



Quantock Hills National Landscape

Winter Newsletter

Issue 22 - December 2024

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Painting the hills

Iain Porter, Quantock Hills National Landscape Manager

Earlier this year the National Landscape Team were approached by the South West Society of Botanical Artists (SWSBA) with a project proposal exploring the flora that make the Quantock Hills special.

The project will consist of a number of arts days, usually one a month, where the groups artists will convene and undertake arts based activities using sample plants of the Quantock Hills.

The project is due to last for approximately 18 months, though the end date may be extended to allow the group to paint species at particular times of the year, for example painting heather species in late summer when flowering. The project will produce some wonderful art works of the different plants, lichens, mosses and fungi that can be found on the Quantock Hills and these will be used to visualise some of the stories, issues and challenges being faced by the National Landscape.

The National Trust very kindly allowed the use of the Music Room at Fyne Court once a month for the artists to come together. There have been three sessions so far which have explored late summer flowering plants such as heathers and lichens and fungi in the Autumn. It is hoped there will be an opportunity for the wider public to engage with the project in 2025, with a number of open art sessions. For more information visit their website at <https://swsba.org.uk>





Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)

Sally Pheasant, Farming Engagement Support Officer

We are now in the final months of the four-year FiPL Program. Pending further news from Defra after the recent budget, the program will close on 31 March 2025.

Following further promotion of the funding scheme over the summer months, aimed at local landowners and farmers, we received a good number of applications. The final Local Assessment Panel met in October to review and discuss five new projects and make their final funding decisions. From a total of £254,000 to be awarded in grants during Year 4 (excluding the Historic Building Restoration Grants), a little over £30,000 remained to be awarded across the final applications.

We were pleased that the Panel approved four of the five projects, which support a broad spectrum of activities: from a local hedge laying competition, to an agroforestry project and a planting scheme of disease-resistant elm trees. The remaining funding for Year 4 has now been fully allocated across these four projects.

Of particular note was the application for the project that will plant disease-resistant Elm trees in the Quantock Hills. Elms were a significant tree in the landscape, especially in the farming fringes of the north and western Quantocks, until Dutch Elm disease was introduced to the UK. The disease is caused by a fungus that is spread by bark beetles and was first introduced to the UK in the 1920s when it killed 10-40% of mature elm trees. The initial epidemic died down but unfortunately a more aggressive species of the disease fungus was introduced into the UK in the 1960s. By 1980 most mature English Elm in Britain had died.



As well as being an important landscape tree mature Elms provide habitat for the White Letter Hairstreak butterfly, which is among the rarest and most threatened species in the UK. Importantly, this project is also providing butterfly identification training to a team of volunteers, so that the impact of the project can be monitored over the long term. Year 4 has also seen a significant award of funds from the Historic Building Restoration Grants. We have taken two projects through this process, which have been approved by both the National Panel and our Local Assessment Panel. The ambition of these projects is impressive, especially since they involve Listed Buildings, one of which has been on the National Heritage at Risk Register.

With an additional investment of nearly £345,000 these projects are making a significant contribution to preserving the local heritage and landscape character and represent a big step forward in safeguarding and enhancing the area's historical and cultural assets. We'll report on the progress of these two exciting projects in the next newsletter!

Meanwhile you can read about another similar project which took place in Year 3, in the case study below.



Case Study – Farming in Protected Landscapes funded project (Year 3) – Restoration of Aisholt Limekiln

The Quantock Hills were formed 350-400 million years ago in the Devonian period when sedimentary rocks were compressed and folded into a ridge of slates and sandstones, rippled through with narrow bands of limestone. This is reflected above ground today by a series of disused limekilns scattered along these limestone seams.

Limekilns burned limestone in alternating layers with coal or wood fuel, heating the stone to around 900°C, to produce quicklime which was used for mortar, plaster and limewash, and also spread on agricultural fields to counter acidity.

The limekiln at Durborough Farm in Aisholt was constructed in the 17th century and was last used around 1930. It had been suffering from structural degeneration due to invasive tree roots and, despite being sited along a road and popular walking route, was rarely noticed due to scrub encroachment.

Rob White and Pete Baker of Durborough Farm in Aisholt were eager to repair and preserve the kiln and share with the public its significance in the local landscape. They approached the Quantock Hills FiPL Officer, Katie Read, and together came up with a plan to tackle the project in stages.

In Phase 1, FiPL supported the removal of the trees and scrub that were threatening the structure, making it safe to access and allowing inspection by a structural engineer. Phase 2 commissioned the engineer to report on the limekiln's condition and prepare a specification of works for its preservation. Bob Croft, Head of Historic Environment and Estates, for South West Heritage Trust, also provided useful advice on the extent and nature of the preservation work needed to restore the kiln's heritage value.



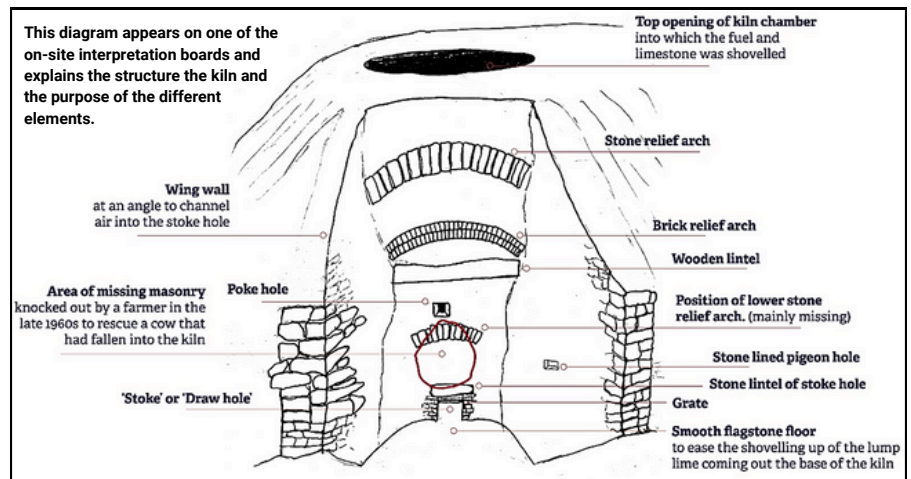
The main structural works were undertaken in Phase 3, which required partial deconstruction of the wing walls, down to a level where the old mortar was firm, then rebuilding with the original stones and repointing according to traditional methods using lime mortar. Similarly, a section of the inner lining of the kiln chamber that had collapsed due to tree root invasion needed to be reconstructed. During Phase 3, it was found that the kiln floor was lower than previously understood, and excavations revealed the original grate supports and stoke hole.

In the late 1960s, an unfortunate Jersey cow fell into the kiln. A hole was smashed in the front of the structure to extricate her safely, and this has been left unrepaired to preserve this event in the kiln's history. Phase 4 installed a safety grid over the top hole to prevent such accidents in the future, and security grids in the stoke hole and grate to ensure that public access can be provided safely.

Finally, phase 5 enabled public enjoyment of the site, installing seating, fencing, and information boards which will greatly enhance the local network of footpaths and engage the public with the agri-industrial heritage of the Quantock Hills.



Pete said: *“The project was not one of economic benefit for the farm business, so not an obvious enterprise to embark upon in these times of falling farm income. However, it was the availability of some financial support from the FiPL programme that made the difference between this preservation project happening or not. Hopefully the preserved structure will be of public interest, as an historic monument for current and future generations to see.*



It will have heritage value and serve to increase public awareness of how the resources in our countryside, have been used, and continue to be used, to meet the needs of the times, throughout history. Having support funding channelled via the National Landscape, with an understanding of local circumstances, has meant the project has progressed in a logical, cost effective and timely manner”.

The project was completed in September 2023 and received a total of £31,780.85 in FiPL funding. Breaking the project into phases, each with their own FiPL application, ensured that the project costs and risks were understood precisely at each stage. It also allowed the Local Assessment Panel (LAP) to follow the project closely and update their assessment as the project scope and ambition developed. Durborough Farm also carried out much of the work using their own machinery and in-house skilled labour, helping to keep costs down.



The FiPL programme structure was uniquely suited to support this project, as without frequent panel meetings, speedy administration and local understanding of the project's importance, these works might not have been possible.

Aisholt Limekiln is now a regular stopping point for walkers, receiving much admiration locally.

You can read more about the FiPL Programme in the Quantock Hills on our website at:

<https://www.quantockhills.com/farming-in-protected-landscapes-home>



Community archaeological excavation 2024

Dan Broadbent, QLPS Historic Heritage Officer

Community Excavation 2024 - Results are starting to emerge from the recent QLPS community archaeology excavation which took place on the Cothelstone Estate.

For three weeks this summer, volunteers led by professional archaeologists from Dig Ventures, investigated a series of cropmark features in a single field near Cothelstone. Cropmarks are formed when buried archaeological features such as ditches or walls impact on the growth of any crops growing on the surface. Often, these features are indiscernible on the ground but can be identified from aerial photographs or satellite imagery.

Excavation of these features revealed a circular ditch, almost 40m in diameter and 2m deep, tentatively interpreted on-site as a possible neolithic henge. However, radiocarbon dating of material found at the base of the ditch, and analysis of associated pottery finds, now suggests the feature may have been constructed in the Late Bronze Age around 1000 BCE.

The site was later reused as a cemetery. In total, fourteen graves were revealed during the excavation and, although no human bones survived, the regular arrangement of the burials in a east-west orientation, strongly suggests early Christian, perhaps dating from the post Roman to Early Medieval period.

Many of the volunteers on the dig were veterans of previous excavations and other archaeological projects run by the QLPS. With the scheme approaching its conclusion next year, plans are now being put in place to harness their enthusiasm and experience to create an ongoing community archaeology group which can continue to unearth the secrets of the Quantock landscape for many years to come.



To find out more about this project contact Dan Broadbent at:

dan.broadbent@somerset.gov.uk





AfriQuan Togetherness

Jon Barrett, QLPS Community Engagement & Volunteering Officer

The Quantock Hills National Landscape were part of Taunton Together this summer, a town-wide event celebrating the diverse cultural and community sectors that make this area so special.

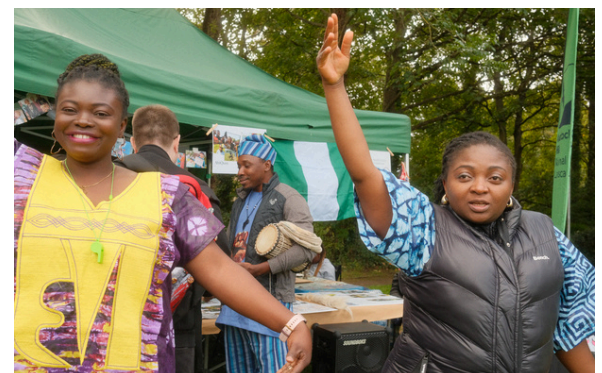
Celebrating their work with African communities living and working locally, the group hosted an AfriQuan stand brought together by the team from the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme who have worked very closely with the group over the years.

A community of African friends and families who support other African groups moving to the county, helping to connect them with nature, the outdoors, and the freedom and safe space it offers, the group were on hand to demonstrate different cultural attributes and show the ways the Quantocks have been enjoyed by their group over the years.

The grass-roots community have gone on to have a stand at Wellington Together and the QLPS team attended the Bridgwater Together back in November, sharing more of the work their scheme has helped to create alongside the AfriQuan community.

It has been wonderful taking the opportunity to share the work of the QLPS in such a central setting, on the main stage of the county town, as the group have worked around the wider areas of the Quantock Hills boundary for so long, but haven't always had this opportunity for engagement with audiences in the town centre.

It comes at a time when the QLPS have been celebrating a local display of their scheme highlights at Hestercombe Gardens in recent weeks – an exhibition that will be expected to tour around local parishes in the near future.





Coppicing at Cothelstone Hill

Paddon, QLPS Wildlife Officer

My name is Paddon and I'm the new Wildlife Officer for the Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme. I joined the team a little over five months ago and have really enjoyed my time here, getting to know the area and all its people.

We recently completed our 3rd coppicing season at Cothelstone Hill. For those who don't know, coppicing is a technique of opening the forest canopy by cutting down hazel, The hazel lives and comes back multi-stemmed as you can see in these pictures. The coppicing is done to replace the natural processes originally done by beavers and large mammals which are long since gone from the area. Coppicing and charcoal burning has been practised by local people for hundreds of years and now it falls to us to continue their work.

Coppicing benefits the forest's ground flora as it clears space and allows in more light. Many small mammals such as the Hazel Dormice who live in Cothelstone Hill woods also benefit from the new habitat and growth from the hazel. The coppicing is only allowed to happen from September to October 31st in order to prevent disturbance to the Dormice and other protected species living in the woodland.



3 sections of the woodland were coppiced this year by the QLPS and our volunteers, together with our Quantock Hills Rangers, their volunteers and Young Somerset.

The QLPS held 4 coppicing sessions with our volunteers and two corporate groups Using hand tools and will power, we successfully completed our block of trees. In a decade's time when the hazel has regrown we hope that this block will be coppiced again.

We are looking forward to next year for our next coppicing season. If you would like to get involved and release your inner woodman then get in touch to register your interest!

<https://qlps.org/get-involved>

<https://www.quantockhills.com/volunteer/conservation-volunteers>



Team changes

A warm welcome to...



Caroline Tilley

Caroline has recently joined the team as a Communications & Support Officer responsible for the administration and communication support for our Quantock Hills volunteers.

Caroline has been working in a self-employed role within financial services for the last 9 years. Caroline enjoys horse riding and has competed in unaffiliated dressage and eventing. She also loves walking with her dog, Aggie on the Quantock Hills.



Helen Richardson

Helen has recently joined the team as a Landscape Project Officer. Helen will work closely with the team to advise and support farmers and the land management communities with their project ideas and application process and support the delivery and monitoring of projects.

Helen previously worked as an environmental permitting and compliance consultant in the waste management industry. Helen and her family enjoy exploring the Quantock Hills and Exmoor by bike and on foot, and Helen is looking forward to learning more about the local area through her new role.

A fond farewell to...



Katie Read

Katie was our Landscape Project Officer who was working for us along side another position working for West Dorset Wilding. Katie left us in November to take up a full time position with West Dorset Wilding and to be closer to home.

We are sorry to see Katie go, but wish her all the very best in her role.



Online survey on farmer uptake of net-zero farming management practices

As part of the **AgZero+ project**, AgZero are conducting an **online survey** to understand the barriers and enablers to farmers' adoption of net-zero farming practices. The survey consists of **16 questions** and should take about **10-15 minutes** to complete.

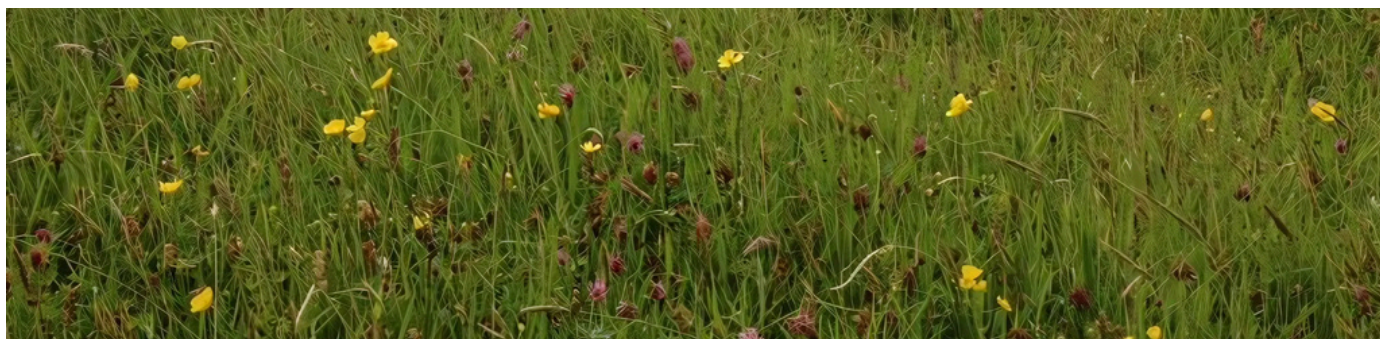
Participants from members of the Quantock farming community would be greatly valued and beneficial to their research. It will contribute to our understanding of what is needed to better facilitate pathways to net-zero within the farming sector.

In addition, to recognise your time in completing the survey, the project will donate **£3 for every response** (up to a maximum of £1,200) to the farming charity, the **Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution** <https://rabi.org.uk/>.

To find out more about the survey and project, please click on the link below:
<https://agzeroplus.org.uk/farmersurvey/news>

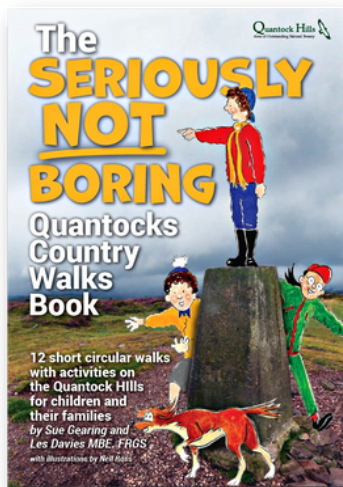
To complete the survey directly, please here:
<https://app.onlinesurveys.jisc.ac.uk/s/ceh-online-surveys/agzeroplussurvey>

For further information contact Hermann Kam directly at: herkam@ceh.ac.uk





Book sales

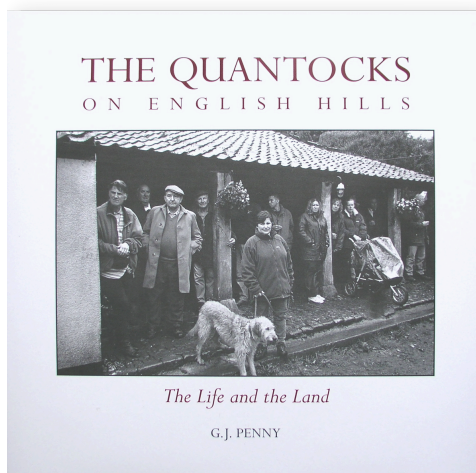


The Seriously NOT Boring Quantock Country Walks Book, is the third in a series of 'Seriously NOT Boring' walk's book that Sue Gearing and Les Davies have written together, aimed particularly at children and their families. Still drawing upon their knowledge of the countryside, its history, landscape and natural beauty, their aim is to show that walking can be anything but boring. Together they have written many other walking books.

There are 12 short circles in and around Quantock Country, between 3.7k (2.5 miles) and 8.4k (5.2 miles) and they include fun things to do such as making a compass in a puddle, sticky stones, building a small shelter and finding the age and height of a tree. So come with us now and join Tom, Mia, Kate, Sam, Harry and the Scamp the inseparable dog on these circles of discovery and adventure.

Mixed blessings is a look at the lives of the agricultural community of the Quantock Hills of West Somerset, through the pictures and extracts from the many hours of interviews the author recorded with farmers and other rural workers from the surrounding area. This book contains a selection of the many hundreds of pictures which Gary has made for the Quantock Hills National Landscape rural archive.

Gary has been a documentary photographer for over 20 years. During that time his work has sought through his images to define the nature of English people. His work is mainly influenced by the social documentary work of the mass observation movement during the middle and later half of the 20th century, which sets out to record the lives of the ordinary men and women of this country who are so often overlooked.



The Quantocks On English Hills is a unique social document that records in photographs of frankness but matchless beauty, one of the last truly distinctive corners of the country. To many it will still seem a remote place. Yet the pace of change in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has led to huge pressures, not only on the scenery of the Quantock Hills but on the culture of the people who live and work there and so largely determine its character. The Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty status was granted in 1957 (making the Quantock Hills the first AONB in England) has helped significantly to protect and preserve the hills, but the way of life here is still a fragile one.

Acclaimed photographer Gary Penny, who lives in the heart of the Quantock Hills, has spent years recording the people of the area and how they interact with the landscape, latterly as Photographer in Residence with the Quantock Hills National Landscape.

For more information on any of the books visit our website at www.quantockhills.com/shop



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