

# Common people

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The Uffington white horse marks an area of open grassland that has been subject to common rights of pasture for over 3,000 years. Credit: Gareth James, Flickr Creative Commons

It's not a nice cup of tea, an insistence on orderly queuing, or even losing bravely. Cambridge archaeologist Dr Susan Oosthuizen will argue at a conference this Thursday that the essence of Britishness is embedded in the sharing of common land between early communities.

In the 1920s [archaeologists](#) discovered more than 1,000 cattle skulls buried at an early Iron Age stock enclosure at Harrow Hill in Sussex, while a huge Iron Age midden (rubbish heap) covering at least 2.5 hectares has been found at East Chisenbury in Wiltshire. Each is thought to represent the remains of vast annual feasts on grasslands shared between local communities, perhaps during the annual round-ups of their collective herds.

These meetings were much more than the chance for a good meal. Feasts reinforced links and relationships within and between communities: such occasions provided at very least a context for resolving disputes about livestock and grazing, at times when animals were taken to the pastures in the spring or rounded up in the autumn and disagreements were most likely to occur. Post-medieval folklore suggests that these meetings may have been accompanied by games and competitions, the making of marriages and other formal agreements between groups, and opportunities to catch up between members of extended families.

Dr. Oosthuizen, a specialist in early medieval landscapes, thinks that the roots of medieval rights of common (which exist today in places such as the New Forest and Forest of Dean) belong in these early pre-Roman practices. She believes that the social structures governing rights of common have existed for many thousands of years supported by an oral tradition for recording custom and practice in non-literate societies – for example, in who was entitled to allow their animals to graze, the timetabling of grazing, and how disputes were to be resolved. Indeed, she argues that the general values underlying common rights are so strongly rooted that they form the foundation of our understanding of what it is to be British and how we do things ‘in a British way’.

The rights of common practised by medieval farmers, who pastured their livestock on land that was shared between a limited number of right-holders, are well-known both from medieval documents and from surviving practice. Harrow Hill is just one of many places throughout Britain that appear to show evidence of a collective (and carefully regulated) use of the land’s resources many centuries before such medieval rights of common are believed to have emerged. Grazing for their large herds of livestock and the consequent importance of knowing its boundaries in detail, keeping it in good heart, and preventing over-grazing were fundamental to the livelihoods of prehistoric communities like those who feasted at Harrow Hill. Cattle provided more than food

(and, in the case of cattle, traction) to pre-Roman farmers, just as they did for medieval husbandmen – and it seems very likely that, for them too, individual and family status was closely linked to the number of animals owned.

Evidence that supports the existence of an early system of common rights can be found on dozens of modern surviving commons and on archaeological landscapes from the heaths of Exmoor to the downs of Hampshire, archaeologically ‘empty zones’ to which all cultivators had access and which were not divided between households. In southern England, we think of pasture as lush green fields; we should, rather, be thinking of the uplands of the Cheviots or Bodmin, the surviving commons at Minchinhampton in Gloucestershire or the Weald in Kent.

The locations of annual autumnal round-ups have been identified at Neolithic causewayed camps, whose boundaries (like those at Hambledon Hill) were re-dug many times, sometimes when they were little more than a dimple in the ground, or on grasslands marked with luminous features like the White Horse at Uffington in Berkshire. The antiquity of these rights is reflected in early documents and place-names: men from much of Devon had rights of pasture on Dartmoor; Wychwood Forest was the grazing belonging to one of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms whose name – the Hwicce – is preserved in the modern place-name as ‘hwicce’ became ‘wych’.

In a presentation of her recent research on Thursday, at a conference of medieval historians organised by the University of Leeds, Dr. Oosthuizen will suggest that ‘Britishness’ stems from the collective management of rights of pasture from at least the Neolithic period onwards. Partly based on a close reading of the landscape and partly on a synthesis of recent archaeology, Dr. Oosthuizen will propose that Britishness, as embodied by a system of common rights, goes back to 4000 BC or earlier. She argues that, though commoning is practised only

by a minority today, the values around which it is structured are alive and well and can be found in almost every formal and informal British organisation.

“In the year of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee and the London Olympic Games, there’s been a huge amount of debate about what it is to be British – whether it’s a nice cup of tea or forming an orderly queue or the ability to lose gracefully. It seems to me that the fundamental values underlying the practice of prehistoric and medieval rights of common reflect many of the same values and beliefs that we consider to be at the core of Britishness today,” said Dr. Oosthuizen.

“The key features underlying this understanding of Britishness are the right for stakeholders to be consulted on matters that affect them, equity of expression among stakeholders, the importance of consensus in decision-making, transparency and accountability of governance, an emphasis on custom and practice, incremental rather than radical change, and an insistence on the moral economy – not taking more than one’s fair share. These are the values we aspire to, and know to be worthy – even if we chose to ignore them.”

Though most of us now live in cities, Dr. Oosthuizen believes that the ways in which we expect our groups to be organised – whether it’s the school fete, committees in organisations, Church of England synods or anti-establishment movements such as Occupy London – reflect the same values as those underlying the collective management of the common resources that exist in the landscape. Our adherence to custom and practice, for example, derives from the importance in non-literate societies for transmitting the structures, from one generation to another over many centuries, regardless of changes to lord or king, for regulating access to, as well as the governance and management of the pastures on which livestock were tended.

Dr. Oosthuizen emphasises that each set of rights of common was restricted to a limited number of right-holders and that landholders existed within a hierarchy that determined their standing, both socially and politically. She said: “This was no early Arcadia any more than Britain is a modern Arcadia today. Rights of common still exist in some parts of the country, as they did in the medieval and prehistoric past, within a society which is structured by both hierarchy and status. The groups who feasted at Harrow Hill 2,500 years ago would have known ‘known their place’ as clearly as ‘working class’ Dudley Moore did in relation to ‘upper class’ John Cleese in the 1960s.

Cattle and sheep – which provided milk, meat, leather and wool – have long provided an intrinsic component of the agricultural economy. “In many places, for thousands of years, domestic animals appear to have been grazed on pastures subject to rights of common. There is an extraordinary persistence of these collective values apparent in the use of land,” said Dr. Oosthuizen.

“From prehistoric times onwards, landholders would have gone into their fields and stockyards, day after day, year on year, to drive their animals to and from pasture, to milk them and process their products, to help with lambing or calving and so on. The needs of animals make daily practical demands, regardless of changes in economies or political systems, and it is little wonder that they survived over such long periods.”

**More information:** Dr. Oosthuizen will present her latest research on Thursday 12 July at the International Medieval Congress organised by the University of Leeds. [www.leeds.ac.uk/ims/imc/imc2012.html](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ims/imc/imc2012.html)

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