



Spring 2015

Devon draws top international riders for eventing trials

Stars of the equestrian world descended on Devon (24th-26th April) as Bicton Arena hosted its first International Horse Trials.

Set within the Grade 1 listed parkland that forms part of the Clinton Devon Estates, over 800 riders from across the globe travelled to East Devon to compete in dressage, show jumping events and cross country – including top names such as New Zealanders Sir Mark Todd and Jonathan ‘Jock’ Paget as well as the Westcountry’s very own Olympian Mary King and her daughter Emily.

An impressive 2000 spectators were greeted by excellent conditions across the three day event, with a light rain shower late on Saturday afternoon providing a welcome relief to previously very dry conditions.

Bicton Arena Manager Helen West said: **“We are thrilled to have been given the opportunity to host the international trials and doing so has definitely provided Bicton Arena with the opportunity to showcase its potential and scope as a world class venue.”**

Helen added: “Feedback from attendees has been overwhelmingly positive and the atmosphere throughout the weekend was electric. It was very exciting to have such big names riding our courses.”

With such an impressive line-up, notable companies from across the South West were keen to sponsor the three day event including Rathbones, a leading provider of investment management services, accountants Francis Clark, Mercedes Benz South West, Everys Solicitors, Harrison Lavers & Potburys Estate Agents, Mole Valley Farmers, Wray & Co Jewellers and Acanthus Press.

Third Queen’s Award win for Clinton Devon Estates

One of Devon’s oldest family businesses has received its third consecutive Queen’s Award for Enterprise – the UK’s highest accolade for business success.

Clinton Devon Estates, a land and property management business, has been recognised for its work in Sustainable Development. It first received the award in 2005, again in 2010 and now holds the 2015 Queens Award for the next five years.

Clinton Devon Estates can trace its history back to 1299. Today it manages 25,000 acres across East and North Devon and is involved in farming, sustainable forestry, deer management, commercial and residential property and a number of small businesses including the South West’s premier equestrian venue, Bicton Arena.

The Estates’ successful business enterprises allow reinvestment into managing the land for generations to come, including the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths, a Site of Special Scientific Interest. All development profits are reinvested across the Estates benefiting local communities and businesses as well as the environment.

Clinton Devon Estates also plays an important part in helping to sustain local communities by providing sports grounds, primary school and community allotments, affordable housing and business premises in many areas across North and East Devon.

The 2015 Queen’s Award citation highlights Clinton Devon Estates’ commitment to sustainable agriculture, in particular the installation of slurry-storage facilities which have enabled efficient manure spreading; reducing fertiliser requirements and improving water quality and land fertility.

Other sustainable measures introduced by Clinton Devon Estates have included the optimisation of wood harvesting, the re-use of low-grade wood for biomass heating and the processing of venison for sale at local farmers’ markets.

Over the past five years Clinton Devon Estates has produced 100,000 kilowatt hours of renewable electricity and 8,000 tonnes of biomass, saving over 4,500 tonnes of carbon emissions.

Estates Director John Varley said: **“Sustainable development is all about next generational thinking and good practice and, as a family business, this is something we are very focused on. Modernised estates like Clinton Devon have a huge part to play in society, the economy and our natural environment.**

“This third Queen’s Award has demonstrated that even through a period of austerity it is possible, through sensible development and careful conservation, to create a fertile environment for business success that benefits the environment and local communities for many generations to come.”



[Click here to watch a video about our Queen’s Award win.](#)

Dartmoor hill ponies with GPS graze on Pebblebed Heaths

A small herd of Dartmoor hill ponies fitted with GPS trackers is helping scientists to clarify how a centuries-old method of managing heathland vegetation with grazing animals enhances nature and wildlife habitats.

The experiment sees 25 ponies relocating from their hilly homeland to the [East Devon Pebblebed Heaths](#) (EDPH) – one of Europe’s most important lowland heaths – where they are grazing alongside a herd of Devon Reds.

The animals are fitted with electronic tracking equipment to provide scientists with information, at 15-minute intervals, of where they are grazing, sleeping and spending most of their time.

Scientists from Duchy College and Plymouth University are monitoring and measuring the structure of the vegetation in over 60 permanent sample areas, measuring two-metres squared, on Bickton Common – one of the EDPH’s linked heaths.

Grazing is excluded from control areas to enable comparisons to be made between grazed and ungrazed sites to better understand the impact of the animals. The data will help inform a long-standing debate around the value of grazing animals to the biodiversity of an area.

The East Devon Pebblebed Heaths, which lies between Exeter and the Jurassic Coast, has the highest European and national environmental designations including Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protected Area (SPA). It is also part of

the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and home to a range of rare plants, insects and wildlife.

Dr Sam Bridgewater is the Nature Conservation Manager for Clinton Devon Estates.

He said: “It has been a long-standing debate among farmers, conservationists, scientists and the public as to the benefits, or not, of grazing animals. Although the benefits of grazing are generally well understood by heathland managers, it has been very hard to prove with any great certainty. Setting up an experiment that stands up to scientific scrutiny can be difficult in an outdoor grazed environment.”

Dr Bridgewater continued: “Last year we undertook studies on the vegetation and some key wildlife groups to provide a baseline to monitor grazing impacts. This year animals will begin grazing on Bickton Common and over time we will build a picture of how their activity is affecting the biodiversity of this area.”

Charlotte Faulkner of the Dartmoor Hill Pony Association, who is loaning the ponies, said: “Dartmoor hill ponies are ideally suited to conservation grazing because they are used to a diet which involves foraging, searching for the most nutritious food and picking through the heathland grasses and nibbling at the gorse and brambles. They are hardy and have been bred for generations to thrive on Dartmoor. We have long believed that Dartmoor hill ponies add to the biodiversity of an area but we haven’t had the science to prove it.

“The benefit for us of having the evidence is that we are concerned that the long-term future of Dartmoor’s ponies is threatened as agri-environment agreements on Dartmoor’s commons increasingly reduce the number of animals allowed on them. This puts ponies in competition with sheep and cattle for grazing places.

“We are trying to promote a traditional mixed grazing model of cattle alongside ponies which, we believe, offers huge environmental benefits and, at the same time, safeguards the future of the Dartmoor hill pony.”

The practice of grazing animals on the Pebblebed Heaths dates back centuries when commoners brought their livestock to graze. Along with the cutting of wood and peat for fuel, heather for bedding and gorse for fodder, the commoners and their stock kept the ever-encroaching scrub at bay, helping initially to create and then preserve the unique landscape.



[Click here to watch a video about the Dartmoor Hill Ponies.](#)

Forging a new agenda for the countryside

By **John Varley - Estates Director**

While we are probably all in agreement that the countryside should offer a place for leisure, a space for nature and vital acres for agriculture, we are perhaps not quite so unanimous in our views on how the countryside should evolve to meet the pressing needs of the 21st century and beyond. There is no ignoring the ever-increasing pressure to provide sufficient food, homes, energy and employment for our growing population – solutions that may be found in the countryside but often spark controversy in the practice of rural land management.

Our focus at Clinton Devon Estates now, as it has been for many hundreds of years, is about stewardship, defined by the global think-tank Tomorrow's Company as "the active and responsible management of entrusted resources now and in the longer term, so as to hand them on in better condition."

This has long been the mantra of many who claim to represent the interests of rural England. However, stewardship is just as much about people as assets and to help understand the principles behind the rhetoric, it is interesting to consider the words of a leading practitioner:

"...our power for good or evil in this world's affairs in a countryside is enormous. You may do much, very much, to make many hundreds of people of all grades prosperous and contented, or the reverse. ...And if you are a lover of nature as well as of your work; if every bird and beast of the field, every flower of the hedgerow, every change of the developing season, every geological change on your charge, and all that such a change brings with it, have an interest for you, and if your barometer, thermometer, and rain-gauge record have the same... how can your life ever be dull? How can it be otherwise than full of interest, and therefore of happiness? But far and away above any satisfaction of this kind... is the inward knowledge that you can look the whole world in the face and say that you have done your duty, and something more than your duty."

The words of Robert Lipscomb, Steward to the Rolle (now Clinton) Estates in Devon were written over 130 years ago, in around 1880 and convey the whole essence of what makes the practice of professional land management so important and special. There is no doubt that if Lipscomb were present today he would fully appreciate the need for both responsible stewardship and embracing change and innovation. In his time he was at the

forefront of leading significant change across English agriculture, forestry and the rural economy. He didn't need a definition of stewardship – his job title was clear enough.

For generations, the management of rural England and those who own and influence it did not receive much scrutiny. However, after periods of unprecedented growth, and now austerity, society appears keen to consider other models of governance. We now live in what has been described as a "contested countryside" resulting in a polarisation of perspectives. Discussions about "what is land for?" are coming into centre stage.



Rather than holding firm to a chocolate box image of the countryside, it is time for us to raise our eyes to a dynamic future, where issues about too much development, the price of milk, animal and plant disease, loss of biodiversity and climate change threats have a place in a positive agenda. An agenda where everyone can benefit from new and informed approaches to future land management in rural England.

The Institute for the Future is a California-based research organisation forecasting technology, social and economic changes and identifying emerging trends. It predicts that "Land management will be at the centre of a debate about demand for food, competing with demand for fuel, carbon management, development and human health".

With that in mind, the only way in which we will be able to achieve successful stewardship of our rural areas is if all parties, including owners and managers of land, local communities, decision makers and political influencers embrace a new openness and transparency with a willingness to learn from each other and consider new ideas.

Technology and innovation will continue to transform our approach to the issues faced in rural England and encourage increased productivity from those who manage land and those who derive their business from it directly or its setting. Equally innovations in the form of social media will ensure that everything that everyone does is fully scrutinised and discussed by individuals and groups far and wide. No longer is there a hiding place because you farm on a remote hill top or you run a waste business a long way from an urban centre.

For those occupying polarised positions as to the way the countryside should be cared for and managed, some of these developments may seem threatening. For others they provide an opportunity to inform, lobby, influence and learn. So, in response to the questions, "What is rural England for?" and "Who pays for it?" it is clear that

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rural areas can offer far more than simply a holiday destination. The potential for improving our natural environment and wildlife is huge, as is the potential for new and innovative industries, sympathetic to their environment and transformed traditional industries sustaining future outputs of food and fuel.

The stewardship of rural England inevitably requires a certain degree of philanthropy, even if involuntary. Where agriculture, forestry and rural businesses have been successful, and long serving through generations, there have inevitably been sound economics underpinning them. Reasonable financial returns to those managing land encourages cross subsidy and in some cases direct funding of non-market goods such as public access, amenities and education.

As the English economy continues its journey through austerity, generation of income will need to be just as an important policy objective as funding public goods and services. Indeed, new partnerships and understanding will need to be developed to recognise the contributions of all parties in the stewardship of rural England.

The only thing holding back the potentially radical new approaches which may be needed is our imagination. Traditional views on farming, forestry, conservation and development will have to be re-thought and all parties will need an open mind.

As the great innovator Isambard Kingdom Brunel said: "I am opposed to the laying down of rules or conditions to be observed in the construction of bridges lest the progress of improvement tomorrow might be embarrassed or shackled by recording or registering as law the prejudices or errors of today".

The idea of having no rules is, of course, a step too far but it is time for us to welcome new ideas and recognise the great potential that rural England offers in helping us to meet a whole spectrum of future needs; for society, for nature and for the environment.

- Clinton Devon Estates is a 21st century property and land management company covering 25,000 acres in Devon. John Varley is Estate Director of Clinton Devon Estates. He is a Fellow of the Royal Agricultural Societies and was a member of the Lawton Review: "Making Space for Nature" which influenced the UK Government's 2010 Natural Environment White Paper and also a member of the Independent Forestry Panel set up in the wake of the Government's abortive plans to sell off part of the public forest estate.

Reintroducing the Devon beaver

By Dr Sam Bridgewater
Nature Conservation Manager

Several weeks ago on a sunny evening in March Devon's beaver families were re-released into the River Otter, having received a clean bill of health by veterinary experts from the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland. The occasion marked the start of a formal trial, under licence from Natural England, to monitor the impact of the beaver population on the landscape, economy, communities and wildlife of the Otter Valley.

Eurasian beavers once lived wild in Britain, and were a keystone species that helped forge the ecological identity of our rivers and wetlands.

They became extinct in the 1600s, having been hunted for their fur, meat and castoreum, a secretion from their scent glands once valued in medicine. However, they survived in small numbers on continental Europe. Through hunting bans, re-introductions and careful management, populations have since largely recovered on the continent, with hundreds of thousands of Eurasian beavers now living in the wild. Britain is one of only a few remaining European countries where beavers have not been re-introduced formally.

The interest in the re-introduction of beavers relates in part to the positive impact they can have on aquatic ecology. Their dams have the potential to regulate water flow, and their activity can improve the diversity of habitats and increase the abundance of other species groups such as invertebrates, amphibians and birds. Fish stocks can also benefit from the presence of beavers (which are vegetarian), although their dams can also potentially impede the migration of salmonids. There are environmental positives and negatives to their presence, but on balance it is believed to be largely beneficial.

Over the past few centuries beavers have been brought from Europe to live in captivity in Britain, mainly in zoos and wildlife parks. Occasionally these have escaped, and there have been sporadic records of beavers existing in the wild throughout the UK for a number of decades. Indeed, a pair were present on the River Axe in Devon in the 1980s. For the most part they do not survive to breed, although a significant population of around 200 individuals survives on the River Tay in Scotland. In parallel to this unauthorised presence, in May 2008 a licence was granted by Scottish Natural Heritage for a managed and licensed re-introduction of Eurasian beavers into the wild in Scotland. The five year trial in Knapdale, Argyll, has

recently been completed and all scientific findings will now be presented to the Scottish Government, with a decision expected on their long-term future this year.

The River Otter beaver trial was prompted just over a year ago when a family of beavers was spotted and filmed on the lower River Otter, near Ottery St Mary.

It is not known for certain where the River Otter beavers came from; the likelihood is that they escaped from captivity or were released illegally. Their presence was of particular significance as the presence of both adults and young suggested that they had been successful at breeding, the first known account of successful reproduction in the wild in England for some three hundred years.

Defra expressed a desire for the River Otter beavers to be caught, primarily due to concerns about them being carriers of disease that could harm humans. However, with strong local public support, the Devon Wildlife Trust applied to Natural England in the autumn of 2014 for a licence for the animals to be allowed to remain as part of a five-year trial to monitor their effects. Licence approval was dependent on a number of conditions, including attaining majority local landowner support, and the beavers being proven to be free of disease.



As the largest landowner in the beavers' existing territory, Clinton Devon Estates was supportive of the trial, but we recognised significant risks attached to it, not least long-term management issues.

Before the licence was issued, the beavers were captured and tested to ensure they were free of serious diseases, including Tularaemia and Tuberculosis. In addition, beavers are known to act as an intermediate host of the tapeworm *Echinococcus multilocularis*, the primary host of which are foxes and dogs. It is possible for this tapeworm to be transmitted to humans which can result in severe illness. The tapeworm is not known from the UK but is present in continental Europe, so it was important to ensure that the River Otter beavers were not carriers. After receiving a clean bill of health, the beavers were re-released into the River Otter

Although the ecological benefits of beavers are not really in doubt, where they have been re-introduced in other countries they can, on occasion, cause conflict with people. This conflict generally relates to the impacts of their damming activity, and the felling of riverside trees. Beavers build dams to ensure that the entrances to their living quarters remain submerged, allowing them to enter and exit safely. In the lower River Otter where the trial is taking place, the water is

generally deep and the river banks ideal for burrowing. It is therefore unlikely that they will need to build dams to any significant degree. However, the potential remains for their activity to block ditches and culverts. Should beaver numbers increase over the longer term (perhaps 20 to 30 years from now) and they spread up the catchment to sites where the river and its tributaries become shallower, they will inevitably begin to influence the local environment to a more significant degree, including through the construction of dams. This activity has the potential to cause localised flooding.

A critically important part of the existing trial is to ensure that the necessary management and legislative frameworks are in place to allow beavers to be pragmatically managed in the future should the need arise. Their future is only viable within tolerable limits. The management of beavers is fairly straightforward, and the techniques well understood.

The UK can learn from decades of experiences on the continent and a priority is for the management issue to be addressed promptly. A consistent lesson learnt from similar introductions on the continent is that beavers can co-exist in areas of human habitation and intensive land use, but management is almost always necessary.

Beaver management can involve a range of techniques. These range from protecting important trees with mesh, to regulating water flow through problematic dams through the insertion of overflow pipes. Dam removal may also be necessary and sensitive infrastructure such as culverts can be fenced off. The extreme end of management involves the capture and translocation of problem individuals, and even culling. The latter intervention would only be considered when all other management techniques have failed.

This situation is complicated further in that beavers are not currently protected by law in the UK, although they are a European Protected Species on the continent. It is likely, however, that they will become protected in England over the coming years. The decision of the Scottish Government on their future in Scotland will significantly influence their future protected status. Should they become protected here, this will certainly have implications for the ease with which they can be legally managed. In our view, clarifying how beavers will be managed in the longer term is the single most important issue to be addressed during the trial period.

If there is confidence that we can act and address conflict where it arises in a sensible manner, then the presence of the beaver in the countryside is

more likely to be embraced. Broad local public support for beavers is clear. Support for their management, however, is not yet evident. Many farmers and landowners remain deeply sceptical, and are rightly concerned that their livelihoods might be impacted if any future protected status does not allow them to promptly address conflict which impacts adversely on their businesses. Over the coming years the beaver trial partnership will be advising Natural England on best management practices, with Natural England given the task of ensuring that appropriate legislation and management frameworks are in place to allow beavers to be protected, but their adverse impacts to be minimised. This is the primary challenge that lies ahead.

Another important part of the trial will be education. Much misinformation still exists about beavers. This hinders informed debate on their value to society and the countryside. Many people still believe that they eat fish, for example, whilst they are in fact vegetarian. The more the awareness of this species and the benefits and potential risks of its re-introduction are understood, the better chance this trial has of success.

We are looking forward to working as a key member of the re-introduction trial partnership over the coming years and building our understanding of the behaviour and impacts of this species on the River Otter. This re-introduction trial is one of the most exciting initiatives in conservation. The presence of beavers in our rivers can potentially provide multiple benefits: healthier rivers, improved wildlife, flood control, and greater public connection with, and understanding of, the countryside. However, the trial brings with it a number of risks and how we address these risks will be a key factor on which the success of the trial re-introduction will ultimately be judged.

- Dr Sam Bridgewater holds a BSc in Plant Science (Sheffield University), MSc in Forestry (Oxford University) and a PhD in Conservation Biology (Edinburgh University). He has previously co-ordinated a Landscape Partnership Scheme in Wester Ross. He has published more than 20 academic research papers and two books.