

## CHAPTER NINE

# “Float in the middle of the heath”

### 1. CHUN DOWNS

CHUN DOWNS FORMS PART OF A LARGE EXPANSE OF OPEN HEATHLAND INCORPORATING Higher Downs and Castle Downs (Chun Downs East) all at present unsullied by any fences, gates or cattle grids. It includes the iconic prehistoric sites of Chun Castle Iron Age hillfort and Chun Quoit dating from c.3500-2500 BC, as well as prehistoric and medieval field systems. It is also crossed by the Tinnerns Way overland track from St Just to St Ives and the area has been popular for horse riders and walkers for many decades. The whole area is currently open access land and registered common land, as well as a Scheduled Ancient Monument.



(09.A) Cornwall Wildlife Trust notice board.

Chun Downs (West) is a Nature Reserve owned by the Cornwall Wildlife Trust [CWT] and previously under an ESA agreement with the farmer at Carne Farm, Morvah, which ended on 30th April 2012 after a cost of over £66,000 and, since 1st December 2012, forms part of a 10 year Entry Level plus Higher Level Stewardship agreement covering some 112 hectares.

Higher Downs has been registered common land for some decades and is owned by three private persons with rights to graze cattle;<sup>1</sup> it was under an ESA agreement which ended on

30th April 2012 after a total cost of about £11,000. Since 1st December 2012 the area has been part of a 10 year HLS agreement. Castle Downs (Chun Downs East) is, as far as I am aware, owned by several persons and is, according to a Defra map, not under any agri-environment agreement at present.

Notwithstanding the large amounts of money expended on ESA agreements the whole of Chun Downs was declared by an English Heritage risk assessment in May 2007 to be long neglected and overgrown, with dense gorse and heather, and significant areas of bracken and bramble. The quoit near the hilltop is surrounded by very short grass, due to wear by visitors.

“... There are common grazing rights, but these are not used due to the lack of fencing. The area is well used by walkers and riders, who tend to be channelled along pathways by the scrub. It has been affected by uncontrolled heath fires, notably in 2003, though these are checked at the quoit by the scrub free ring of ground there, and at the hillfort on the summit by stony ramparts. Overall the monument is thought to be at high risk. Features within it have particular needs, involving monitoring and managing vegetation and localised visitor erosion; in general the ideal management would be scrub control through burning/cutting, and then grazing”.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. HEATH PROJECT

FROM AS EARLY AS AUGUST 2005 MOST OF THE WORKS UNDERTAKEN UNDER HEATH ON THE Nature Reserve – the only part of this large area to have been ‘targeted’ – consisted of assessments of bracken clearance, planned bracken control, and site visits by a contractor and an officer of the Cornwall Wildlife Trust. By October 2005 bracken control was taking place with more planned over the following three months – in fact this continued for at least a year and, in early 2008, bracken clearance apparently took place using scythes.<sup>3</sup> No other work is known to have taken place.

Problems with stock-proofing must have been encountered since, although considered a ‘target’ under the HEATH Project, the 22 hectares of Chun Downs was classified at the end of the Project as “Challenging to progress” although the area was expected to enter Higher Level Stewardship when the ESA ended in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

As no fencing had taken place on Chun Downs by the time HEATH infrastructure works had finished across West Penwith at the end of March 2009 we assumed this area was ‘safe’. However, to satisfy ourselves that this was still the case – now that more fencing/grazing was being undertaken through Higher Level Stewardship schemes on areas other than previous HEATH Project ‘targets’ – a query was sent to CWT during March 2010: “I wonder if CWT has plans for future fencing and grazing of Chun Downs. Would be interested to know. Thanks.” The reply from the Reserves Manager stated: “Further to your enquiry via the CWT website I can confirm that CWT currently has no plans for fencing/grazing at Chun Downs.” (Note: apart from place names there was still no indication that this area of moorland was anything other than a single large entity.)

A response from CWT in November 2011 explained that they decided not to carry out stock-proofing on their nature reserve of Chun Downs under HEATH because:

“With funding from the HEATH project CWT decided to carry out major works at Bakers Pit (near Nancledra). Knowing that the works were ambitious we felt taking on further sites

would be stretching us too much, which in hindsight was very sensible. Bakers Pit Nature Reserve boundaries actually meet up with physical boundaries on the ground such as existing Cornish hedges or fences that have existed for many years. Whereas our ownership boundaries at Chun float in the middle of the heath.”<sup>5</sup>

### 3. HIGHER DOWNS

IT WAS NOT UNTIL I RECEIVED A PHONE CALL FROM THE FARMER AT HIGHER KEIGWIN INVITING SPM to a meeting, including an official from CWT in her personal capacity who had carried out the Farm Environmental Plan, that the situation all changed. On 1st November 2011 we



(09.B) *Above*: Looking from Chun Downs over the Quoit to Higher Downs

(09.C) Looking across Castle Downs from Trehyllys Farm.

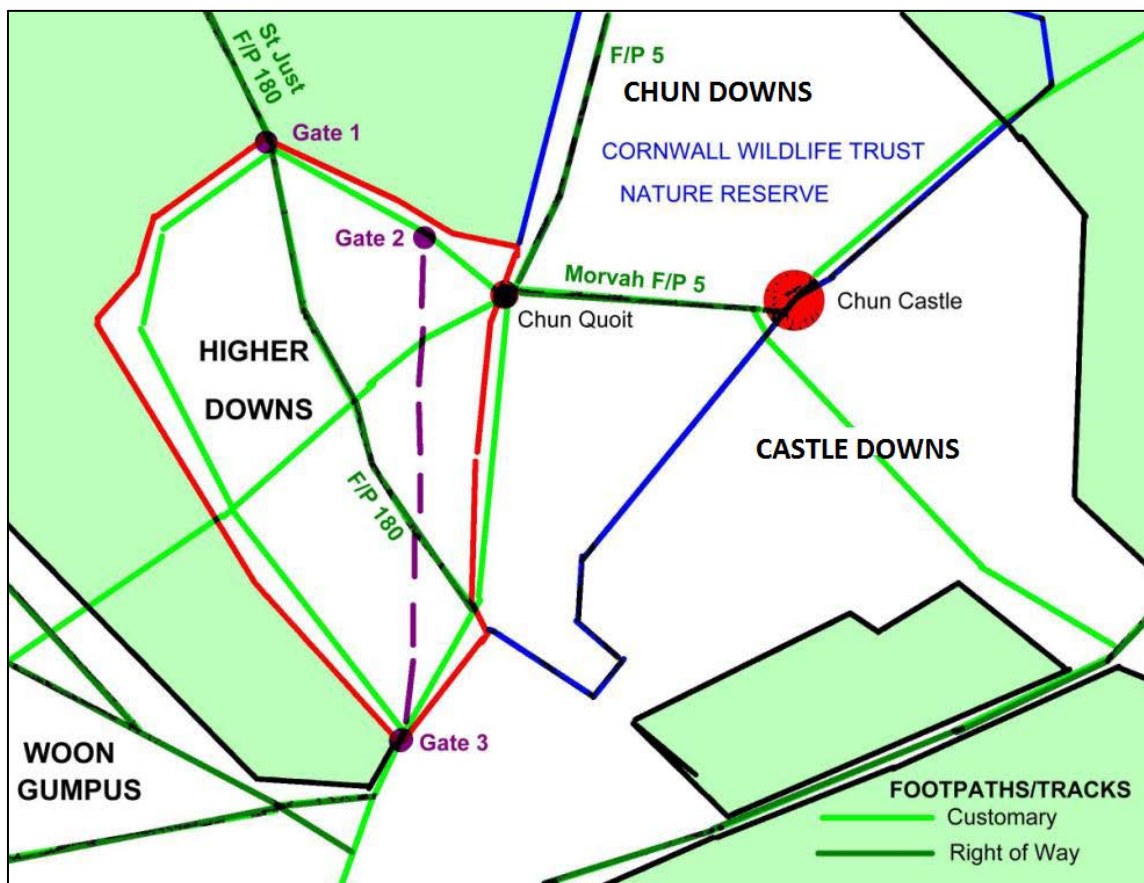


were taken around the area of Higher Downs where proposed stock-proofing works were shown to us and discussed at length. we were not impressed with this charm offensive – and said so.

At the end of May 2012 both Liz Cox [CWT] and Lisa Guy [Higher Keigwin Farm] attended a meeting of St Just Town Council<sup>6</sup> to discuss proposed moorland grazing at Higher Keigwin Farm (i.e. including Higher Downs) under a Higher Level Stewardship Agreement following a recent site visit attended by Councillors Morris and Thomas. CWT gave a brief summary of the work of the Trust:

“Two options were proposed to graze two areas of common land at Tor Noon and Higher Downs. Option 1: graze each moorland area in small compartments, option 2: grazing both areas as a whole using existing gates and Cornish hedges with an area of temporary electric fencing, to be used when cattle were grazing. Option 2 would require consent from the Secretary of State.”

English Heritage had been consulted and Schedule Ancient Monument Consent had been received – other organisations consulted included Save Penwith Moors, PAROW, British Horse Society and the Ramblers, as well as the AONB and Cornwall Council’s Historic Environment Service: “The overriding objective of the scheme was to introduce sensitive management of the farmland, whilst preserving public access to, and enjoyment of, the moorland”.



(09.D) Sketch map of proposed stock-proofing.  
 Purple items = proposed new stock-proofing on Registered Common Land.  
 Pale Green = fields..

In the summer of 2012 an article was published in *The Cornishman* regarding fencing and grazing in the area around Chun Quoit: “New Proposals to fence off areas of ancient west Cornwall moorland to allow cattle to graze on it will be ‘vigorously opposed’, says campaign group Save Penwith Moors.”<sup>7</sup>

Later on the same year, writing about Higher Downs and Tor Noon, the CWT web site<sup>8</sup> proclaimed: “Local people support grazing proposals”. This statement was apparently based on feedback from just 13 people who attended two information walks in July and would mean that the area would be crossed by ‘unobtrusive’ temporary electric fencing. No mention was made of the two gates SPM were told of during our ‘consultation walk’ in November. We take exception to this highly biased and disingenuous headline based on the opinions of just 13 people – I wonder how many of these, or their close relatives, benefited from agri-environmental payments? No mention also that Higher Downs was under an ESA agreement and why no beneficial management had been carried out then?

It is, I think, highly significant that whereas the CWT did not want to stock-proof their nature reserve of Chun Downs because their ownership boundaries “float in the middle of the heath”, their official – even in her personal capacity – seemed to be quite content to promote installing temporary electric fencing (and gates?) on adjacent open Higher Downs where the boundaries with both Chun Downs and Castle Downs also float in the middle of the heath. What exactly is going on here?



(09.E) Sketch of proposed gate, hedging and temporary electric fencing with the Quoit in the distance.

#### 4. HIGHER LEVEL STEWARDSHIP [HLS]

IN ANSWER TO A QUERY IN SEPTEMBER 2011 WHETHER THE CWT HAD ANY PLANS TO FENCE AND graze their land on Chun Downs, I received this reply from the CWT West Cornwall Reserves Manager: “A local farmer has the tenancy for our part of Chun until 2020 so it is up to him if he wants to enter the site into HLS. I’ve looked at the site with an eye to management and some areas would benefit from grazing, particularly those with the most Purple Moor-grass. We are aware that it is part of a well loved open landscape and would therefore consult widely with local people on how this would be achieved.”<sup>9</sup>

Following the site meeting on Higher Downs an email sent to Natural England three days later elicited the response: “I know that we are targeting this area for HLS (along with Chun Downs and Hale Downs) and the adviser has been in discussion with the farmer. I don’t know

all the details of this particular proposal though, but I will discuss with the adviser and Wildlife Trust to find out more and let you know.” It was after this that SPM added Chun Downs to our list of campaign sites.

As far as is known the whole of Chun Downs area – apart from Castle Downs – has never undergone grazing since at least the 1950s, if ever in earlier times. What is certain is that this area of moorland has self-managed for at least half a century and done so rather well, although heavy vegetation to the east of the castle may need to be controlled to allow improved access, especially important since this is part of the Tinnors Way.

It is a concern that HEATH/HLS has largely targeted areas which do not require urgent management while ignoring those that do. Farmers would not be grazing most of these areas without Natural England intervention and the lure of considerable funding: it was uneconomical and unproductive to graze for decades prior to HEATH/HLS. However, cutting bracken and gorse for domestic and farming use was done on a huge scale and had a far greater impact on the landscape as is clear from old photographs.

What seems apparent is that this one-size-fits-all policy is a deeply damaging one. There are areas of the Penwith landscape where grazing is certainly required for management. Equally there are areas where it is inappropriate and, for those areas, alternative methods have to be carefully considered but should not disqualify funding for owners or tenants. No one need lose out, but this unique landscape deserves better and far more sensitive treatment than the ill-considered ideas currently being encouraged by Natural England.

While acknowledging the time and effort expended by the farmer to manage Higher Downs as sensitively as possible, it remains an unpalatable fact that if this project is not stopped then this present large unobstructed open access moorland will be dissected by the imposition of alien gates and fencing for the first time, even if fencing is only there in the summer months, and recreational users will – as in so many other ‘right to roam’ areas – be subjected to the unpredictable and potentially dangerous behaviour of grazing stock as well as loss of the visual ‘open beauty’ of yet another area of iconic moorland.

However, the new common land status for both Chun Downs and Castle Downs will now give a degree of protection from the previous situation where unaccountable installation of temporary and/or permanent works could take place at will. Despite recent threats of fencing the whole area remains free of stock-proofing infrastructure.



[09.F] Chun Quoit – summer sunrise and, below, in winter.



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<sup>1</sup> <http://common-land.com/lands/view/3292>

<sup>2</sup> Email 1st December 2011 Cornwall Council Historic Environment & English Heritage, from a quote from the relevant risk assessments on the English Heritage database.

<sup>3</sup> HEATH Project Time Sheets ©Natural England & Selected notes from Activity Report by NE (Truro) submitted 31st December 2005 and signed 20th January 2006 to Interreg IIIB ©Natural England

<sup>4</sup> Heritage Grants Final Grant Payment Request and Completion Report – Final dated 17/03/2009 covering the period May – December 2008.

<sup>5</sup> 29/11/2011 CWT West Cornwall Reserves Manager

<sup>6</sup> St Just Town Council minutes 28th May 2012 TC35 <http://www.stjust.org/stjusttc/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/m.280512.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See “Fencing proposals met with defiance from campaigners” at <http://www.cornishman.co.uk/Fencing-proposals-met-defiance-campaigners/story-16303220-detail/story.html>

<sup>8</sup> Previous web link no longer active

<sup>9</sup> CWT West Cornwall Reserves Manager email dated 13th September 2011