

EXMOOR'S HERITAGE – 6th May, 2011
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Sometimes a photograph can awaken the memory of an enjoyable experience. It takes you back to a holiday or some celebration or association with people and the landscape. I want to start today's Conference by sharing with you a mental snapshot taken from the late 1960s that demonstrates how people, unfamiliar with the moor, can have different experiences from those that live on, or are familiar with it.

A couple pitching a tent in the heart of Exmoor's moorlands to experience overnight camping in the wild - the husband, locally born, explains how the moorland has been continuous here since the Bronze Age, the evidence of which can still be seen by the small stones nearby arranged in a circle. By midnight, the couple have gone, the wife, urban bred, having been spooked by the place, with the wind moaning through the molinia and the bright moon showing up the stone circle, too near for comfort.

A mental picture then incorporating some of the aspects of Exmoor's cultural heritage: a relict pre-historic landscape, with stone monuments, wild isolated moorland created by grazing animals from the Bronze Age onwards, (no doubt seen as the "environmental planning disaster" of that time), and the ethereal nature of so much of Exmoor - still able to excite and inspire a heightened imagination. However, if the couple had read Lorna Doone, rather than Lord of the Rings, they would have known the reputation of this place.

"John Fry a local shepherd knew the place well enough but he liked it none the more for that, neither did any of our people; and indeed all the neighbourhood of Thom's Hill and Larksborough lay under grave imputation of having been enchanted with a very evil spell. Moreover it was known that Squire Thom who had been murdered there a century ago or more, had been seen by several shepherds even in the middle of the day, walking with his severed head carried in his left hand, and his right arm lifted towards the sun."

The key aspect of this Conference is to raise a greater awareness of the importance of Exmoor's heritage, not only to other specialists, but to politicians and the wider public to show that there is still so much to explore, discover, learn from and reinterpret and enjoy. Exmoor comprises both an understanding of its past history of how people have used the land over the centuries, and of their culture that continues to inspire, in so many different ways. These are the two themes that we will touch on today.

To my mind, there is a misunderstanding at the heart of our approach to valuing and managing our rural landscapes. When formulating policy for rural landscapes our attention has become too focussed on the component parts, and the pressing needs of so many different interests, ranging from nature conservation and farming to recreation and access. National priorities are now firmly concentrating on the importance of the natural world – biodiversity, ecosystem services that help sequester carbon and improve water quality, and responding to climate change – to the relative neglect of the "people element". We may have lost the ability to stand back and look at the bigger picture. There needs to be a better balance by recognising more strongly the historic and cultural dimension, as well as what people value in a particular place.

At a national level, policy-making is not helped by the fact that responsibility for rural landscapes is split between Government departments: Defra for farming and forestry and natural resources and processes, as well as for landscape aesthetics; DCSM for heritage and tourism, and DCLG for spatial planning - not to mention others such as the Departments of Energy and Transport. In this climate of dislocation, English Heritage has been very helpful in raising the importance of the historic character of the countryside.

Internationally, the problem is made worse by the European Union regarding the environment as a trans-national issue with cultural heritage being the responsibility of individual countries. Strong European directives for nature conservation not only distort our ability to integrate the cultural role, but have deflected attention from historical and cultural assets that are of an incalculable value. There needs to be a more integrated approach. Exmoor is a national park which is a landscape designation whose purpose is to bring together nature, scenery, heritage and people's values, in order to protect them for future generations. By zooming in on Exmoor's cultural heritage, we can learn some lessons about how to make better choices for the future and the importance of being able to understand and manage our landscapes holistically.

Re-reading recently W G Hoskins seminal "Making of the English Landscape", I was reminded how he taught us how to look at landscape in a distinct way. He was concerned that much of the changes in post war Britain had led to the countryside being "uglyfied" and losing much of its meaning. It was not enough to just appreciate scenery but to look deeper so that the hidden significance could be revealed. As a boy in Devon he said: "I felt that everything I was looking at was saying something to me, if only I could recognise its language". He interpreted the language by tracing the physical impact on the landscape of people from prehistoric times onwards, introducing the time/depth element. He used documents, maps in particular, and field walking, recording details such as the shape of fields, boundaries, sudden bends in roads and hedges, buildings and their special architectural features in relation to their locality. This process he argued leads to unexpected secrets being revealed and, in his words, "brings a delight to the mind as well as to the eye".

What then is the state of our understanding of Exmoor's heritage? I suggest that we need to continue to ask seven questions:

1. **How do we read Exmoor's landscape?** Until the last two decades, Exmoor's archaeology has not been consistently explored, and it is relatively recently that many new and exciting findings have come to light. We need to continue this process of discovery helped by more sophisticated tools. Rob Wilson-North, the national park archaeologist, is still finding new sites and monuments particularly from the pre-historic period, such as a burnt mound at Hoccombe Combe and the Neolithic mortuary enclosure near Chapman Barrows; types of sites not found before on Exmoor. We need to continue reading Exmoor's landscape and be ready for real surprises and retain the ability to reinterpret their significance.

2. **At what scale do we read Exmoor's landscapes?** As we know, much emphasis is on the details such as archaeological sites, the fabric of the landscape and standing buildings. But should we be looking at planning at a landscape scale? Although a Historic Landscape Characterisation has been carried out for Exmoor it is under-used and needs further interpretation so that it can become an integral part of landscape character assessment, and influence planning decisions, agri-environmental schemes and people's understanding of their history. Our premier archaeological

landscapes (PALs), such as prehistoric ones found on parts of our moorlands need to be recognised. We know that Exmoor has unique monuments from this period. Stone settings, aptly called “miniliths” because of their small size, lie in a much busier pre-historic landscapes of fields and settlements some of which are too slight to be seen on the surface, and buried beneath the peat. Excitingly, they form part of Exmoor’s “special puzzle”, a term used by Hazel Eardley-Wilmot, an amateur archaeologist who discovered so much between the 1960s and 1980s. PALs should carry the same weight as other designations, such as SSSIs.

3. **Is there a more urgent need for archaeological research?** There is much catching up to do and reinterpretation of the significance of the new archaeological findings at a national level. Many sites are vulnerable and could easily be destroyed, particularly through changes in land use practices. For example, the first phase of the Exmoor mire project to re-wet deep peat areas did not take into account sufficiently the importance of the last major land reclamation in England carried out by the Knight Family in the 19th century of Exmoor Forest. Dare I say that this may be of greater significance than the ecology?

4. **What has Exmoor contributed to the Arts?** We know about Lorna Doone but does this need more emphasis and particularly the legend on which it is based, have we for example tapped into the American market where we know that there is a great deal of interest in the story? And what about Exmoor’s contribution to the Romantic Poets with their Exmoor walks which so inspired their thinking? Elizabeth McLaughlin, I know, will give us some interesting new insights and show more clearly how Exmoor’s landscape was an early inspiration of the Romantic Movement. And, what greater opportunities there could be for Lynton and Lynmouth to make the most of this association, because, after all, they have made a tourist industry out of it in the Lake District.

5. **What is Exmoor’s culture?** We do know that this place is one of the few areas in England where there is still a deeply rural way of life where the farming year and events linked with stag hunting still dominate. There are particular Exmoor stories and mysteries, such as the murder at Wheal Eliza, that are still fresh in people’s memories today. And what better person than Steven Pugsley with his ancient family name to contribute to this important aspect.

6. **How do people perceive Exmoor?** Many tourist and local surveys indicate that people value Exmoor in particular for its varied scenery, views, peace and quiet and getting away from the normal pressures of modern day living in a place where time appears to move slowly and a sense of the past is retained. The many individuals, voluntary groups and organisations that specialise in archaeology and the historic environment, indicate the great enthusiasm there is generally for finding out more about Exmoor’s heritage. It is interesting that many people send contributions to the Exmoor Review, the journal of The Exmoor Society, about their memories, and family, associations from the past on Exmoor. Martin Hesp, the well-known West Country journalist who writes so knowledgably and movingly about Exmoor, will share with us what he believes inspires people to love Exmoor.

7. **Do we take enough notice of the built environment and our historic settlements?** There has not been sufficient attention on how settlements of Exmoor have evolved. Some villages have had Conservation Area appraisals, but these do not take into account how the settlement has developed. The importance of Medieval Dunster, Dulverton and wool, and Lynton and Lynmouth (which the early tourists called

“Little Switzerland”) in particular need to be fully researched, as well as individual buildings. After all, these places attract thousands of tourists to Exmoor. There is a danger that, through insidious changes, the historic character of our settlements, including farmsteads, will be lost.

Finally, there is a real need to influence policy and people’s perceptions about the value of Exmoor’s heritage. Exmoor’s status as a National Park is crucial. The National Park Management Plan is an essential tool that prioritises the importance of Exmoor’s archaeology, history and culture. With cuts in the National Park’s budget allocations, we must lobby hard that these do not affect the heritage. There is the danger that we could be considered 21st Century vandals by losing important evidence of the past, for example, and of Exmoor’s landscape becoming homogenised countryside indistinguishable from the rest of England. There is still a great need to understand the value of our cultural heritage at a national and a local level and there could be no better person than Peter Beacham to help us do this today.

I am reminded that Coleridge was interrupted by “a person from Porlock”, which led to unfinished business. Our landscape heritage will always be unfinished business because, with new findings, we need continually to reinterpret the significance of the past and what it means to us. Other sectoral interests have developed many programmes of action and it is crucial that the heritage sector plays an important part in the process. In a period of rapid change, there are choices to be made on how the future landscapes of Exmoor will evolve. The Exmoor Society wants this to happen in a more holistic way so that we retain, not only the remarkable rural way of life, but that we can experience the real spirit of the place that is its genius loci in all its richness, uniqueness and continuity with the past, and pre-history.