Moor Medieval Study Group: Turning Ideas into Projects

(as discussed at the meeting on 23 January 2016)

INTRODUCTION

I've tried to identify and define, below, some clear, focused, and manageable projects, chiefly using the ideas that have been generated and discussed at Group meetings over the last few months; I've also added three other possible projects that I've been mulling over in the last few weeks while munching turkey sandwiches. I should stress that this is not intended to be a final and immutable list; instead, it is simply an audit of where, I think, we stand at present. In drawing up the projects, I've been in contact with the coordinators of the different sub-groups, as well as with Keith and Emma, and have tried to cover as many of the themes discussed in these sub-groups as possible (economy and society, archaeology, tin-working, and longhouses); I've also attempted to take into account the evidence that survives and what has and has not yet been done in terms of research.

I felt that there were three good reasons for trying to frame projects in this way at this stage. Firstly, there is no better way of testing whether a potential project is workable (and hopefully attractive to at least some members of the Group) than trying to write a proposal for it. Secondly, I felt that having something in writing would enable us as a Group to discuss in a more focused way what it is we want to do. I certainly don't wish ruthlessly to impose these projects on the Group, but I hope that by defining them as clearly as possible we can think more constructively about: whether we want to do some, or all, of the projects as they stand; whether we would like to revise or amend them in any way; or whether we would instead prefer to do different projects altogether. Just to reiterate, these projects are not (so to speak) set in stone: we can add to them, amend them, or abandon them as we see fit. Thirdly, I'm very keen for members of the Group to become actively involved as soon as possible in one or more projects, whether in terms of documentary research, archaeological excavation, or analysis of the landscape, and we can't really do that without clearly defined projects. As you'll see, each of the projects naturally breaks down into a number of elements; my hope is that, by defining the projects in this way, members of the Group will feel that taking on responsibility (as time and energy allows) for one or more aspects of one or more projects will seem realistic, manageable, and appealing. In short, I wanted us to start the New Year with a clear purpose and with practical goals in mind.

Of course, in order to turn any of these (or any other) ideas into actual projects we must also overcome some significant logistical hurdles. So, as you read through the various proposals, please bear in mind not just which of these projects you might like to be involved in, but also (more practically) which of them you could see us realistically undertaking. This is partly a question of getting professional advice where necessary, acquiring the requisite skills, and gaining access to certain types of equipment or documents. But, perhaps more significantly, it is also a matter of finding people willing and able to coordinate and/or manage each project on a day-to-day and month-by-month basis. Without such a person, a project will have little chance of success. There may well be people within the group itching to lead a particular project but, if not, we must consider the feasibility of approaching and securing somebody with the necessary attributes to take on that role. Keith has some excellent ideas on that front, though we must also take into consideration that this may limit the number of projects that we could realistically do. In short, we need to do more than just identify projects that we want to do: we must also ensure that we can do those projects; and prioritise them if need be.

You'll notice as you read through the proposals that I've not divided them according to the four sub-groups as we originally envisaged them: I've simply listed eight possible projects (five of which stand alone, plus three parish-based projects). This is not intended to diminish either the importance of any of the themes that have been discussed or the work of the sub-groups. Instead, it reflects the belief that for some projects a multi-disciplinary approach is the most appropriate way forward. Furthermore, when putting the proposals together, it became increasing clear to me that some of them would cover several themes. Thus, for example, lists of tin-workers are fundamental to a wider project on 'Dartmoor Lives', while mapping agricultural remains, settlements, tin-works and so on forms part of a broader project on the medieval landscape. In the end, I felt that getting the projects right was more important than following set divisions between different sub-groups, and I found it more productive to define them without being restricted to a particular approach or theme.

Finally, as I mentioned last summer, we must not forget that another, very significant, project will emerge as the Study Group progresses: that of putting it all together. Effectively, what was life like for people living on or around this area of Dartmoor during the medieval period? For me, this is what it is all about: people; period; and place.

STANDALONE PROJECTS

Snapshots of Medieval Dartmoor

This project will analyse a series of documents that enable us to chart chronological and geographical variations in population, resources, and the wealth of communities in medieval England: Domesday Book (1086); 14th century tax data (1332-34 lay subsidies, 1377 poll tax returns); 1524-7 lay subsidy data; and inquisitions *post mortem*/miscellaneous (from the mid-13th century onwards). Although these documents have previously been exploited to look at the historical geography of England and Devon, they would certainly repay close attention at a local level - and can be used to generate snapshots of the economy and society of the study area in the late 11th century, the 14th century, and the early 16th century. All these sources are available in translation, with introductory material about their use and interpretation. Although all were produced in the post-Conquest period, a close analysis of Domesday Book also enables us to peer back into the late Saxon era. This project would dovetail neatly with 'Mapping the Landscape of Medieval Dartmoor', below.

Dartmoor Lives

The number and variety of extant lists of names of people either living on Dartmoor or utilising its resources is highly unusual for the medieval period: lay subsides (as well as those published for 1332 and 1524-7, individuals are listed in the lay subsidies of 1302/3 and 1327); agistment rolls (1347, 1351, several from 1413-21, and several more from 1424-61, 1496); lists of tinners claiming exemption from royal taxation (1337, 1344, 1348, 1373, plus others for wool taxes c. 1330s-1340s); together with various other documents, such as rentals. With some basic palaeographical training, transcribing these lists of names (and the economic resources mentioned for each person) would be manageable, would provide glimpses into the lives of individuals living on and exploiting the resources of Dartmoor in the later Middle Ages, and would bequeath a database of names for use by future historians and genealogists. Given the spread of the documents mentioned above (and the project on 'Dartmoor in the Age of the Black Death'), it would probably make sense to concentrate initially on the period c.1327-1421, although this could subsequently be extended to include further agistment rolls and the lay subsidies of the early sixteenth centuries.

Dartmoor in the Age of the Black Death

The medieval manors of Dartmoor and South Teign (the latter lying across the parishes of Chagford, North Bovey, and Moretonhampstead) are unusually well-documented from 1338 onwards because of the high rate of survival of yearly account rolls for the Duchy of Cornwall, to which both belonged. The information recorded in these accounts includes: income from the leasing of land and mills; details about the agistment of beasts and turf-cutting; the numbers of landless men on Dartmoor; and the expenses of administering the two manors. Perhaps surprisingly, these series of accounts remain under-exploited. Harold Fox looked at several, but by no means all, of the Dartmoor accounts when he charted the extent to which the economic exploitation of Dartmoor changed in the half century or so after the Black Death of 1348/9. Meanwhile, to my knowledge, the South Teign accounts remain relatively untouched. This project would attempt to fill in the detail for Dartmoor in the post-Black Death era by focusing on the years 1338/9-1417/18 (for which 59 accounts survive), and compare and contrast this picture with developments on the manor of South Teign over the same period. Notably, this chronology would tie in with the spread of documents used initially in 'Dartmoor Lives', above, enabling the two projects to inform and complement each other.

The built environment

Medieval longhouses are an iconic feature of the Dartmoor landscape. This project would examine the origins, features, siting, orientation, and uses of surviving examples, aiming to build up a gazetteer of longhouses in the study area, together with an accompanying discussion. The project would not only involve visiting and recording features of longhouses, but also studying a wide range of maps and documents. Last summer, Keith showed us various maps comparing sites of known longhouses with other features of the Dartmoor landscape; alongside Keith and Val Harrison's expertise in this area, these maps would be an excellent place to start. Vernacular buildings are not the element of the medieval built environment to survive, of course. Recording the chronology of architectural developments for the various churches in the study area, together with any hints about the development of churchyards, would tell us much about patterns of population and wealth in different communities over the course of the medieval period. Apart from anything else, learning to 'read' a Church is a fascinating and fabulous skill to develop.

Excavation at North Hall Manor, Widecombe

This project, the latest stage of which has been generously funded by Moor Medieval, will hopefully continue to offer members of the Group the opportunity to join a full-scale archaeological excavation during the summer months. As we heard at the meeting in December 2015, Peter Rennells and others have been working on this project for nearly two decades, yet there remains much research to be done if this site – and the nearby earthworks identified by Peter – are to be interpreted as fully as possible. Given this, and the links between Peter's research and the Moor Medieval project, we have asked Peter whether he would welcome having one or two research assistants to help him continue to investigate this fascinating site. We will let you know the outcome!

PARISH-BASED PROJECTS

A Database of Medieval Place Names

The recording and interpreting of place names and field names is one of the most fascinating and revealing aspects of medieval local history. They are, as Margaret Gelling suggested, literally signposts to the past: they are one of the few ways we can glimpse the colonisation of the landscape in the Anglo-Saxon period (see, for example, Harold Fox's use of them in *Dartmoor's Alluring Uplands*, esp. pp. 162-6); their meanings can take us into the social, economic, and cultural priorites of the era in which they were coined; and they often reveal the amazing continuity of names in the landscape, from medieval to modern times. Moreover, further work on place names is long overdue. As Matt Tompkins and Chris Dyer recently wrote, 'the principal source available for their interpretation, *The Place-names of Devon*, was produced in 1931-32 and is now out of date ... and a reexamination of many of Devon's place names would probably cast new light on aspects of Dartmoor's Anglo-Saxon and Celtic past'. A comprehensive parish-by-parish search for place names and field names would doubtless bring other medieval local names to light, and would consequently provide a fantastic resource for future work on the historic landscape of this region. With some basic palaeographical and documentary training, place names and field names are relatively straightforward to locate and read in medieval documents.

The Development of Settlements on Medieval Dartmoor

The progress and retreat of settlement is fundamental to the way in which we interpret the economy and society of any area during the Middle Ages. In determining the chronological development of major settlements during this period, the best place to start is with the analysis of historic maps, aerial photographs, and the documentary record. But, having exploited these, archaeological test pits can then provide further important evidence about the extent of medieval settlements at different periods, as well as intriguing insights into the nature of human activity. Test-pitting has become hugely popular in the last ten years, involves the young and the less young (and the totally inexperienced as well as the experienced), and includes a number of tasks besides digging (sieving earth, metal-detecting, washing finds, photographing and sketching the test pit, and discussing a range of interpretations over many cups of tea). It involves methodically digging one metre square holes, layer by layer; finds often include sherds of pottery, but sometimes also metal goods, the occasional coin, and – if very lucky – an archaeological feature. For a useful guide to the methodology for digging and recording a test pit, see http://www.hoxnehistory.org.uk/Hoxne%20Test%20Pit%20Guidebook.pdf.

Mapping the Landscape of Medieval Dartmoor

It would be a fantastic culmination of the Moor Medieval project if we were able to reveal all known features of the medieval landscape of Dartmoor and the surrounding parishes on a series of maps. After all, there is a tendency to pick out certain features from the landscape (settlements, longhouses, fields, tin-works, roads and tracks, greens and watering places for livestock, churches, and so on) and study them in isolation; instead, this project would attempt to reconstruct the medieval landscape as a whole, enabling us to see the interaction between different features as well as the ebb and flow of human activity. Given the degree of change over time in the medieval period, it would be appropriate to try to map the landscape of each area or parish at three points in time: the 11th century; the early 14th century; and the 15th century. Not only would this mirror the main demographic patterns of the period, but it would also broadly tie in with the 'Snapshots of Medieval Dartmoor' project. The

mapping would naturally utilise the findings of several of the other projects (especially 'Snapshots of Medieval Dartmoor', and those projects investigating place names, the development of settlements, and the built environment) together with the Historic Environment Record, but would also involve further research on maps and documents, together with fieldwork. As such, as well as providing an overarching picture of medieval Dartmoor, it may well turn up new features of the landscape, or new interpretations of known features.