

The Commons

Many Exmoor commons were under forest law in the 13th century. Following disafforestation manors gained control of their own commons and were anxious to maintain it. They were not always successful. In 1541 six Withypool farmers were accused at the forest court of ploughing seven acres of Withypool common with oxen and enclosing it for tillage the previous year. In 1559, after 25 men were similarly accused with regard to 10 acres, it was stated that the common could only be used by the free suitors for pasture or by stock taken from the forest at the drift or chase, the round-up of grazing stock.

We can learn about commons from manorial court rolls. Disputes were taken to the courts, which

maintained common rights and punished infringements. In 1553 three men were variously accused at Almsworthy manor court of taking stone, heath, and turves without licence. In 1556 four men were ordered to make enclosures on the common before St Luke's day (18 October), presumably for sowing, and others were presented for driving animals out of the manor during the chase. Farmers depended heavily on common hill pasture in summer to make a profit from their stock, which could not hope to be as profitable as those on richer grazing. There was always a temptation to overstock to increase yields. In 1556 a man was accused of overburdening Riscombe Down in Exford with 100 sheep. Almsworthy tenants were reminded that they must abide by the



Figure A Corn ditch to keep sheep out of crops on the commons. Temporary fences were raised on low walls of earth and turves and removed when the commons were not in tillage. Later some were stone faced as a permanent barrier. A ditch in front prevent stock jumping over.



Figure B Comer's Gate Winsford. At Winsford names such as Comer's Gate, Edbrooke Hill Gate, Cross Gate, and Summer Way indicate routes by which animals were driven to common pasture.

accustomed rate for stocking the commons. The breaking of common grazing for arable would have reduced pasture temporarily. In 1559 two farmers were fined because their grain growing in the commons was insufficiently hedged. Traces of such fields are found on Wellshead Allotment. Monkham manor common in Exford continued to be cultivated in 1638. At Winsford the church raised money by letting rights to put a number of sheep on the commons and in 1603 a cottager was allowed to graze 10 sheep if he obtained the consent of the manor tenants.

The communities of southern Exmoor had to know the boundaries of their commons. Some bounds

were clearly marked such as the 'Cornell' ditch that divided common rights at Anstey in the 1530s. Others had stones or trees at intervals that needed to be memorised. Manors and parishes perambulated (walked) their boundaries. Boys would be sat on the stones, or on occasion held upside down, so that they would remember the bounds. Elderly parishioners remembered the Exford perambulations of 1606 and later because they were pinched at a boundstone. In 1623 the minister of Molland led 30 or 40 inhabitants on a perambulation of Molland Common whose boundary was marked by heaps of stones 40 yards apart.