

Uppacott in its Place – medieval life, work and wealth on south-east Dartmoor

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Taking as a starting point the likelihood that some of the present buildings of Uppacott were in existence in the first half of the 14th century, perhaps shortly before the Black Death, we can be confident that Dartmoor at that time was highly prosperous – mainly due to a booming tin and woollen industry, but also due to the summer grazing of cattle. New farms had recently been created (e.g. Dunnabridge 1304-6) and a new corn mill built at Babeny (1304).

Uppacott itself was well-placed to take advantage of this prosperity, being in a zone full of resources and was well-connected, both to the wealthy town of Ashburton and on to the rich seaport of Totnes/Dartmouth, as well as the high moor (the lane past Higher Tor led to Dartmeet Hill and Spitchwick Common) and its good grazing (cattle, sheep and ponies). It was close to the River Dart (fish), very extensive woodland (timber for building, charcoal, bark)



Charcoal hearth in Dart valley woodland. Scale: 1m (photo: Tom Greeves)

and also had adjoining arable (a local form of strips/openfield – local arable strips were known as zellions/selions).



Medieval strip fields visible in snow at Hexworthy (photo: Elisabeth Greeves)

Moorland also had resources of stone, fuel (peat and furze) and bracken (for animal bedding), and rushes (for thatching). Besides extensive and already ancient tinworks (Drylake/Dryworke on the Forest/Holne boundary is first recorded in 1240), there were rich deposits of copper and iron in Ausewell Wood.



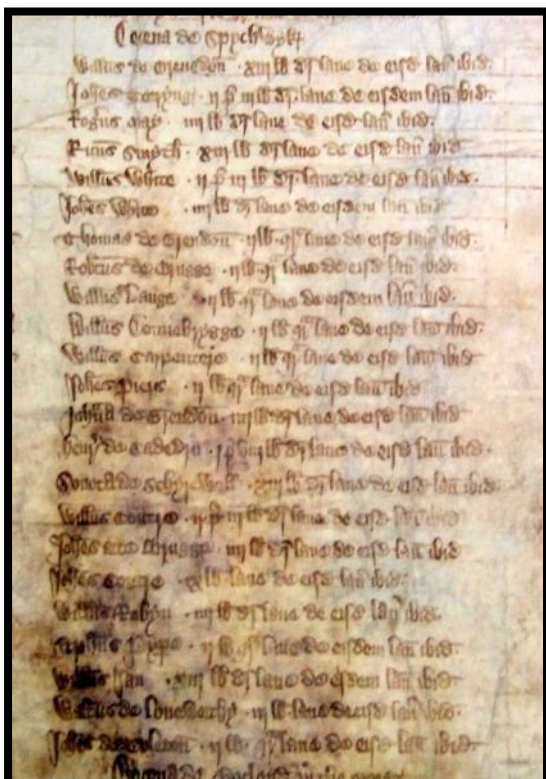
Cleft Rock openwork, Ausewell Wood – scene of ancient copper and ironworking (photo: Tom Greeves)

It was a society familiar with concepts of boundaries – manor (Spitchwick), parish (Widecombe), hundred (Kerswell/Stanborough), Dartmoor Forest and stannary (Ashburton). It was an old land, full of prehistoric features and other evidence of previous settlement. Many, probably most, of the farms were already ancient e.g. Brimpts (first recorded 1199).

The immediate environs of Uppacott had a possible prehistoric enclosure on the edge of Leusdon Common, a chapel of St Leonard at Spitchwick, a possible fire beacon at Bel Tor, a playing place (wrestling, kayles, performance etc), butts (archery), and a winstrew (winnowing).

In 1303 Ashburton stannary, in which Uppacott was located, produced 54% of all tin metal in the county of Devon. Nearby tanners presenting ingots of tin for coinage included neighbour John at Tor (7th largest producer), Abraham and Robert of Uphill, Joel of Brimpts, William of Sherril and Walter Wallings of Holne (3rd largest producer). Edward I's charter to the tanners in 1305 must have been a major cause of celebration and impetus for further work. The monarch himself had visited Ilsington and Ashburton in 1297.

Hundreds of Dartmoor tanners claimed exemption from Edward III's wool and other taxes of the 1330s and 1340s.



Spitchwick tanners (Tithing of 'Spychwyk') claiming exemption from wool tax, early 14th century (TNA/E363/4/046)
(photo: Tom Greeves)

Apart from the lord of Spitchwick manor, secular power was represented by castles at Hembury (Dart – possibly in ruins by 14th century), Plympton, Lydford, Okehampton and Gidleigh. The creation of the Duchy of Cornwall in 1337 must have been highly significant. Religious power was represented by the great and wealthy abbeys of Tavistock, Buckfast and Buckland, but the parish church of Widecombe would also have been highly important.

However, superstition was also prevalent, with healing, charming and belief in witches good and bad. Storytelling would have been commonplace, drawing on tales of King Arthur (King's Oven), Childe the Hunter, Jan Oo (spirit of woods and River Dart), Bishop Bronescombe and the Devil (Sourton). Rolling flaming wheels down into the R. Dart from Mel Tor on midsummer's eve may well have been practised (perhaps even since Roman times). Ghostly sows and piglets and other apparitions abounded. Crosses marked crossroads and also one route across the moor (from Holne to Walkhampton, probably known as the Maltern Way). There was probably an ancient bridge (perhaps of timber) over the Dart at Dunnabridge, which would have formed part of a winter route to Lydford.

Particular vocabulary for commonplace artefacts (e.g. zull for plough, usen for manger) would have been in use. Tradition and ceremony would have been important at different times of year.

Might Uppacott once have been sited by a moorgate and 'green' used as a gathering place for animals being put out on the moor for summer grazing? – hundreds of cattle must have passed by the farm.

Ralph of 'Uppecote' is recorded in 1330 (*Place-names of Devon*, p.529). He would have known this world and all its richly varied activities, and may have been responsible for building the structure that still exists.

Tom Greeves, 28 August 2015