

DARTMOOR AND THE COUNTY COUNCIL OF DEVONSHIRE.

BY W. F. COLLIER.

(Read at Okehampton, July, 1895.)

WHEN the Devonshire Association held their Annual Meeting at Southmolton, about this time last year, I read a paper on "Dartmoor for Devonshire," in which I argued, to the best of my ability, that, following the example of the City of London, whose Council bought Epping Forest for their citizens, the County Council of Devonshire should buy Dartmoor for the Devonshire folk. I sent a copy of my paper, with the author's compliments, to every member of the County Council, Aldermen and Councillors, numbering 104; and out of all these representatives of Devon I got one letter in reply, which was unfavourable to the proposal. Two of my papers came back to me unopened, because they had been forwarded to another address, and there was a half-penny to pay on them.

Not a word, as far as I know, has been said in the County Council on the subject of this proposal, and the County Council has treated it with the silence of the grave.

I do not complain; it does not concern me as a simple member of this Association. I am quite willing to think that the paper was not equal to the occasion—that it was not worth the while of any County Councillor to read it, as a piece of writing—and that it fully deserved the contempt of those eminent persons as a suggestion to them of a subject that might well occupy their minds.

But the scheme to purchase Dartmoor for Devonshire had the unanimous approval of this Devonshire Association, at their annual meeting; it also had the approval of the Dartmoor Preservation Society, and of the Mercantile Associations of Plymouth and of Tavistock—all of which

consist of persons worthy of the notice of the County Council. This Devonshire Association alone might inspire some little respect, sufficient to induce the members of the County Council to take some steps to consider such a proposal as the purchase of Dartmoor.

The Corporation of the City of London began a suit in the Law Courts, in the Epping Forest case, in July, 1871, and the Forest was thrown open by the Queen herself, on the 6th May, 1882. The Corporation of the City, therefore, thought the Forest of so much importance that they devoted eleven years to the hard work of acquiring Epping Forest of 6000 acres. The Devonshire County Council think so little of the Forest of Dartmoor of 56,000 acres, that it is not even worth their while to mention it, though it must have been before the public for some time. It is true that the County Council has been re-elected during the year, but the word Dartmoor has not been uttered by any one of the members of the Council, that I ever heard of. Their minds are full of police, roads, bridges, technical education, and such like affairs, and we all know that we are a rate-fearing people. Still, the acquisition of Dartmoor would, at least, be worth discussion, if it were merely to find out whether buying it were possible, and if so, whether it would pay a rent, and be a saving of rates, or otherwise.

In the case of Epping Forest, bought by the City of London, there was nothing, except the Forest as a public pleasure ground, for the Corporation of London to buy and to protect. Whereas in the case of Dartmoor there is the water supply of more than half the County to be protected; and so far from Dartmoor being an expense and a charge on the rates, it is not unlikely that it would return enough, in existing circumstances, to cover all expenses, and be no charge whatever on the rates. As it is a Forest, it might also offer a field for forestry, an art much neglected, and a technical school for forestry might engage the attention of the Technical School Committee on some parts of the Moor.

The City of London has cleared the way for all future Corporations to proceed to acquire the open spaces available for their people, and the Local Government Acts expressly empower Local Councils to take their commons, village greens, and open spaces under their care.

It is hardly necessary again to say that all Devonshire men, if not Cornish men also, have rights on Dartmoor, which rights can be made good in the Courts of Law. The City of London has established such-like rights by means of

judgments obtained in the Courts of Law, and they cannot now be disputed. Therefore the County Council have simply to take charge of the interests of the Devonshire folk on the Forest of Dartmoor.

Whether it be legal or not legal, open spaces are enclosed, and have been enclosed for generations, unless they are protected. No man's purse or watch would be safe unless it were protected by the law, acting through a police constable. So it has been, and will be, with Dartmoor. There will be nothing of it left, the sources of the streams will be destroyed, and no rivers worth talking about will flow from its watersheds, if some authority does not undertake its protection.

I do not doubt for a moment that the Devonshire County Council, with its Aldermen and Councillors, is of the greatest advantage and use to the county. It has taken steps, by means of Technical Dairy Schools, to improve off the face of the earth our Devonshire cream and butter, and to substitute separators for the scalding process in the treatment of milk. I would far rather they would let the Devonshire cream alone, and turn their attention to Dartmoor.

This Devonshire Association consists of a great number of Devonshire men and women, who have naturally taken a supreme interest in Devonshire and Devonshire matters; geology, archeology, Domesday, dialect, and what not! on which many pages of writing are now to be found in the volumes of the published *Transactions*. Dartmoor itself has occupied no small part of the attention of the Devonshire Association, as the volumes of the *Transactions* can testify. It might be supposed, that when a member of the County Council were elected, the first thing he would do would be to seek to join this Association. But it is a remarkable fact that of all the 455 members of the Devonshire Association only twenty-two of them are members of the County Council. The County Council have this advantage over the Devonshire Association, that whereas all the members of the Devonshire Association cannot be members of the County Council, all the members of the County Council can be members of the Devonshire Association. But as they have not availed themselves of that privilege, it is not surprising that the Devonshire Association and the County Council should look at Devonshire from different points of view. The puzzle for the Devonshire Association is, to find out the point of view of the County Council, and to discover how it is the County Council have,

apparently, never heard of Dartmoor as a place of any interest or importance whatever. I suppose the County Council consists of men of business, whilst the Devonshire Association consists of men and women of Science, Art, and Literature; and the County Council may think that men of business have no business on Dartmoor, if they are to have their minds confused with such things as Science, Art, and Literature. If the County Council occupies itself only with roads, bridges, and police, halving the care of the police with Quarter Sessions, they can have nothing in common with the Devonshire Association; but the County Council has also concerned itself with Technical Education, and the Devonshire Association has devoted itself to educating the people for years, though they might differ from the County Council as to what may be technical in education, especially in the matter of Devonshire cream and butter.

A most surprising difference, however, between those two great Devonshire authorities has developed itself. The Devonshire Association devotes itself in a great measure to Dartmoor; on the other hand the County Council appears not to be aware that it exists. There is another rather surprising fact. The London County Council, a kindred body to the Devonshire County Council, are so much alive to the value of Dartmoor that they have actually promoted a Bill in Parliament, happily withdrawn for the present, to acquire Dartmoor for a water supply, and, in the face of that remarkable state of things, the Devonshire County Council, judging from their sayings and doings, are not aware that there is any water on Dartmoor, or any river of pure water flowing therefrom for the benefit of Devonshire folk. I should imagine that no County Council that ever was elected could be so apathetic, on a question of the water supply of at least half their county.

The County Council may think that Dartmoor is quite safe, if they give a thought to it at all. An Act of Parliament has been passed, which practically, it is said, repeals the Statute of Merton, and no more inclosures can take place. But why was not the Statute of Merton repealed, instead of a roundabout way taken to make it inoperative? Dartmoor is not safe, as we too well know, and will not be safe, until the County Council has acquired it, and then if our representatives do not take care of it, it will be our own fault. Every year some part of Dartmoor is practically lost to us, and even now there are crazy notions of Company Promoters, for ruining their shareholders by

turning the Dartmoor bogs into peat fuel, which would be destructive of our water supply. Is a fine water supply of no value, and is such a thing, of infinite importance as it is in these modern days of large populations, to be trifled with, and be allowed to slip away from us? The County Council ought to satisfy themselves that Dartmoor is safe before they let it severely alone; but no, they never mention it, its name is never heard; and if they took the trouble to inquire, they would soon find how far from safe it is.

It is true that we are a rate-fearing people, and the County Council may fear the rate-fearing public. But they spend rates on the police, and no amount of policemen can compare with Dartmoor in importance, taking into consideration the nature of the property to be protected. I will run the risk of again quoting the old wise saw, which should never be forgotten:—

“The Law condemns both man and woman,
Who steals the goose from off the common,
But lets the greater felon loose,
Who steals the common from the goose!”

As the police protect our geese, for which the ratepayers pay them, so ought the County Council to take care of our commons for us.

My opinion from the first was, that Devonshire is too large for one County Council, and that the county ought to have been divided into two parts, for the purposes of Local Government.

Dartmoor would then have been in the Western Division, and would have been of the first importance to the Western County Council, instead of being of no importance at all in the minds of the County Council that sits at Exeter. Exeter is too far from many of the districts to be anything but a trouble and a burden to the Aldermen and Councillors who happen to represent them, especially as the work is done by constant and repeated attendance on Committees. The result is that those who live within easy reach of Exeter rule the County, and they are of those who do not know or care much about Dartmoor.

Although commons, open spaces, village greens, rights of way, are especially placed in charge of Local Authorities by the Local Government Act, 1894, and the Local Councils are called upon to protect such rights, yet there exists a certain amount of indifference to these most valuable public possessions, as they may well be called, and they have time

out of mind been allowed to lapse by neglect; some for the want of authority to protect them, some from carelessness and ignorance of their great value, and some from the dread of the monstrous law charges which we must all pay for the luxury of justice, especially in matters relating to the land.

The County Council have certainly had a great deal of work thrown upon them by the Local Government Act, and it may be said that they have had no time for anything else. If such an excuse had been given for not taking up the subject of Dartmoor, or even if Dartmoor had been alluded to as a large part of Devonshire, we could patiently wait a short time for the leisure of the County Council; but if no such place as Dartmoor existed they could not have been more silent, or more indifferent to its claims as a Devonshire Common, Forest, Chase, or whatever it may be called, on which the public have valuable rights.

It seems to me that not only the County Council, but also the District Councils, Parish Councils, and parish meetings will have to be urged to look after their rights of common and rights of way; there appears to be so much indifference to their real value on the part of leading men. It is not at all easy to say why there should be so much negligence of what are infinitely valuable rights. If there had been any appreciation of such rights whatever, Dartmoor would have been a matter for the consideration of the County Council from the first.

No one for a moment would suppose that the valuation of such a forest as Dartmoor for purchase could be an easy, simple affair, still less could it be supposed that the Duchy of Cornwall would show any anxiety to sell such a property. The sale by the Duchy, and the purchase by the County Council, must be of necessity an affair of importance, demanding very serious consideration on both sides. It has been too hastily assumed, and it has been stated in the newspapers rather too confidently, that the Duchy would be willing to sell.

Exmoor, which was a true Royal Forest, was sold by George III. to a subject of His Majesty, a private gentleman, though it is still called a Forest.

The County Council have taken some interest in Exmoor, part of which is at present in Somersetshire, and have endeavoured to get the County boundaries altered, which are now absurdly irregular, that the whole of Exmoor may be included in Devonshire, as it clearly ought to be. In the reign of King John the whole of Devonshire was disafforested,

with the exception of Dartmoor and Exmoor, Exmoor Forest was, therefore, then in Devonshire, and the County Council are only right in claiming it.

But why neglect Dartmoor? If a private gentleman could buy Exmoor of the King, surely the County Council can buy Dartmoor of the Duchy of Cornwall. Perhaps as Dartmoor is part of the property of the Duchy of Cornwall, the County Council may have a vague idea it is in Cornwall.

As George III. sold Exmoor Forest, it may be assumed that the Duchy of Cornwall might sell Dartmoor to a public body, such as the Devonshire County Council, at an adequate price, for the sake of the public of Devonshire. And it is probable that the Devonshire County Council might manage such a peculiar property to greater advantage, than officials in a London office. If by the transaction the net income from the property, reckoned on a fair business-like calculation, would not be reduced, would be more easily collected, and more regularly received, it would be some advantage to the Duchy to sell the property, which at present must be rather troublesome to manage. The great advantage to both sides would be that the Devonshire people would get a property of extraordinary value to them, for many reasons, and the Duchy would get rid of property of no value whatever to them, except the mere income in money that it brought in.

It is a fact that the London County Council actually promoted a Bill in Parliament in 1894, to enable them to obtain water for the supply of London from Dartmoor, which attempt to take our water from us, most serious as it was to Devonshire folks, does not seem to have been worthy of even so much as a casual remark by any one member of the Devonshire County Council.

If the London County Council first treat with the Duchy, and propose to buy the whole of Dartmoor, for the sake of a copious supply of the purest water to London, what would be thought of the apathy of our County Council then? The half of Devonshire, west of the Exe and south of the Taw, would be grievous sufferers. They would see the London County Council masters of Dartmoor, managing it for their own sole advantage, and going with a light heart with their enormous wealth into the Law Courts, to test the validity of all our rights—rights which our County Council had neglected to bestow a thought upon.

I can see Dartmoor, in my mind's eye, turned to good account by the London County Council in their own London fashion—Cockney villas in all directions, with railway and

tramway approaches; large reservoirs in the place of our river heads, now silent spots for thoughtful men, far from the madding crowd; perhaps boats and electric launches on them, with bands of music, and a superfluity of the sort of civilization which is peculiar to this *fin-de-siècle*; tourists on every remaining Tor, the granite of which may not have been good enough for London Police Stations, and trippers staring at the reservoirs, calling them pretty, like the Serpentine.

I loath the very thought of our pure water, caught as it is by our high hills from the heavens, and held for us by those blessed bogs, conducted into pipes, taken to London by Act of Parliament, eventually to flush the sewers of the modern Babylon. To what base uses we may return!

The Local Government Act, 1888, under which the County Councils were established, was unfortunately not so carefully protective of our rights of common, of our open spaces, and of our rights of way, as the Local Government Act, 1894. Dartmoor Forest itself is in the Parish of Lydford, but the rights over it, as has already been said, are very extensive. All the parishes around it, whose Parish Councils or Parish Meetings have powers under the Act, such parishes also being included in several districts with their Councils, exercise these, to them, very valuable rights. Much of the details of the Local Government Act, 1894, were entrusted to the County Councils to be, by them, made effective; it is not, therefore, asking too much of the County Council to call upon them to undertake the protection of the rights of common of so many parishes in the County.

The quantity of land that has been enclosed and appropriated by the Duchy, all of which has been shown to be illegal, is astonishing; and although the Duchy may now be protected by the statutes, there is surely in such a body as the Duchy of Cornwall a moral sense, in the face of the judgment of Jessel on the right of inclosure, which would move the Duchy to treat readily with the County Council, if the Duchy were properly approached. If no approach is made at all, if the County Council shew no sign, take no interest whatever in Dartmoor, the natural conclusion on the part of the Duchy would be, that the Devonshire people do not value it, are careless of what becomes of it, and as it is a troublesome property for the Duchy to manage, that it had better be sold to the highest bidder.

It is not an uncommon characteristic in human nature not to know the value of what we have until we have lost it. When we have lost Dartmoor, there will be lamentations

throughout the land, but it will be too late, and we shall be crying over spilt milk, like little children who have not the foresight to see the value of what it is possible to lose.

I say, without hesitation, that it is the imperative duty of the County Council to take up this matter without further delay, and to exercise all their best powers, their knowledge of affairs, and the business talent at their command, to open a treaty for the purchase of Dartmoor with the Duchy of Cornwall, with all due propriety and respect for that Royal Office.

If it should be found that the London County Council had forestalled us, and had already entered into a treaty with the Duchy, we have only Parliament to protect us; and, in that case, we should have not only to promote a Bill in our own interest, but also to oppose, with all our might, the Bill of the London County Council, or of the Duchy itself, enabling the one to buy and the other to sell.

The water supply alone ought to be enough to rouse, for the sake of their rights, the men of Okehampton, of Tavistock, of Plymouth, Devonport, and Stonehouse, of Kingsbridge, of Dartmouth and Totnes, of Torquay, of Newton Abbot, of Teignmouth, of Ashburton and Buckfastleigh, of Moreton Hampstead, of Chagford, of Barnstaple, and the towns on the Taw.

Such a force would be ready to turn and rend the County Council, if, by their neglect, they lost their right to a full supply of pure water, their rights of common, and the right to enjoy free foot on the Forest.

If the present generation do not fully realise the value of the Forest, generations to come will, and will curse the apathy of those who lost it for Devonshire.

It is not too much for this, the Devonshire Association, to ask the Devonshire County Council to take the matter into serious consideration, without loss of time, seeing that loss of time may be loss of Dartmoor. A Committee might be appointed to inquire and report, which, at least, could put the County Council in possession of the facts—a Committee of men who have some sympathy with those of the West of Devon, who regard Dartmoor as a land of great peculiarity, of great utility, of surpassing interest; a land of natural beauty, in some respects the more wild the more beautiful, a study for those who delight to trace the relics of primitive Man, a land in which the gentle rain from Heaven droppeth in profusion, to cleanse and purify us, giving us rich, deep valleys and pastures, charming us with the scenery of woodland and river.