

Higher Uppacott, Medieval Transhumance and the Dartmoor Longhouse

The paper explored the reasons for the survival of medieval longhouses in great numbers on the eastern fringes of Dartmoor. It made great use of Harold Fox's recently published research into the medieval development of Dartmoor under royal control and the evidence of transhumance, that is to say the movement of lowland cattle onto the high moor during the summer months. (*Dartmoor's Alluring Uplands: Transhumance and Pastoral Management in the Middle Ages*, Harold Fox, published in 2012 by the University of Exeter Press.) He explains how everyone in Devon had the right to pasture their stock on Dartmoor and how the crown sought to control this and make money from it. There were gates which were to be opened on a certain date which had been announced publicly in the major market towns of the county; how the ancient tenements were established on the moor with free pasturage rights but the obligation that the tenant present himself on horseback for the drifts (when the cattle were counted and appropriate charges levied), how the surrounding parishes had venville rights which meant that they paid a small sum for pasturage



Figure 1: Dartmoor Longhouse: Higher Uppacott, Poundsgate, WITM

rights but also could, like the tenants of the Ancient Tenements, charge lowlanders to look after their stock, how droeways can be identified throughout Devon and so on. Fox envisages a red sea of cattle ebbing and flowing to and from the high moor. He also explains the math's describing a virtuous circle where all involved made money from this controlled transhumance.

The academic demonstration of this special and peculiar set of historic circumstances appears fit with the physical evidence of a large number of longhouses on the moor and the adjacent parishes. Many of these preserve evidence of their medieval origins. As buildings which house a farming family and, in winter, their cattle, they represent an important phenomenon which ranks of European significance associated with the contemporary development of the Devon landscape extending far beyond the high moor.

Higher Uppacott is a particularly well-preserved example of a Dartmoor longhouse which has been acquired by the Dartmoor National Park Authority in order to use it as an educational asset in a tourist area. It is on the main route from Ashburton to Tavistock which includes two medieval bridges, and in that part of Widecombe parish known as Poundsgate which advertises the presence of one of the ancient gates onto the moor. We might assume the site of the old gate now represented by the cattle-grid a short distance up the hill. It is also a typical Dartmoor longhouse in that it was built with others close by. This is not the common arrangement in lowland Devon, but it is on the high ground in and around the moor. One assumes this was a practical response to living in an area of potentially severe winter weather. Higher Uppacott, with nearby Higher Tor, shows clear evidence of its 14th century origins and a series of high quality modernisations through the 16th and 17th centuries. Its builders cleverly adapted the building to a relatively steep slope and it sits comfortably in the landscape. Visitors are impressed by the size of the probably original round-headed eastern doorframe. The hall was provided with an impressive granite fireplace in the second half of the 16th century with the back of the stack presented as a show of granite ashlar (a common trait of the Dartmoor area). The first floor was inserted in the early or mid-17th century and this was a show of generous oak timbers - presumably an expensive material near the moor. The sooted roof is now thought to date from the 17th century when the inner room end was open to the roof and served as a kitchen with an open hearth fire.

Importantly it is one of the one of the small minority which still preserves its unconverted shippon. The floor is cobbled with large slabs of granite lining the central drain which exits through the middle of the end wall and was designed for two rows of cattle facing the side walls. Just inside the outer walls there is an upstanding kerb with holes drilled into the tops of the stones. These were provided to secure tethering posts. There would have been feeding racks and water troughs against the wall.



Figure 2: Higher Uppacott shippon drain from loft level

The quality of these longhouses is quite surprising since longhouses in other parts of Great Britain and Europe tend to be peasant housing. Domestic accommodation might be limited in the Dartmoor longhouses, compared to lowland farmhouses, since the shippon took up about half the building but commonly wings were added to Dartmoor longhouses. At Higher Uppacott, for instance, there is a 17th century parlour wing with heated chamber over.

There are a group of medieval longhouses on the eastern side on the eastern side of the moor which are particularly fine, having impressive walls faced up with massive granite ashlar, including the shippons. This was expensive walling which surprises visitors from outside the county. The reason why so much was spent on appearance is probably explained by the fact that these longhouses are along the routes up to the moor which were probably the most busy since they would have taken cattle from mid and east Devon as well as the places in between. One can only surmise that the tenants of these houses built them to advertise their cattle skills, presenting their shippons as bovine palaces, in order to re-assure lowlanders, who were, after all, entrusting their main capital assets, to the Dartmoor farmers for the summer months. There are interesting touches. For instance, at Sanders in Lettaford (North Bovey) and Great Ensworth in Gidleigh shippon roof timbers are sooted indicating that the over-wintering cattle were warmed from the heat and smoke from the medieval open hearth fire in the hall, apparently separated from the main domestic space simply by a low oak screen.