

IN THE FIELD

MARCH 2022

By Sir Johnny Scott Bt.

“HEATHER BURNING”

On calm, dry days in March, plumes of smoke can be seen spiralling up above the skyline of moorlands in northern England and Scotland as gamekeepers burn heather as an essential part of moorland management. The sight of this smoke, and the caramel scent of burning heather is to me, more of a sign that the seasons have changed and spring is here in the hills, than the moaning sound of a cock snipe marking his territory by diving with his primaries extended, or the soporific, drawn out whistling of mating curlew.

By the middle of the 18th century, a rapidly expanding urban population, the growth of our colonies and an interminable period of warfare, led to increased demands for raw materials, particularly grain and wool. Much traditional pasture came under the plough and flock masters pushed ever further north in search of new grazings on the vast areas of upland heath and heather moorland, using the oldest form of agriculture – burning to create regeneration. The heather moorlands that today are such a feature of the landscape of Northern England and Scotland, was painstakingly reclaimed from untamed heath by graziers as they established their flocks. By using a system of rotational burning, the early flock masters were able to replace the heathland scrub, gorse, thistles, bracken and old, woody heather with an even spread of nutritional regrowth to support their flocks.

By 1780, landowners were beginning to notice that young heather shoots benefitted both sheep and the previously scarce grouse population, and that moors managed by graziers carried infinitely more grouse than those that weren't. Rumours of new sporting possibilities reached the marvellously eccentric Colonel Thomas Thornton - he of volley gun fame - who in 1782 hurried to investigate and his delightful: “Sporting Tour through the Northern Parts of England and Great Part of the Highlands of Scotland”, was the first publication to advertise the northern uplands as a sporting paradise. The limitations of flintlock shotguns meant that grouse were initially walked up over pointers or setters, but the development of percussion cap meant grouse could be driven and the first record of grouse driving was in 1836, on the moors above Barnsley belonging to the Spencer-Stanhope's of Cannon Hall. By the 1850's and with the invention of the breech loader, grouse moors were rapidly becoming prime land use cross the uplands of Wales, northern England and Scotland.

It took several decades of trial and error for landlords and shooting tenants to get heather management right. Either too much or too little was burnt and grouse numbers fluctuated, until trial and error dictated the optimum burning policy on an annual rotation of between one fifteenth and one twentieth of the total area of a moor. A properly managed moor should have an evenly



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Sir Johnny (as he is better known) is an author, natural historian, broadcaster, columnist, countryside campaigner, artisan snuff manufacturer and retired hill farmer.

He wrote and co-presented the BBC2 series *Clarissa and the Countryman* with Clarissa Dickson Wright. He writes for a variety of magazines and periodicals on field sports, food, farming, travel, history and rural affairs.

A lifetime devotee of the countryside and its sports, he is currently:

- Joint Master, The North Pennine Hunt
- Regional Director, Vote OK.
- President, The Gamekeepers Welfare Trust.
- President, The Tay Valley Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Newcastle Wildfowlers Association.
- President, The Association of Working Lurchers / Longdogs.
- Centenary Patron and Honorary Life Member, British Association for Shooting and Conservation.
- Patron, The Sporting Lucas Terrier Association.
- Patron, The Wildlife Ark Trust.
- Patron, The National Organisation of Beaters and Pickers Up.
- Board member, The European Squirrel Initiative.

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distributed mosaic pattern of between two and four hectares of different ages and lengths of heather. This provides the depth of cover for grouse and other moorland birds to nest in safety from aerial predators; space between areas of longer heather for their chicks to learn to fly and a plentiful supply of essential plant food.

"Muirburn" is strictly governed by legislation and for decades the burning dates on land below 1500ft may only be carried out between 1st November and 31st March and from 1st October and 15th April on land above 1500 feet. In the vast majority of cases, most burning is done on dry days in March, when the heather and vegetation litter has dried out sufficiently over winter and burning is at its most effective. Natural England imposes further regulations for which licences are required for burning on peat above a depth of 40cm, areas of special scientific interest (SSSI), special areas of conservation (SAC) and special protected areas (SPA). Areas of more than 10 hectares in a single burn, areas of more than 0.5 hectares on a slope steeper than 45%, etc. The equivalent of Natural England in Scotland and Wales have similar licensing regulations.

Heather burning has created and maintains a landscape with a worldwide reputation for beauty. The income from grouse moors exceeds £100 million pounds per annum, supports the equivalent of 2,500 full time jobs and is the driving force behind the vast majority of other lucrative tourism businesses in the uplands of northern England and Scotland. Generations of moorland keepers on the 4 million acres of UK grouse have provided the habitat and a safe haven from predators for the summer visitors who flock there in the spring, to nest and rear their young. The golden plover, curlews, snipe, lapwings, sky larks, meadow pipit, merlins, dunlins, redshanks and dotterels, breaking the long silence of winter with their exuberant melody.

The management of rural Britain is continually victimised by ignorance and prejudice, and inevitably heather burning has become a controversial subject, with concerns from climate change obsessives over its effect on peat moorland's important capacity for storing carbon. Lengthy and detailed scientific evidence has proved conclusively that burning on a 15 – 20 year rotation does not damage carbon storage and the very real danger to the climate and biodiversity is wildfire from moors that are not burnt.



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