

WATERMEADOWS IN THE VALLEY OF THE GAVE DE GAVARNIE, FRENCH PYRENEES

So where does your average 'drowner' take a holiday? Wanting to get away from it all, you might imagine choices include the Sahara Desert (no water), going sailing? (Too much of it, and too salty to worry about). Neither is really to my taste, the one being too hot the other too much like hard work. So how about The Pyrenees? Not much flat land by a river and very different geologically to Wiltshire.

It was the first full day after leaving the Bilbao Ferry and we resolved to go for a hike. We climbed up the sides of the valley to the north of Luz St Sauveur (Vallee of the Gave de Gavarnie, upstream of Lourdes). Complete with walking boots, map, compass and reluctant 15-year-old, we climbed the east side of the valley. The route ahead looked tough; there was not a café bar in sight. We climbed through 200m and found a farm track....and there I stopped, my mouth falling open. Did you see that? Said my wife. Then muttered under her breath: 'I had hoped you had not spotted it!'

Not a Yeti, nor even the famously unheard of Pyrenean Snow Leopard. It was, actually, a water meadow hatch set in a simple, but familiar design of housing. It clearly controlled water entering the top end of a valley-side meadow. (Photo 1) There were in fact two parallel carriers. One to feed a succession of meadows, the lower designed to overtop and flow downslope in each meadow. A few metres downhill was a shallow trench set along the contour, presumably to collect and redistribute water from the top of the meadow.

Well, it was at least *different* from Harnham. We were actually looking at a catch meadow, or a hillside catchwork system. This general design is well known in Britain, from Scotland to Devon. I first encountered these on Exmoor, they were a part of agricultural improvements following the sale of the Royal Hunting Forest in 1818. In the eighteenth century, the South Hams district of Devon was especially famous for hillside irrigation. But were the Pyrenean meadows operational? They looked as if they might be. Then, with my eye now in, to the east of Luz St Sauveur on the road to Bareges (where the Tour de France slogs up to the Col de Tourmalet), I found another meadow, with a maturing hay crop, but sadly traditional irrigation arrangements (carrier in the background) were replaced by a sprinkler (Photo 2). Looked like cheating to me, but demonstrated the value of the summer hay crop for these mountain farmers. Next day, I crossed the road below our campsite. There was a water meadow actually under irrigation - in August. The familiar sound of running carrier (Photo 3) with an iron hatchplate lifted. I was surrounded indeed, and still on holiday!

A web-search has revealed a few tangible points of information. As is the case in the Alps, Pyrenean farmers irrigate their lower pastures in summer. This enables two cuts of hay, where once there would only have been one. The meadows appear lush and florally diverse. Irrigation would help to compensate for thin soils, not only by re-wetting the soil, but bringing in such extra nutrients as were available. There is no mention of spring irrigation to produce an 'early bite' as occurs in southern England, in the case of both our catchmeadows (as in Devon and Somerset) and floodplain bedwork meadows (as at Harnham). In the Pyrenees, apparently natural rainfall is found sufficient in spring, but it is also probable the spring meltwater is not sufficiently warm, unlike the Nadder or Avon! An article about the water meadows on the Spanish side by Fillet et al (undated) is at (<http://ressources.ciheam.org/om/pdf/b27/99600305.pdf>).

Meadow irrigation is a part of European landscape, agriculture, biodiversity and culture. It is practised from southern Scandinavia, through central Europe to Spain and Italy. My serendipitous stumbling across watermeadows on the Franco-Spanish border is but one part of a larger picture. Next year? I will try The Moon for a break.

Hadrian Cook.

Photo 1 Double carrier arrangement near Visos, Luz St Sauveur

Photo 2 Old and new irrigation arrangements, east of Luz St Sauveur

Photo 3 Hatch open, actively watered meadow August 2010



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