



Merry Christmas & Happy New Year 2022



from the Quantock Hills AONB Team



10th December 2021

Winter Newsletter – Issue 15

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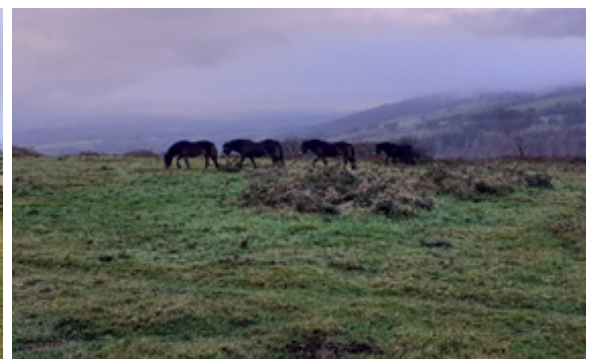
Winter Visitors

Andy Stevenson
Quantock Hills AONB Ranger

The Exmoor ponies at Cothelstone Hill are some of the most loved and photographed animals across the Quantock Hills. Our current herd of mares are an ageing group in their late 20s and early 30s. They are the perfect breed of grazing animals to tackle the rough grassland and scrubby vegetation on the site as well as survive the weather and attention from visitors.

Sadly at the start of the autumn we lost one of the seven who deteriorated very quickly due to natural causes. Quite by chance the vet that attended on this occasion mentioned that she had four Exmoor ponies looking for some winter grazing having been at a Somerset Wildlife Trust nature reserve during the summer. We took her up on the offer and took delivery of the winter visitors in early November.

The additional four mares had a good run around and explore initially and kept their distance from the existing herd for 24 hours but were soon accepted into the group. If you go up to Cothelstone Hill you will therefore see ten ponies over the winter. Please keep your distance from the herd whilst they settle in.





Somerset Nature Connections

Joanna Hicks

Somerset Nature Connections Project Officer

Somerset Wildlife Trust, Quantock Hills AONB & Blackdown Hills AONB

The beauty of the spectacular autumn on the Quantocks has been celebrated with the Somerset Nature Connections group, a collaborative project between the Quantocks, Blackdowns and Mendips AONBs and the Somerset Wildlife Trust. The Project seeks to enhance nature connection for participants who experience, or are at risk of experiencing, mental health and wellbeing issues. The sessions are structured using a model developed by the University of Derby, focussing on 5 key elements: Contact, Beauty, Emotion, Compassion and Meaning.

The recent Quantocks session focussing on beauty was set amidst the myriad of autumn colours and textures. Land-based art was explored, creating pieces which built upon a natural feature, to enhance the beauty and bring a new dimension. Autumn riches were further enjoyed when exploring meaning. Life cycles and seasonal changes were the subject of the day. Activities included co-creating a delicious autumn soup cooked on the fire – especially welcome in the cool, crisp air. The simple act of cooking outside in a group brought joy and nourishment on many levels, together with interesting talk on nutrition and sharing of recipe inspiration. As well as time spent around the fire, the group has been keeping warm with activities on the land, including clearing rhododendrons and scrub, whilst keeping a close eye out for wildlife and discussing the plants, trees and creatures along the way.

Participants speak enthusiastically of the benefits the project is bringing them, one observing that he had not spent time in nature since his teenage years, many decades ago, and another noting that following a period of ill health, she had not been able to get out in nature and was grateful for the opportunities presented. For those unable to access the woods owing to lack of transport, this can be provided with no charge for participants. The course itself is also free of charge to participants.



Project Officer Joanna Hicks, who recently joined the project to co-work alongside Hermione Toulson said:

“One of the many joys of this programme is seeing participants leave at the end of the day feeling relaxed with smiling faces. We always offer a take home activity as well to encourage deepening nature connection between sessions and are frequently in awe of what participants tell us they have noticed when they return the following week from star gazing to bird watching. We are now open to applications for our next course starting Tuesday 4 January 2022, 10am–2.30pm. Participants can self-refer or be referred by other organisations.”



For enquiries and further information, please contact snc@somersetwildlife.org or Joanna on 07894 960819.





Understanding the Landscape

Dan Broadbent

Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Historic Heritage Officer

The Quantock Landscape Partnerships Scheme’s community archaeology project ‘Understanding the Landscape’ continued in October with the first of our five Village Test-Pitting weekends. Residents of Bicknoller were invited to join QLPS volunteers and professional archaeologists from Past Participate in conducting archaeological investigations across the village, with the aim of better understanding the origins of Quantock villages.



Test-Pitting involves local residents digging 1m excavations in their own gardens and recording them archaeologically. It is a well-used technique for both engaging communities in archaeological research and for providing information in occupied areas which other methods cannot access. Supervised by the professionals, the weekend gave residents of Bicknoller the opportunity to learn archaeological skills of excavation and recording whilst helping to add to knowledge of historic development of their own village.

11 Test pits were opened across Bicknoller which produced a substantial array of finds. As expected, the upper layers produced large amounts of post medieval pottery, but medieval pottery and prehistoric flints were also recovered. These finds are now being professionally analysed and mapped in readiness for a final report on the excavations, but early indications appear to confirm Bicknoller’s origins as a planned twelfth century village.

The next Test-Pitting weekend is planned to take place in Kingston St Mary from 18 – 20 March 2022.

If you would like to take part please contact our Historic Heritage Officer, Dan Broadbent at dbroadbent@somerset.gov.uk





Volunteering Through Autumn & Winter

Verity Jones

Quantock Hills AONB Volunteer Coordinator

As we've moved into the autumn, wildlife surveying groups have finished up and volunteer groups have been kept busy with the wealth of woodland work to be done. At the start of the autumn there is a small window of opportunity when coppicing can be done between September and October, because the dormice found onsite will start to hibernate from October onwards. The volunteers have been busy completing the areas or 'coups' of hazel which have been set out in the woodland management plan to be completed this year, allowing for greater biodiversity and a mix of age structures in the woodland. The hazel would have last been coppiced 50 - 100 years ago, so there were some very large hazel trunks and it was pretty hard going but the volunteers did a valiant effort to complete it all.



Successful coppicing with Quantock Countryside Volunteers and Andy and Owen our rangers

In the last month it has also been great to have out Greendays, a day care group for adults with learning disabilities after a long hiatus due to the pandemic. They had good weather and cut and burnt gorse at Cothelstone Hill to ensure the gorse doesn't take over the species rich grassland.

Next month will be spent catching up with volunteering groups for Christmas get togethers and there is also the matter of 4000 trees to be planted before the end of the winter!



Greendays group at Cothelstone Hill



31st January 2022
FY21-22 DEADLINE



Farming in Protected Landscapes Update

The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme launched this summer and has gotten off to a great start in the Quantock Hills, with five projects now approved for funding. We're excited to be supporting a wide range of activities, including the conversion of arable land to species-rich grassland, tackling invasive species, restoring historic boundary features, planting hedges and enhancing the local rights of way network.

We're working with farmers to develop more projects and have been inspired by the work in other protected landscapes. We've heard recently about some very impactful projects where large farm clusters have undertaken soil carbon audits. This work will inform long-term strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and enable farmers to support each other by sharing their knowledge and experience. FiPL is also being used to help farmers transition into regenerative agriculture practices, for instance by purchasing machinery that reduces soil disturbance and fertiliser use.



One of the strengths of FiPL is its flexibility, meaning that we can help farmers deliver activities that cannot be funded through existing grant schemes. For example, we're currently developing a project that will restore a series of ponds and weirs, capturing large amounts of water during high rainfall events and simultaneously providing valuable habitat for wildlife.

FiPL can also facilitate collaboration between farmers, which may be crucial as we progress through the Agricultural Transition towards the upcoming Environmental Land Management scheme. For instance, we're supporting a group of farmers developing a plan to extend and enhance important grassland by funding floral and fungal surveys and specialist land management advice.



We're fortunate to live and work in a landscape with outstanding historical as well as natural heritage. We're working with multiple applicants on projects to conserve walls, mills and lime kilns, as well as make these more accessible to the public exploring the hills.

The deadline for applications in our first year is **January 31st 2022**, so it's not too late to get support for projects this winter. For more information call Landscape Project Officer Katie Read on **07977 412249** or **czread@somerset.gov.uk**



Landscape Partnership Scheme Update

Bill Jenman

Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Manager

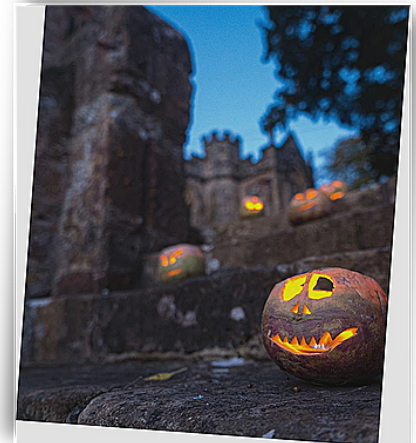
At the end of every quarter, we submit a grant claim to the Lottery and then a month or so later meet up with the Lottery staff to review progress. At our last meeting we looked back over a mad busy summer– once Covid restrictions eased an awful lot has happened.

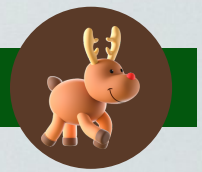
By the end of September more than 2000 people had come to our events and activities or volunteered for us (without getting technical the Lottery divides these into “Beneficiaries” and “Volunteers”, but they have all taken part one way or another). Most of these days were about understanding and enjoying nature, and about 4/5th of this took place in peoples’ home communities away from the Quantocks themselves. Finding new ways to manage access pressures is one of our key objectives.

Speaking of managing access, we’ve two important legal processes now underway. First, on behalf of the Friends of Quantock we submitted an application under s38 of the Commons Act 2006 to erect a low ditch and bank along parts of the east side of the Stowey road to deter illegal parking – if you know the area, you’ll know how churned up the grassy patches opposite Crowcombe Park Gate and Withyman’s Pool parking areas can get. There were an awful lot of pre-application negotiations involved, but, in the end, there were no objections. s.38 applications are determined by the Planning Inspectorate nationally – I very much hope they’ll give us the go-ahead in time to do the work before next spring.

We’ve also submitted a new planning application for a replacement car park at Crowcombe Park Gate. The very brief history so far is that we want to restore most of the current steep and heavily eroded parking area to heathland and build a new car park on flat land up by the boundary nearer the cattle grid. We applied for, and obtained, planning permission a couple of years ago but in the course of the application we had to halve the size of the proposed replacement to meet objections from Rights of Way. Since then, it has become more and more obvious that the new car park we ended up getting permission for wasn’t going to be big enough. We also learned that the Rights of Way that prompted the objection were incorrectly mapped in the first place. Which was rather frustrating! Anyway, we have submitted a fresh application to expand the planned car park back to its originally intended like-for-like replacement capacity. As part of this we will need to divert the official line of a footpath that currently runs along an unusable route under a row of the trees to the top of the boundary ditch (which is where it always has been on the ground, and where everyone thought the legal line was anyway until the recent revision by RoW). Fingers crossed – once (if) we have planning permission we’ll also need a fresh s38 Commons consent, so there’s a long way to go yet but we’re headed in the right direction at least.

Enough of the legal stuff! I leave you with Jon, as the Wizard of Broomfield at our Lore and Draw event, and a fine Punkie from our Halloween Ghost walk at Crowcombe.





Farewell Folks!

Verity Jones

Quantock Hills & Blackdown Hills AONB's Volunteer Coordinator



After two years working as the Volunteer Coordinator for both the Quantock Hills and Blackdown Hills AONBs, I have accepted a new role with Young Somerset as an Environmental Youth Worker and will be leaving at Christmas.

I have had a great time working with the teams in both the Quantocks Hills & Blackdown Hills AONBs, getting out in such beautiful landscapes and getting to know the great groups of volunteers who work so hard within the AONB.

It's been an absolute pleasure and I will be catching up with as many groups as possible for pre-Christmas get togethers to say bye and eat mince pies together.

A big thank you to all the wonderful volunteers for their hard work and continued support of the AONBs and all the best for the future.



A successful summer of dry stone walling with the Working Well group



Zoe Cox



Ian Sherlock

Photo Competition

Win £100 or £50 gift voucher!



Village Life- must be taken within a village or settlement in the Quantock Hills AONB and surrounding LPS area.



People of the Quantocks- an image representing the people of the Quantock Hills AONB and surrounding LPS area



Quantock Working- an image of working life within the Quantock Hills AONB and surrounding LPS area

Go to <https://qlps.org/qlps-photo-competition> for full details

send entries to qlps@somerset.gov.uk with completed entry form
by 31st March 2022



Andre Clinchant



Frank Clatworthy



Dawn Mahoney



Green recovery work on the Quantocks

**Iain Porter, Quantock Hills AONB Development Officer &
Andy Stevenson, Quantock Hills AONB Ranger**

The Quantock Hills is delivering four sub-projects under the Levels Up Project, Cothelstone Hill Woodland Resilience, SAC Woodland enhancement, Acidic Mires and Stowey Woods enhancement – delivered by Stowey Green Spaces Group. At Cothelstone Hill three areas have been selected for work under this scheme. One area is a block of ash that is showing significant effects of the ash dieback disease. The ash trees have been felled, removed and the area will be replanted with a mix of native trees such as oak, wild cherry and hazel. A second block of woodland that is dominated by sycamore and beech will be felled and then replanted with a more diverse mix of trees; this will allow more light to reach the woodland floor and promote the seed bank of ground flora to return. Lastly an area of thick bramble is being cleared and being planted with native tree species to increase the area of woodland and also to join two existing woodland compartments. The work will increase the species and age diversity of the woodland, provide a range of habitats and make it more resilient to the impacts of climate change. In total over 6,500 trees will be planted.



Bramble area cleared ready for planting

Another sub-project is enhancement of acidic mires. According to Natural England there are 16Ha of acidic mires on Quantock Common. These areas are fascinating dynamic habitats with a vast diversity of plant and animal life. They are fragile though and can be easily damaged or degraded through disturbance, reduction in water flow, over grazing or under grazing.

Part of this project was training for staff and volunteers to be able to monitor these habitats and on a gloomy day in July Friends of Quantock's own John Andrews with Dr John McGill lead a training session exploring Ramscombe Mire. Using the training we will be undertaking volunteer led monitoring of some of these mire areas to help better target future projects and inform Natural England of their condition.



The other aspect of this sub-project is the clearance of scrub, such as holly and silver birch, from 2 mire areas to allow the mire flora and fauna to flourish which was completed last month.

The third sub-project being directly delivered by the AONB Service is the enhancement of the Upland oak woods in the northern combes. These woodlands are designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) as well as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). At 230Ha they are a considerable area of high nature value habitat however in some areas the woodland is dominated by holly. Holly will shade out the woodland floor and stop regeneration of other native tree species, such as sessile oak.

This project is thinning the holly where it is dominant allowing the woodland to regenerate. This work has started and due to the sensitive way in which the works are being undertaken will complete later in January.

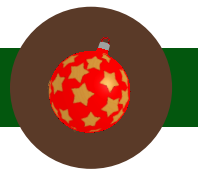


Ash clearance ready for replanting

During the project The AONB Service was able to reduce costs for the 3 original sub-projects. This allowed us to be able to provide funding to Stowey Green Spaces Group who manage Stowey Wood. The group has been working to increase the resilience of the woodland by removing conifer species and replanting with native broadleaf species.

Due to the difficulty accessing the site the group contracted Rowan Working Horses who used 3 working ponies to extract the trees once they had been felled. The ponies did a great job with minimal damage to the tracks, they were also a great draw, especially for a class from Nether Stowey primary school.

In total these projects are enhancing nearly 290Ha of priority habitat across the Quantock Hills and when added to the other 9 sub-projects, partners are enhancing over 400Ha across Somerset. The project is only possible due to the great partnership of organisations and willing landowners able to grab the funding opportunity when it arose.



Quantock Word Search





Quantock Hills
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



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