

Rural Ritual That Selects the Men for the "Gaits"

THE ADMINISTRATION of Austwick Stinted Pastures, like the British Constitution, is a thing you must be bred in if you are to understand it completely. Even the villagers of Austwick have difficulty in expounding it with accuracy.

Imagine telling a stranger to your house how to find a small object in a dark room. You have a detailed subconscious concept of the shape of the room and the arrangement of the furniture. He hasn't. Similarly, a stranger to the needs and purposes of sheep farming finds much in the lore of Austwick Stinted Pastures puzzling, because he is blind concerning things which, in the sight of the native, stick out plain as the bulk of Ingleborough.

To begin with the pastures are three—Moughton, which is something over 1,000; Ingleborough Pasture, or Long Scar, which is something less, and Oxenber, or Austwick Wood, whose size is difficult to judge, being variously estimated at 100 to 300 acres.

Into these three huge upland pastures on the slopes and fells of Ingleborough the farmers of Austwick turn their sheep from spring to autumn. A shepherd is appointed to tend each pasture for the season.

The Annual Meeting

The shepherds are appointed at a meeting held annually in February. This meeting took place in Austwick Parish Hall on Saturday night. The shepherds tender for the job, asking so much a "gait," or sheep.

Actually, a "gait" is a sheep's pasturage. Four "gaits" is the pasturage of a cow, eight that of a horse, ten that of a mare and foal. "Stinted" means that only a limited number of gaits or grazing rights, is allowed upon each pasture. Moughton's stint is nearly 600 gaits—a total divided in varying proportion among a number of farms.

The principle governing the fixing of the stint did not discover, but it seems to be based upon sound common sense, for one hears of detriment to the pasture in instances where it has been exceeded.

On Saturday night about thirty farmers were ranged on the bare benches of the Parish Hall, with a small table and a kitchen chair before them for the chairman when elected. One, John Chapman, being proposed for that office, announced that he would rather someone else took it. No-one paid any regard to that.

"I second John Chapman . . . all in favour . . ."

"Aye, well, I shall have to get on wi' it, then," says John Chapman, a young farmer, in cord breeches and polished black leggings, and takes the chair. "Are you going to have a secretary?" he asks.

Procedure

There is a general feeling that a secretary in addition to a chairman is an unnecessary luxury.

"Well, papers for the bank will have to be signed by more than one," says John Chapman. So another young farmer in a raincoat is elected as secretary.

Someone else is proposed for treasurer, it being announced that "he's not here, but it will be all right."

"He said he would have nothing to do wi' it," it is protested on behalf of the absent nominee.

"He'll have to. He's one of the biggest owners."

"Are you going to do this writing, or am I?" the chairman asks the secretary.

"Oh, you do that," the newly-elected secretary firmly assures him.

So the chairman gets out his fountain pen, and opens the leather-bound minute book, which contains the record of the meeting for over a hundred years—names, rules, and appointments in faded yellow, copper-plate of the 'sixties, 'fifties, 'forties, back to the stiffly-inscribed signatures of the early years of the century.

Chairman: If I don't follow it right, you'll have to tell me. Well, now then, Ingleborough Pasture. Has anybody been round the fences? What are they like? Just one gap at —? Well, you'll see that it gets put up, won't you? Now, then, tenders for Ingleborough."

The First Tender

A tender is passed up on a folded slip of paper.

"Tom Brown. . . 1s. 3d. a gait. It that the only tender? Will anybody propose it?" Nobody does.

"Knock a penny off, Tom, and then we will," says someone.

"No, I can't," answers Mr. Brown.

The meeting, apparently at a deadlock, falls into a silence broken only by the scrape of matches.

Chairman: "Well, Tom, are you going to knock that penny off?"

"No."

"Come on, don't be obstinate."

"No."

"Well, it looks as if we'll have to leave it over and carry on wi' t' next business. . . Moughton, tenders for shepherding. . ."

"Well, I'll propose Tom for Long Scars (Ingleborough)," strikes in someone. "Then it'll be settled and done wi'."

So Mr. Brown gets Long Scars and the disputed penny.

For Moughton there are two tenders, both at 1s. 3d. a gait, so the farmers whose sheep graze Moughton vote for the man they want. A farmer has one vote for every 10 gaits going with his farm. Charles Constantine, who has had the shepherding of Moughton for some half-dozen years, was re-elected.

"Other Business"

There is various other business, such as the election of a committee for each pasture, all of which the chairman transacts largely unassisted, writing busily, while the meeting relapses into general conversation.

"All in favour?" he looks up to ask every now and then. Nobody seems to take any particular notice.

For the third pasture only one tender is offered—by Robert Fell, at 1s. 2d. a gait.

"I propose he has it. He did it very well last time."

Robert Fell is elected. Next comes the business of Little Wood, which is a part of Oxenber. Little Wood, common ground belonging to the parishioners of Austwick, is let to defray fencing, mole catching and other expenses of Oxenber.

Mole-catching in respect of the other two pastures is paid for by a levy of a penny a gait on the farmers.

Mr. John Drinkall rents Little Wood, and that ends the meeting.

When the summer grazing season is ended, each shepherd will make the rounds of the farmers stocking his pastures, collecting from them the appointed one-and-something for each gait, and "pennies for moles" as well, the latter sum being paid into the bank for the feeing of the mole-catcher.

The shepherd's fee, amounting possibly to 500 or 600 one-and-threepences, is a tidy little sum, very useful to a man with a small farm or a large family, or to a farmer's

A report of one of the 'herd letting' meetings, Mr W.R. Mitchell, who is press reporter for Austwick around 1950.

Long before he became Editor of The Dalesman.