

ROUGH GROUND RESOURCES

A long tradition of rough grazing and transhumance in Cornwall shows that a more frugal approach to farming still has a possible future, as PETER DUDLEY explains.

For many people the bleak looking downs, moors and cliffs of Cornwall are iconic parts of its landscape. Due to their wild appearance it is easy to imagine them simply as natural landscapes, but their character has in part been formed, and maintained, by thousands of years of human activity, principally through the grazing of livestock. Sometimes the term 'rough ground' is used to describe them as they contain a mix of rough vegetation – coarse grassland, heather, heath species, furze (gorse), bracken and willow. Until the early 19th century, rough ground was an important part of Cornwall's farming landscape and used as part of the rural economy. Today, it is likely that few people are aware of the history of farmers taking sheep, cattle, ponies and goats on to the rough grazing. Such sights were once commonplace.

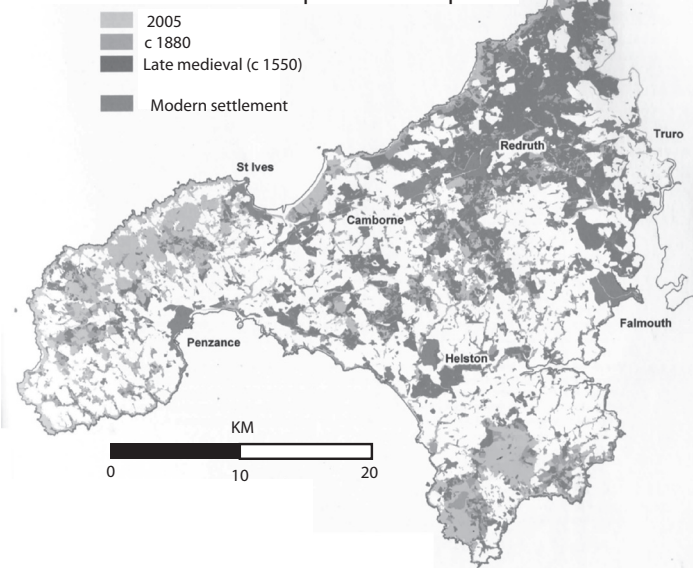
However, over the past 15 years rough grazing has been increasingly used as a habitat management tool by conservationists. Rough grazing, when properly managed, is also seen by many archaeologists as a sustainable management tool which can maintain archaeological sites as visible features in the landscape.¹ In Cornwall, rough grazing has been re-introduced at a local scale with some success. For example, it made a significant contribution to the re-colonisation of the Chough, Cornwall's 'national' bird, by providing the habitat for the birds to feed (ie short turf and dung to encourage insects).²

Attempts have also been made to reintroduce rough grazing for conservation benefit at a larger scale. Between 2004 and 2008, the HEATH project brought together partners in west Cornwall to help re-introduce rough grazing to several areas, principally on the Lizard and West Penwith peninsulas.³

Transhumance

The HEATH project had varied success; on the Lizard peninsula it met with comparatively little opposition whereas on the West Penwith peninsula there has been a vociferous campaign against it, a campaign which continues today.⁴

The extent of rough ground in West Cornwall from the late medieval period to the present.



Despite the opposition it is clear that rough grazing has a deep history in many parts of the landscape, a history often with characteristics shared across the British Isles and Ireland (for example, on Dartmoor).⁵ A common theme to all is the crucial role of transhumance, or the movement of animals to summer grazings on rough ground some distance from the settlements to which they belonged. An important part of the archaeology component of the HEATH project sought to explain the history of transhumance in west Cornwall and to demonstrate how rough grazing had been a vital part of the economic, social and cultural landscape actively managed by people for over 1,000 years at least. A broad outline of that history⁶ runs as follows:

Cornish language place-names dating to the Early Medieval period (circa AD 410 to AD 1066) suggest that transhumance was practised then. This is based partly upon our understanding of Cornish havos and hendre place-names. *Havos* is a compound of the elements haf- 'summer' and bod- 'dwelling', and has been interpreted by Oliver Padel to mean either pasture land or a hut built on such land. *Hendre* is derived from a compound of hen-, meaning 'old', and tre-, meaning 'farmstead'. The hendre place-name also occurs in Wales where, as in Cornwall, the meaning of the name has shifted from 'ancient farmstead' to 'winter farmstead'.⁷

When considering who might have moved seasonally to the havos structures, archaeologists in Cornwall have relied upon later documentary evidence from elsewhere in Britain and Ireland. Only part of the household spent the summer with the stock, usually teenage girls and young unmarried women who were not specialist herders, but part of a family unit practising a mixed farming economy, the rest of the family staying with the permanent settlement to sow, tend and harvest the arable crops and to make hay. The girls would normally leave around May Day and return at Halloween.⁸

Transhumance need not always be for an entire summer and not always over a long distance. The importance of transhumance was that it made full use of the upland rough ground for grazing. The seasonal movement of livestock away from the fields allowed land close to the permanent settlement to be more easily used for hay and for arable crops. In the winter the animals, when returned to the home settlement, would manure the fields as they grazed them.

The Lizard, Long Ago

In the later medieval period (c AD1066 to AD1540) areas of rough ground were commonly called in the Cornish language, goon ('downland'), hal ('moor' – wet, boggy, low-lying areas) and 'croft' (a small enclosure of rough ground) and in English variously 'waste', 'common', 'downs', 'moor' and 'cliff': the place-names descriptive not only of location but of also of the mix of vegetation, land-use, ownership, and the rights (for example, grazing) that people were entitled to upon them.

It has been estimated that in the late medieval period (11th century to mid-16th century AD) about 43 per cent of west Cornwall was rough ground, but today, through enclosure and agricultural improvement, only 11 per cent of that total now survives.

The percentage of surviving rough ground on the Lizard peninsula is much higher as the serpentine soils are difficult to improve and are susceptible to waterlogging. In places, these environmental conditions have favoured the formation of peat. The analysis of pollen preserved in the peat has shown that heath vegetation has been present on the Lizard from at least the Bronze Age (circa 2500BC to c800BC). In more exposed places heathland vegetation has probably been dominant from an earlier period, perhaps as far back as end of the last glacial period (over 10,000 years ago).⁹

More generally it is thought that by the Late Neolithic period (c3000BC to c2500BC) people had probably started to clear woodland vegetation on quite a substantial scale, perhaps to encourage grazing by certain wild and then domesticated animals, and to help favoured plants to grow. By the Bronze Age, settlements, enclosures and ceremonial complexes were being constructed in an increasingly open landscape created and sustained by farming.

Rough Harvests

Certainly by the medieval period, but potentially from later prehistory onwards (c1000BC), the use of the rough ground was often shared and divided between the tenants of farming hamlets, who had 'rights in common' to graze their animals and to collect furze and turf for domestic fuel, cut ferns as bedding for livestock, and rushes and heather for thatching. The earlier, medieval farming settlements can be distinguished by the Cornish place-names tre-, 'farming estate', and bod- (bos place-names), 'dwelling'. These settlements seem to have their origins from between the 6th to 11th centuries AD, and are found on the fringes of the downs and moors (or the former areas of these) in the more sheltered areas and on the better soils, surrounded by field systems (often with curving, sinuous field boundaries).

From the 13th and 14th centuries onwards, the larger areas of downland were steadily subdivided into smaller blocks by Cornish hedges (stone-faced earth walls) and walls. Small enclosures of rough ground, or crofts, also began to be enclosed. By the 17th century crofts were found as part of most west Cornwall holdings, often used for grazing and/or as fuel grounds for the cutting of furze.

Up until the late 19th century furze, heath, ferns (bracken), rushes and willow were for many people still important resources, necessary for everyday life. Furze and heath were cut for the hearth (fire) to cook and to keep warm, heather and



Cattle graze the wet valley bottom of Trevider Moor, West Penwith. Part of the rough ground resource benignly exploited by Cornish farmers, these "moors" provided lush grazing, hay meadows, reeds for thatching and rushes for candles; willow and alder for baskets; clog soles, and wildfowl for the pot.

rushes harvested to provide shelter by thatching buildings and ricks, ferns scythed for bedding the animals (and to produce manure) and willow to weave baskets.

Gathering Fuel

Furze continued to be used as a fuel on more isolated farms into the mid 20th century, and its harvest would have been an important event in the calendar of most west Cornwall holdings. Furze was cut throughout the summer and brought to a plot in the townplace (the yard next to the house) to be ricked (stacked), sometimes as late as October. When fuel was needed for the hearth, a small stack would be taken down from the rick using 'furze hitches' (small hand-held hooks).

Turf (the term peat is not used vernacularly in Cornwall) was also once an important domestic fuel, and in the medieval period, a valuable fuel source for tin smelting. The turf would be cut using a 'piggall' (a 'beat-axe' or 'biddick', a broad and heavy bladed mattock) or a 'turf iron' (a specially designed spade) depending on the quality of the turf. The turf would be cut in the late spring/early summer and ricked on the downs and moors for the remainder of the summer. To do so effectively the cut turves would be stacked carefully as a temporary rick to allow them to dry further and to be as sheltered as possible from any rain. Typically a stack would be rectangular in shape measuring approximately 3m in length and between 1m to 2m wide, around which a shallow ditch would be cut to improve drainage. In the late summer, as with the furze, the turves were transported to the townplace to be ricked leaving the ditch and small external upcast bank as the only surviving reminder on the downs of such activity. These features are known to archaeologists as turf stands and the Lizard has over 600 surviving examples, mostly on Goonhilly, Predannack and Lizard Downs.

From the late 18th century onwards there were major changes to the value of the rough ground. The ideals of the 'agricultural revolution' were incompatible with the traditional farming economy. The rapidly rising population required housing through small holdings (single homesteads typically with small rectangular straight-sided fields and often with English place-names pre-fixed with 'Mount-', or Biblical names or references to back-breaking labour); growing markets for food meant that existing farms expanded and new farms were created; and advances in technology enabled increasingly large areas of rough ground to be improved with greater ease.

The Rough gets Tougher

In the 20th century, due to farm specialisation, principally in dairy farming, farmers lost the economic stimulus to graze the rough ground and the breeds of livestock capable of doing so. For example, the Lizard was once home to a small pony breed known as 'Gunhillies' or 'Gunnellies' of which in 1758 Rev

Lamorna Birch, 1899

William Borlase wrote

‘they [ponies in Cornwall] are at present rather small, or but middle sized, especially in the coarser grounds; but they are so much more hardy [tough] than others, that they bring a large price, and a strong, punch and spirited horse, is with us [the Cornish] generally called a Gunhilly, from a wild downs of that name ‘stretching almost from Helston to the Lizherd [Lizard] Point anciently famous for such little horses’.

The Cornish breed of cattle, which is now also sadly extinct, was also noted for its hardiness. Descriptions recorded the animal as typically small, black and short horned, and probably similar in appearance and temperament to the ancestors of the modern Welsh Black and Kerry breeds.

Whilst rough grazing has a long-standing history in Cornwall, and in the British and Irish landscape, and from an archaeologist’s perspective is a traditional land management regime, opinions about encouraging and sustaining rough grazing seems to divide individuals, communities and organisations, depending on how they view the landscape, the intervention of human activity and perceptions of ‘wildness’.

Opinions are often politically and emotionally charged. Perceived over-grazing worried conservationists on Bodmin Moor, Cornwall, so much that certain commons have been made to reduce the levels of grazing.¹⁰ George Monbiot’s influential recent book, *Feral*, suggests that the grazing of the Welsh mountains should be abandoned for ecological reasons. With the continued financial pressure on farmers it is likely

that many in future will decide not to graze stock on the rough ground, or just as likely, give up farming altogether. Yet, in other areas, as in west Cornwall, the seasonal grazing of stock on rough ground, or transhumance, has been encouraged and supported financially by projects such as the HEATH project.

Sadly, from my perspective, in many areas people have become unaccustomed to seeing livestock on the rough ground, viewing the downs and moors as a separate landscape from the farming landscape; many people do not understand that the rough ground has been managed by human activity. Many people, perhaps reasonably, do not like the intrusive nature of fencelines, water troughs and cattle grids, which are now needed in many areas to manage livestock. The devil is perhaps in the detail - in the grazing levels, in the pressures and conflicts of interest from different groups, the abilities of different farmers to manage their stock and to win over other people to their viewpoint, the different agendas of agencies, conservationists, pressure groups and the communities nearby.

For Cornwall transhumance and rough grazing has been an important part of its agricultural history and in some areas this tradition continues, whilst in others there is the potential to re-establish it. The question is – is there the broader political and public will to nurture and support it?

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This 1922 painting shows the cutting of furze in winter on Chyenhal Moor. A stooping figure can be glimpsed among the bushes, upper middle-left. The main furze harvest took place in summer, but extra fuel could be gleaned at any time of year. The coarse grasses and both low and tall furzes are ablaze with colour under a pearly blue sky. Scratching a living from Cornish rough ground surely had its pleasures.