that farm it, and it is the National Trust which he feels has most influenced its more recent development since they became involved fifty years ago.



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‘I think if you asked the general public they would say it’s the National Trust which has made the hill what it is’, he suggests, ‘but as we know, it’s the commoners and their livestock grazing over hundreds of years that have really formed the landscape and something of that has been lost with the drastic reduction in stock levels. I think the commoners have been a bit short-changed in terms of recognition for their contribution to the shape of the hill, although I think it’s now being realised that earlier approaches had their benefits.’

This was a fascinating viewpoint and I wanted to know what Brian felt had led to the imposition of such reduced sheep levels.

‘It’s true huge numbers of sheep can’t be sustained any more but you could say that’s because the hill has been let go in a way. After all, there are five and a half thousand acres up there and two thousand of them are bracken. No cattle are grazed on the hill at all now but they were many years ago and there also used to be huge numbers of ponies up there, too, and now there are hardly any. If you go back a hundred years, the bracken was apparently trampled and smashed by their hooves and it never got a foothold. But now it has and, if something isn’t done about it, it really is going to change the landscape; it has done already because the sheep are being pushed further and further up the hill and I think it’s that, in part, that led to the overgrazing in the seventies and eighties.’

The relentless encroachment of the bracken is certainly a huge problem, and from a number of perspectives. Visually, its preponderance detracts from the impressive grandeur of the hill and its spread stifles the growth of other hill plants; also, as Brian Lloyd points out, its inexorable advance uphill puts further pressures on a way of shepherding that has existed for centuries. Certainly, during the three decades and more that I’ve lived at the foot of the hill, the conquering intent of the plant has been obvious and, quite apart from any environmental consequences, the practical drawbacks for the hill’s shepherds are considerable. The periodic gathering of flocks can be a nightmare as they are brought down through bracken as tall as some of the shepherds themselves. Reluctant ewes find ways of dodging the flow of the flock or get separated from their lambs and, no matter how good a dog might be at diving in headlong after unseen targets, the aim of achieving a one hundred percent gather is often compromised.

On the Western side of the hill Alan and David Jones graze a substantial number of their hardy, sandy-faced little Welsh Mountain ewes on hill that includes the rights for grazing on land owned by the Midland Gliding Club; it’s one of the oldest gliding clubs in the country and their airfield alone comprises over three hundred acres. Bringing gathered sheep across the green baldness of the airfield before the arduous descent through thick, obfuscating bracken is welcome respite on gathering days.

Further southwards along the hill another local farmer shepherds some of his flock in a rather different manner. Malcolm Corfield’s late father moved with his family to Myndtown Farm in 1959 and Malcolm now manages the farm of seven hundred acres which supports a mixed flock of around a thousand ewes and a hundred suckler cows. The farm is on the huge and ancient Plowden Estate and when the Corfields took it on, around eight hundred and fifty acres of open, un-reclaimed



hill was shared between four farms. The boundaries were eventually formed so that each individual farm had its own access to water from the hill springs and in 1969 Malcomb's father decided, in conjunction with ADAS, the environmental and agricultural consultants, that some of their land could be reclaimed.

'We set out and did something like eleven miles of fencing', Malcolm says, 'and along with two hundred and thirty acres on the west-facing side of the hill we ended up with ninety acres of reclaimed land which is now two fields of fifty-two and thirty-eight acres.'

He recalls the early days when all the farms in that section of hill did the gatherings together, much of it on ponies (he thinks he was probably the last person on the Long Mynd to gather from the saddle), and how a great deal of sorting out had to be done to make sure the different flocks were kept intact. An added problem was that, with so much unfettered open hill rolling along together, neighbouring flocks ignored their hefts with as many as three or four hundred sheep having to be returned to their own patches.

Although Malcolm hasn't had to become involved in schemes with the National Trust, he is restricted to keeping sheep on his section of open moorland for six months of the year because it comes under the Higher Level Scheme (HLS). In effect, this has led to the land becoming under-grazed as the sheep he keeps there, Welsh and Chamoise or Romney crosses, only go there to rear their lambs. They do, of course, do pretty well but it was becoming less than ideal.



'We put the dry sheep up there as well', Malcolm explains, 'but, even so, the rigid restrictions on grazing ratios was leading to the grass becoming feggy and inedible; and because we had done as they wanted and sprayed the bracken, there was more of it to get that way. So I had to take this up with Natural England and last year we got permission to put quite a few extra sheep out for a couple of months before

tapping, mainly cross-bred ewes after we'd weaned them. They've been getting it down since then so at least there'll be fresh, better quality grass coming up next spring.'

The farm used to keep Welsh Halfbreds and Welsh Mules exclusively but over the years Malcolm has rung the changes in his aim to find the best ewe for his land and conditions. He feels the land isn't good enough to keep any density of Welsh Mules and he is currently breeding New Zealand



Romneys onto Welsh ewes and then putting Lleyn tups to their progeny. This, he feels, could produce a slightly more efficient ewe than the Welsh Mule and give him the chance to lamb them outside in April with very little concentrates.

Like everyone working the hill, Malcolm regards the working dog as essential and his current pair, a black and white collie and a red Welsh collie, perform their duties well. Also like everyone else, he can see that the hold which bracken has taken on the hill is a worrying problem for both the hill farmers and the National Trust.

It seems to be the generally agreed view that the level of sheep on the hill in the seventies and eighties was getting out of hand but it's an inescapable fact that the long-gone trampling of cattle and ponies and constant foraging of big, hungry flocks has allowed the bracken to flourish; and it's not an easy foe. With the capacity to extend its coverage by up to 3% a year, its invasive nature is further complicated by its growth on steep, inaccessible slopes that are difficult to control with sprays and special rollers and mowers. Nobody doubts that the National Trust is onto the problem but it's impossible not to see the enormity of the task. The Long Mynd is a fabulous hill that has sustained centuries of Shropshire shepherding and one hopes that its continuation can be assured.

The ISDS Sheepdog Archive is looking for photographs and videos of other gathers that take place in the UK and Ireland.



Sheepdogs are used to gather the sheep from the Long Mynd hill, and they are driven downwards.

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Heading further downwards and sheep from the Jones flock begin to reach the farm



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The sheep collect on the Midland Gliding Club in Asterton. From here, the farmers get their own sheep to do whatever job needs doing, dosing, lambing, clipping, etc...



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