

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: Harford and Ugborough Commons

The logo for Natural England, featuring the words "NATURAL" and "ENGLAND" stacked vertically in a white, sans-serif font against a dark green square background.

Name:	Ann Willcocks
Region/County:	South West / Devon
Address:	Meads farm, Devon
Farm Size/Type:	542 hectares of common land
Stocking:	812 Sheep, 73 hogs, 227 cattle and 21 heifers
Key objectives	The restoration of upland heath, acid grassland and blanket bog. The maintenance and enhancement of the habitat and the maintenance of farming on the common through grazing livestock.

Harford and Ugborough Commons fall within the boundaries of the Dartmoor National Park and South Dartmoor SSSI, part of which is also within the Dartmoor Special Area of conservation. In 2010 the Commoner's Association were encouraged to move from an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) to a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement and are also in Uplands Entry Level Stewardship (UELS) for some of their land.

The Commoner's as a whole have registered around 3,716 livestock units that are split between 45 rights holders. There are 9 active graziers who place 369 livestock units on the common, and 30-40 inactive graziers of which some are active in the management of the common. They receive a small payment not to exercise their rights in order to avoid overgrazing. There is a strong community element to the graziers association.

This upland site contains some of the most extensive areas of blanket bog, mixed valley mire and unimproved acidic grassland/heathland mosaic in southern Britain. The area also has many scheduled monuments including Stall Moor Circle – a circle of stones at the end of the longest stone row in the world; Blatchford Bottom – an ancient village or settlement and Three Cairns – another ancient stone structure.

Mrs Willcocks is the Secretary of the Harford and Ugborough Commoners Association and says "Being within the National Park the area gets quite busy with both tourists and local dog walkers. There are many visitors to the archaeological sites so we use scrub management in the form of grazing to reveal the historic features and to protect them."

During the ESA most of Dartmoor was deemed to be overgrazed, so the options the Commoner's chose under HLS are either for maintenance or restoration.

Mrs Willcocks says "In order to manage grazing we have created a stocking calendar that controls the number and type of animals grazed month by month. We no longer graze cattle in the winter as this was too intensive and instead only graze sheep and ponies. In the summer we shepherd our cattle onto the molinia (purple moor-grass) which needs careful management. We use native breeds that are 'at risk' to maintain the genetic diversity.



Harford Moor looking towards Plymouth, over Stall and Penn Moor

As livestock graze the heathland they leave different lengths of vegetation, allowing herbs and flowers to emerge. Their droppings attract insects, which in turn attract birds such as swallows and warblers. There are a range Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species - meaning species that are endangered – that have been seen on the commons include barn owl, bullfinch, kestrel, lapwing, linnet, reed bunting, skylark, yellowhammer, Dartford warbler, spotted flycatcher, cuckoo, grasshopper and a variety of bat species.

Mrs Willcocks says "The funding we get from HLS is vital to sustaining our upland farm and we are very keen to maintain the environmental value of the land. Being in HLS has had a positive effect on the Commoner's Association. Graziers can see a

difference in the common now from a conservation and landscape perspective. We have much improved bird records and are looking to collect data on butterflies. The Association is more active as a result of seeing the improvements gained through HLS, for example they are looking at better ways of marketing and communicating with the users of the common."

Andy Guy is the Natural England local Adviser for the commons and says "The agreement on Ugborough and Harford is progressing well. We have built up a good relationship with the commoners and the owner over the last 12 years or so. There has been a great response from the heath on the common. We're now working on managing the re-emerging heath vegetation through controlled burning. The commoners have planted some small copses of trees to add another bit of variety to the habitat. They've also put in some 'dry hedges' made of cut gorse bushes to re-direct horse traffic away from eroded paths. We're also discussing how we can tackle some other areas where erosion is developing around mire habitats. I'm really pleased with the way the commoners are working together and with us on improving the management of their common."

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