

# Interview with Layland and Gill Branfield

## Hosts for the English National Sheepdog Trial 2024



**Moorlands Farm - Princetown**

## **Cumbria, Exmoor, Dartmoor and a Love of Sheepdog Trials**

Gill and I moved to Moorlands in October 1987 at times of the big storm. We moved from Exmoor where we were helping my Dad on his farm at Hawkridge and we had been there for three years and then prior to that we had spent three years working for Lord Inglewood at Wythop Estate in Cumbria. This is where the dog trialling came in and started as the person I worked with ran dogs and provided our work was done in the winter we spent all our time at trial fields or organising trials. This was Northwest Moorland Nursery Trials where I was a committee member and ran my first dog in October 1981 in a trial at Joe Relphs fathers farm who is now President of the ISDA. That gave me the inspiration for trialling and at that time I bought a lifetimes membership of the ISDA which was at least a months wages and I did it before I told Gill (!). So, the early days were with the Cumbrian men and dogs doing some trialling, breeding pups and getting to know people. I got my first pup in 1978 when I was at the Northumberland College of Agriculture (77-78) and then when I was on a gap year in America my brothers looked after him and I took on the training when I got home.

In 1984 when we moved back to Exmoor I became a member of the Devon and Exmoor Sheepdog Society and used to run a trial or two on my fathers farm and used to do some judging as well. Mervyn Bennallick and Ernie Duke used to use me as a judge on Exmoor and we then moved to Dartmoor and had dogs, but work impacted on my spare time. I needed to earn a living! In Cumbria you could turn up at a trial and enter on the day and could do two or three on the same day. Perhaps Cumbria, Northumberland and County Durham in order to get the points. So I found on Dartmoor as you needed to enter a fortnight or three weeks in advance I couldn't always make it which wasn't fair on the organisers. So I didn't stop altogether. I ran when I could. We moved to Moorlands and had 90 ewes and 6 cows and an old tractor, dung spreader and a Subaru car. When I went away scanning I took the car and Gill would have a taxi to go shopping and would go down to the bridge and get a lift from there with three small children. I did run a couple of trials here in the late 1980's or early 1990's. I believe if you run a dog you should make your best effort to run a trial.

## **Sheepdog Types and Bloodlines**

I break my own dogs. I like a bare skinned dog and back, white and tan. First dog I had was Ben and he was a grandson of a dog called Wiston Cap, his father was Tullys Glen and mother was Archie Tait's fleece (a well-respected bitch line in that area). I can trace all the bloodlines in my head. The Cap dogs didn't suit everyone, but I bought this one off the shepherd at Northumberland College. He was a big back white and tan a little hairier than I would have liked. They always said you need a dog on the fell which won't overheat. I have had a woolly dog that has overheated and died of heat exhaustion. When I was in Cumbria I bought a bitch pup by the in fashion Bobby Dalizells Dryden Joe. His father was Thomas's Don. When I had this bitch I didn't find out her ancestors until 1987 / 88 when I went to scan sheep in Ayrshire for a chap called Willie Welsh. He had a nice dog called Don which was the grandfather of the bitch I had at home. I worked out from there that there was also an old guy on Exmoor called Martin Chugg with the same breed, who my brother had a dog from. This bitch was the line all the way done through but now sadly I have lost the blood line. When I did the scanning I would go to SW Ayrshire for three weeks. I used to work the scanning around when there were nursery trials and we provided a cup for them. I have all that stashed away in my memory don't ask me what happened last week but I can reel off a pedigree of a dog going back a bit! In Cumbria we had 1600 ewes and I had 800 to look after so we needed dogs that

could work across the fell. We now have two dogs but could do with three. Currently I have a young one coming on and an old one.



Layland prefers a bare skinned dog but the 'Cap' line were a longer haired collie type

### **Farming at Moorlands and Preparations for the Trial**

We run about 100 Stabiliser cows and 400 Swaledales and 50 Herdwicks, 110 Texels and Mules and 15 Grey Faced Dartmoor and 15 Blue Faced Leicester. The Dartmoor sheep came from the cowman at Dartmoor Prison whose family originally had a large farm near Wotter and were keen breeders. When we took the tenancy of Prince Hall in 1993 I let him have some grazing and he gave our daughter Emily a couple of ewes, her 'Fluffy sheep'. Unfortunately during foot and mouth they got slaughtered apart from two hoggs and I promised Emily that they wouldn't take them but I couldn't do anything about it. So at the time Pauline Harvey was selling her Greyfaces as she moved out of Grattan and they were genuine hardy sheep and that took us up to 10 and every other year I buy the best ram I can. It has taken us 20 years but now they live out in the snow and lamb on their own and I haven't seen one born this year. There have been years when the Greyfaces on paper at a per ewe basis have earnt more than the other flocks if you include the wool clip as well. There was one year I forgot to take the ram out and they lambed in January at 1100' in the snow and they were fine. I am hoping one day someone will want an easy care Greyface. They basically manage on almost zero just a little supplement when needed at lambing if the weather is poor. I have one young ewe I can show this year she is a fair sized ewe.

Moorlands and Prince Hall is 565 acres in the SDA and the National will be on Prince Hall. The Trial field is about 43 HA or 100 acres with a further 45 acres as sheep holding, camping and parking. I will have to find somewhere for 200 ewes and lambs which normally graze the trial field and then need to accommodate someone else's sheep. Would be nice to use ours but the way we gather them they are too familiar with the area. The problem we have with the

sheep is that the ewes need to be weaned, udders dried up and ready to go. Might be able to find some hogs or someone with lowland sheep. Got to be thinking about this at the beginning of July if you need to wean lambs and let ewes dry up.

We have put cows to bull early so we can move cows out earlier onto the rough to go to bulls again. There are 40 acres to cut early as we usually cut on August bank holiday so we have to alter the system to get the ewes and lambs away so fields can be freshly cut at the beginning of August. Doesn't necessarily suit the farm or systems. Need to get my ass in gear and get sheep sorted. It's important we focus on getting 5 sheep in front of a man and a dog and don't get too distracted from the purpose of the Trial.

### **Trials, Committees and Giving Something Back**

When I was in Cumbria we used to run a lot of trials and drive around looking at fields and considering what is a good trial venue. I always thought one day it would be nice to host the National, maybe 40 odd years ago I was thinking that. Never did I dream as we are getting on towards retirement that this opportunity was going to happen and that's why when Jed and Joe came forward and said they were looking at the newtake I agreed to help. Although it's a year's hassle, what's a year in a lifetime? The guys I know out of Cumbria, we go back most years to buy sheep or visit and I usually manage to get to their first nursery trial. Jo is the secretary of that nursery trial and my mate is on the committee and I meet some of the Northumberland farmers I know and the guys out of Scotland and Lancashire. All those guys I have run against at various trials. I like to think I am providing a trial for them. It's payback time for Layland Branfield. I have had a lot of fun and put a lot of time into it and it's my time now to have a party.



Layland and Kenny Watson discussing sheep

Many of those with qualified dogs treat a visit to the National as a holiday. Those boys only move out of their area for something like this if they have a dog entered for the National, they will come. Some even with no dogs qualified. I was talking to Derek Scrimoger at the first nursery of the season at his place. I would be surprised if he doesn't have a dog qualified. Mark Elliot was quizzing me also. Others at the tup sales were curious. Joe Relph was booking in dogs so we were able to discuss issues that might arise. I am hoping that come the trial days I don't have too much to do and I can enjoy meeting up with people I haven't seen for a long time. We will have a house full with lots of family and extended family coming back to Moorlands.

### **Dartmoor's Chance to Shine**

It will be what Dartmoor wants to make. It hasn't happened here before and we hope it will show off Dartmoor in its best light. My priority is having a good test of a lot of good dogs and running the trial. If we can have a lot of people come and watch it and a lot of people contribute to the cost of running it, that will be good. What I am keen on is to test the dogs and have the sheepdog community here at Moorlands. We have had a tremendous amount of offers of help which we will need in the last fortnight or three weeks but people are keen to get going now but we can't get enough work in front of them. I am hoping that the agricultural community of Dartmoor will be able to drop in and drop out a bit as we are all committed at that time of year to doing lots of stuff. I would like to think people can find the time to come for a few hours to have a look and have a chat. Then disappear back to what they need to do. Hopefully it will be four days of people coming and going. I have this concept that at the end of it I want to be able to celebrate what's been achieved. Twenty years ago, we had a significant event and things either happened before (2001) it or after it. I hope the National will be a new notable event for Dartmoor.

### **The Challenge**

I am not sure if we have to do anything formally, it will depend on who's coming. Hopefully we can wander around chat to people and make sure things are functioning and sort out problems as they occur. It will give credibility to Dartmoor in the sheepdog trialling community. People know what the north of England and Wales is like but Dartmoor is not so widely known and I hope it will give credibility. Hopefully as a test of dogs as people tend to assume when you're in the southwest it's a bit soft. Peter and I are on the same wavelength in that we believe the course should be a test of a dog and a dog needs to find its sheep and it might be that people will have to send their dog and for 300 and of the 400 yards the sheep will be out of sight of the dog. Sometimes a dog may need to turn in or bend out and practically it might need to over run or cut the sheep short. Everything is perfect according to what the sheep are doing. As far as I am concerned it's a working task and if the dog should be thinking for itself, I wouldn't knock points off. Those Cumbrian men send their dogs for sheep and they will keep walking but the dog knows where the sheep are and they will bring them on. The dogs have to think for themselves because they can't see the men and in places the shepherds can't walk to the sheep because it's so in-accessible.

It's a seven (AM) till seven (PM) long three days. Joe said to me that in Ireland he was starting at 4.30AM most days. I will probably sleep over there and not bother walking home. How it is going to happen I am not certain, but it will, and we will sort it as it goes. There is a campsite with toilets and showers for competitors. We hope that the pubs and other campsites will

benefit and I hope that the tourism industry notices a difference as the public will be coming too.