

Maurice Retallick

The swaling process.

And this is carried out usually in the spring when the gorse is fairly dry, prior to its starting its next growing season. There is a swaling period open from November through to March, but in actual practice its never really dry enough to get a good burn until sometime in March, and we carry out that by swiping an area around a block of gorse that we're going to burn and we have, on the ground, tractors with water tankers, water bowsers and other fire-fighting equipment, so we will burn one piece, keep control of that.

How's it changed over the years that you've known swaling on Dartmoor?

It wasn't organised to the effect it is now, many years ago when I was perhaps ten or twelve and Father would be - and Uncle - would be way out on the moors gathering sheep to come back to the farm for lambing during March, because the sheep started to lamb in April; I would join him on my pony and I could tell from which direction he was coming by him lighting a few little fires, and he would just light a fire here, there and somewhere else, because the vegetation wasn't so strong as it is now, it wasn't so coarse and it wouldn't run on into such big areas and have such big fires as we're always concerned about now.