

Beer, S., 2016. Crying the more crying the moor: The continuing vagaries of farm prices *The Exmoor Review* 58, 19-20.

"I think that you would have had to have been on another planet" to have missed the lively discussions in the media over the last 12 months, on the prices that farmers are receiving for their produce. In many cases, this discussion is particularly focused on the dairy industry; to say that prices have plummeted would be an understatement. According to the Defra average farm gate prices, recently reported in the Farmers Weekly, in July 2014 milk was around 30p per litre and by May 2016 it had fallen to around 20p per litre! Most of Exmoor is about grazing livestock and the price for finished cattle was well down on last year throughout the winter. The finished lamb price was also down before Christmas compared to last year, but caught up in the Spring. This all has to be set against the annual rise and fall of prices. Figure 1, below, shows average store lamb prices on Exmoor for the first 6 months of 2016. Prices were up and down after Christmas until the grass starts to grow and supply starts to fall, resulting in a price increase in April, which gradually tapers off. Knowing when to sell and how to get animals to that point on time for the right price, is not easy and was worth up to £30 per animal.

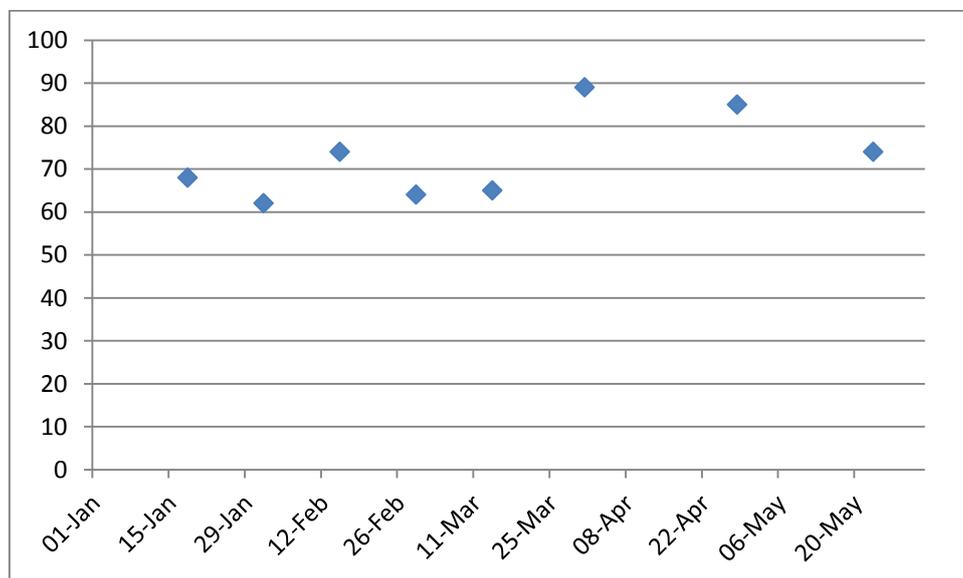


Figure 1: average store lamb prices (£ per head) on Exmoor January to June 2016 (based on figures from Exmoor Farmers Livestock Auctions Ltd).

The only consolation is that feed wheat prices have been somewhat lower; useful for the livestock producer feeding some concentrates, but not for the arable farmer. It has been said in the past that, "this is farming" sometimes it is up and sometimes it is down, however,

it has been down for a long time now. 'Commentators' like Sean Rickard maintain that the only way forward is to become more efficient, with larger farms. Potentially this will lead to a polarisation of farming, with large "efficient" units and smaller hobby farms. Where the Exmoor family farm fits into this, and along with that the future of Exmoor, I do not know. There is also a problem with the term large efficient units. When I visited Australia, as part of a Nuffield Scholarship, I spent the weekend with a retired farmer who had a hobby farm which consisted of 700 suckler cows and 2-3,000 sheep! I also visited a moderately sized beef finishing unit that sent off 30,000 cattle a year, and in New Zealand I have a friend that finishes 45,000 lambs per year for the UK market. As I sit here writing, we are still to come to terms with the Brexit vote to leave the European Union. Many promises were made with regard to continuing support for British agriculture and the environment. In terms of our economy, I hope that this will not falter, as income to support agriculture and the environment needs to come from somewhere, and I got the impression that the amount we were going to save in terms of payments to the EU was promised, to various groups, several times over. Also it must be remembered that we will need to develop many new trading agreements with countries around the globe and I hope that food is not seen as a cheap bargaining chip. We shall see.