

Blackdown Hills

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Annual Review
2007/2008

Introduction



Chairman's report

This year has certainly been momentous! Our acting manager and planning officer Lisa Turner is now, like former manager Lynn Kettles, the proud mother of twins – it must be in the water. Lisa intends to return early in 2009, whilst project officer Carmel Wilkinson has left the Blackdowns for a new post in Dorset. Our best wishes to all. We had thirty applicants for the post of manager and sixty for project officer, all of a remarkably high standard. We have appointed Linda Bennett who currently works for the Hawk and Owl Trust as manager, Nickie Moore as project officer and Vivien Geen as temporary planning officer. A hearty welcome awaits them on their arrival.

As I write, we are putting the final touches to our joint bid with East Devon AONB for funding from the Rural Development Programme. Our bid is based on continuing the principles of the Leader+ programme which came to an end this year. We should hear whether we are successful at the end of July. We have always recognised that the social and economic life of the Blackdowns is vital to ensure the conservation of the environment, and if we are successful we will have a funding programme to continue our work in this field for the next six years. It has been heartening and exciting to witness the enthusiastic level of support for this bid right across the area. Lisa and East Devon AONB manager Chris Woodruff did a great job on the initial work, and our consultants have successfully established the evidence base; but the greatest accolade is for Jenny Archard, our Leader+ manager, who has triumphed over time and resource to control the entire process and bring coherence to the bid.

At the same time, we have been exploring closer working between the two AONBs. It is now embedded in our collective psyches to look for better practice in our working arrangements. The landscape of the two areas mostly comes under the Blackdowns Joint Character Area (a way of describing landscape types). This results in obvious synergies, and we genuinely enjoy collaboration. Through the bid process, we are also reaching out to our market and coastal towns as well as the World Heritage Coast. I can't remember a time when the spirit of co-operation and innovation was so prevalent.

I am conscious that the chairman is often the figurehead of any organisation, but I could contribute little of value without the dedicated support of the team at St Ivel House, the collective wisdom of our funders and management group, and the various voluntary panels and groups who contribute so much to the underlying "localism" of all that we do.

To the future with thanks,

Paul Diviani
Chairman

AONBs and National Parks in South West England
(Redrawn from original map supplied by Natural England)



The Blackdown Hills AONB

The Blackdown Hills, which lie on the border of Devon and Somerset, form one of the finest landscapes in Britain, a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The AONB covers 370 square kilometres of varied landscape including steep wooded slopes, high plateau, lush valleys and rolling farmland. The Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership is the body which exists to protect this precious place.

This partnership is made up of local authorities, interest groups, national agencies and local communities, all of which are committed to ensuring that the Blackdown Hills remains a healthy, living landscape for future generations.

What is an AONB?

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a landscape which is considered so precious that it is protected for the nation. The criteria for designating an AONB include valuable wildlife, habitats, geology and heritage, as well as scenic views.

There are 40 AONBs in England and Wales. AONBs have existed since 1949, although the Blackdown Hills was designated relatively recently, in 1991.

The natural fabric of these important places is fragile, so the primary purpose of all AONBs is to conserve and enhance the landscape.



The National Association for AONBs
Cymdeithas Genedlaethol AoHNE

Management group

Policy decisions about the AONB are made by the management group, which consists of key funders plus elected representatives drawn from the AONB Partnership Forum. More than 50% of the management group must represent local community interests.

Management group meetings are held four times a year, at locations throughout the Blackdown Hills. These meetings are open to the public.

Current members:

- Cllr Paul Diviani**
East Devon District Council (chair)
- Geoffrey Sworder**
Campaign to Protect Rural England/ Community Council of Devon (vice chair)
- Allison Wallis**
Natural England
- Cllr Frank Rosamond**
Mid Devon District Council
- Cllr Ros Roderigo**
South Somerset District Council
- Cllr John Berry**
Devon County Council
- Cllr Paul Buchanan**
Somerset County Council
- Cllr John Thorne**
Taunton Deane Borough Council
- Bob Buxton**
Honiton Development Trust
- Frank Edwards**
Blackdown Hills Hedge Association
- Mike Hudson**
Culm and North Parishes
- Richard Kallaway**
National Farmers Union
- Ian Panton**
Devon Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
- Gavin Saunders**
Forestry Commission
- Heather Stallard**
Blackdown Hills Business Association
- Andrew Tucker**
Otter and West Parishes
- Dr David Allen**
Yarty and East Parishes

Staff

This year the AONB faced significant challenges as we operated for most of the year without a full staff team. Following the resignation of Lynn Kettles and the departure of Steve Marston, who was covering Lynn's maternity leave, we were without a permanent manager from August. Planning officer Lisa Turner acted as manager for the remainder of the year, while also covering her own post.

- AONB manger (April – August)**
Steve Marston
- Planning officer/ acting AONB manager (August – March)**
Lisa Turner
- Project co-ordinator**
Carmel Wilkinson
- Information officer (from April)**
Katherine Findlay
- Office manager**
Jackie Vaughan
- Local Products Strategy co-ordinator (April-May)**
Catherine Leach
- Local Products Strategy co-ordinator (from May)**
Jenny Archard
- Local Products Strategy/Sustainable Development Fund assistant**
Caroline Newcombe
- Temporary assistant planning officer (from October)**
Lesley Kerry



Grants at a glance

AONB grant funding backs local enterprise and new ideas. This year Natural England’s Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and the EU’s Leader+ allowed us to support projects with environmental, economic and social benefits.

Grant funding awards 2007/08:

Sustainable Development Fund

Project	Grant received
Otterhead Coach House	£10,000.00
Dunkeswell Eco Business Park	£10,000.00
ACRES (FWAG)	£6,800.63
Camera Obscura	£1,500.00
CWS Devon & Somerset - Phase 3	£6,147.45
Dalwood Community Shop & PO	£2,278.82
Woodworks 2	£9,999.71
Taste the Harvest	£2,477.50
Broadband Research	£300.00
Sunday School Wood	£300.00
Wambrook Green Fair	£266.00
Kitchen Garden	£300.00
Buckland St Mary Allotment Enhancement	£360.00
Dunkeswell Allotments	£1,599.15
Axe Valley Environmental Project (AVEP) (ACRES 2)	£2,667.00
Horse Pasture Management Workshop	£1,200.00
Munty Farm	£2,600.00
Neroche Recorded History	£683.91
Wellington Farmers Market	£281.74
Churchstanton Forest School	£206.88
BHBA Farmers’ Market banners	£1,297.58
Dalwood Bags	£104.00
Culmstock Forest School	£279.54
SW Protected Landscapes Forum	£1,350.09

Leader+

Project	Grant received
Coldharbour Mill Education Centre	£8,000
Woolly Waste	£3,182
Capacity Building for Blackdown Hills Woodland Association	£3,300
Blackdown Hills Food & Drink Festival	£8,000
Monument Feast	£8,000
Dunkeswell Eco (IT) Centre	£8,000
Women’s Business Project	£6,337
Increasing ELS Take Up	£8,000
Box Distribution Scheme	£3,060
Dalwood Community Shop	£2,400
Taste the Harvest	£5,227.50
Woolly Boost	£7,995
Hog Roasts	£3,213.96

Economy and community

The beauty of these hills has been shaped by the people who live and work in them. A viable local economy is essential for the future of the area, so we work with communities to boost local business and skills, and improve quality of life for people who live here.

Some of our achievements in 2007/08

Woodland Forum

Leader+ funding helped the Blackdown Hills Woodland Association to launch a website to promote its members, and hold a Woodland Forum event with an environmental theme. We also funded administrative support to help get these ideas off the ground. Both the website and the event were a great success and provided a good platform for the Woodland Association to continue to progress and benefit wood business in the area.

Local Produce Box

Established meat box producer Kittow Cattle successfully expanded into a wider range of produce this year thanks to a grant from Leader+. The funding provided a portable building for much needed workspace and meant that the distribution network could be improved. The expansion benefited not only Kittow Cattle but also suppliers of a range of local produce including chicken, fish and ready meals.

Woodworks 2

Working with the Silvanus Trust, we helped Blackdowns wood businesses to take on local people in need of skills and work. Leader+ funding enabled a variety of businesses to take on trainees by offering a wage subsidy over six months, a tools fund and a 50% training grant. The scheme was also open to people setting up their own enterprises. The project aimed to help a new generation to learn traditional crafts and ensure a future for small-scale modern wood industry in the area.

Dalwood Community Shop and Post Office

SDF and Leader+ funding bought a computerised till and new freezers, which meant the shop could stock a greater range of local produce. Forty-five people help out in the shop each week, which is about 10% of the people living in Dalwood. The original village shop closed its doors about ten years ago. SDF also funded the materials for local people to make cloth bags to sell to shoppers and reduce the use of plastic bags.

Dunkeswell Eco Business Park

This project aims to provide low-cost accommodation for a range of workshops and light industrial businesses. We granted funding to carry out sympathetic repairs and improvements to four vacant buildings of historical wartime interest and install wood fuel heating, rainwater harvesting, and composting toilets. Work started in January and is progressing. Once complete this flagship project will demonstrate how industrial land can be integrated into the landscape

and how businesses can embrace green objectives. Young entrepreneurs will be actively targeted for these units and rental charges will be kept to a minimum to help establish new and expanding businesses.

Fibrefest

This festival of all things woolly took place over two days in September. Leader+ funding helped to put on a great show with 62 stalls from local producers, spinners, weavers, clothes makers and more. During the festival Coldharbour Mill ran special tours and activated the original steam machinery to give visitors a fascinating experience, along with talks on the history of the local textile industry. There were also workshops on topics such as traditional felt making, tapestry weaving, spinning and hat design. The festival aimed to highlight the importance of wool production in the Blackdowns and boost the local economy in this sector. The success of Fibrefest, with over 2000 visitors, has encouraged the Blackdown Hills Natural Fibre Group to make this an annual event.

Women's Business Project

Leader+ funding helped the Blackdown Hills Business Association to employ a women's business development worker. This post was created to support local women who are interested in setting up or expanding a small business, but find themselves disadvantaged by their rural location. Particular emphasis was placed on helping those women who were not benefitting from existing support. The type of support is tailored to individual needs, but could include IT training, business coaching, networking with other business women or help with transport and care costs.



Fibrefest



Hayden Banwell-Moore, Woodworks



Ruth Strange, Beech Hayes Farm



Landscape and environment

The primary purpose of the AONB is to conserve and enhance the landscape. We do this by working with conservation bodies, farmers, landowners and local people to protect the distinctive countryside, wildlife and heritage of the Blackdown Hills.

Some of our achievements in 2007/08

Grazing Animal Project

The East Devon & Blackdown Hills Grazing Animal Project was run by the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) with support from both AONBs. Our contribution meant that a site at Dunkeswell could be managed as an example of how grazing animals can benefit wildlife and farmers. The eight hectare site at Park Farm is a County Wildlife Site comprising springline mire, rush-pasture, coarse grassland and secondary woodland. Scrub encroachment and controlling the rush are the main threats to the site, much of which is wet and difficult to access. Our grant helped the landowner to erect stock fencing so that he can allow grazing by cattle. This grazing will create a varied habitat which is vital for many insect,

invertebrate and plant species. It also results in very tasty, marketable meat. The landowner has been greatly encouraged by what has been achieved and we hope that the example will inspire more farmers and landowners in the future.

Entry Level Stewardship promotion

Entry Level Stewardship is the first stage of the Environmental Stewardship scheme for farmers. This project was established following research by the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) into the low uptake of ELS in the Blackdown Hills. Having identified farmers and target areas, the aim of the project was to increase applications through a

publicity campaign to promote the scheme and through advice and support to farmers. The contract to carry out this work was won by Carver Knowles, who exceeded expectations by completing sixty plus farm visits and achieving fifty ELS applications.

Landscape Character Assessment

This year we continued to work with local authorities, Natural England and AONB teams across Devon to develop a consistent, detailed assessment of the county's landscapes. A Devon landscape officer management group was established to work collectively on Landscape Character Assessment. This is a process of identifying the features

that give a locality its 'sense of place' and pinpointing what makes it different from its neighbouring areas. It describes the characteristic patterns and features of our countryside, and explains how an area has developed over time. Different layers of information tell us about the landform, underlying geology and soils. We can also see the influence of human activity in patterns of settlement, land cover and differences in tree cover.

Landscape Management Guidelines

We worked with East Devon AONB and East Devon District Council on landscape management guidelines for the area. These guidelines promote the unique character of the local landscape and provide advice for those involved in planning and land management. During the coming year they will be made available online. The work will be adopted by East Devon District Council as an important tool for mapping and planning within the council.

Catchment Sensitive Farming

This new government initiative encourages farmers to prevent diffuse pollution in river catchments. This year we sat on the steering group for the Otter catchment, helping to assess the priorities for the area and target funding accordingly. At the same time we allocated AONB funding to closely related projects from the Axe & Char Rivers Environmental Sustainability Project (ACRES). We were also able to help promote events such as the FWAG manure management roadshow. Farmers were shown how applying manures at the correct time, and in the correct way, saves money and reduces diffuse pollution.

Management plan

Our most important tool in looking after the landscape is our management plan. This guides everyone who makes decisions affecting the Blackdown Hills, and gives structure to the work of the core AONB unit. The current plan

runs until 2009 so this year we have begun reviewing it for the future. This process will involve extensive consultation with partners and the public during 2008/09. The new plan will be assessed against the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) matrix and Habitats Regulations, before it is adopted by our six local authorities in March 2009. During 2007/08 we produced a first draft to be approved by the local authorities for consultation purposes.



Awareness and enjoyment

We encourage everyone to enjoy being outdoors in the Blackdowns whenever possible. We believe that experiencing the countryside and the natural world inspires new generations into conservation, as well as improving quality of life for people of all ages.

Some of our achievements in 2007/08

Otterhead

The Otterhead Estate Trust received substantial funding and support for their project to carry out sympathetic repairs to the coach house at Otterhead Lakes and make it suitable for use as an education resource. Works included replacing the slate roof, yard drainage, lime plaster repairs, stabilisation of the walls, and installation of bat boxes and a slow worm house. The Otterhead Estate Trust Company Ltd now operates independently,

run by volunteers who manage the conservation of the site. During 2007/08 they also established a website and a Friends of Otterhead scheme, and put on a popular snowdrop walk in February.

Community conference

Local people enjoyed glorious sunshine and a stunning woodland setting at our annual community event in June. The event, which was put on jointly with the Neroche

scheme, was held outdoors for the first time. Highlights included a natural arts workshop with local artist Michael Fairfax and magical storytelling in a tipi by a stream. Guided walks through the Neroche forest near Staple Fitzpaine showed people ancient trees, rare wildflowers, butterfly habitats and recently introduced English Longhorn cattle grazing in the woods.

Events programme

Blackdown Tales 2007 proved to be another successful events programme for the eighth year running. Nearly 50 events were highlighted, featuring something for everyone from coppicing to storytelling. The events in the programme were as popular as ever, with local people and visitors of all ages enjoying a range of outdoor activities.

For 2008 we decided to make some changes to the name and format, and the new joint AONB/Neroche Countryside Events programme was launched in February. This introduced two seasonal programmes, and a year round schedule for the first time. The spring/summer programme started in March with a traditional orchard course and a children's farm visit. It continues until the end of August with a host of walks, workshops, and fun family days.

Events include wildlife gardening, wild food foraging, a journey to trace a river, bushcraft skills, natural art, birdsong, bat detecting and lots more. All of these events were made possible by working with enthusiastic local experts and a wide range of local organisations.

Website

This year we went through the process of completely redesigning our website. AB Design of Exeter won the contract and came up with a design to suit the new structure we wanted. The new site is designed to be clearer and easier to navigate, and we hope will prove to be a valuable resource for anyone with an interest in the Blackdown Hills. The site can be seen at www.blackdown-hills.net

Taste the Harvest

Taste the Harvest was an event organised by two local farmers, Mark Pope and Rob Walrond, with our support and funding. The two day event in September was part of the Year of Food and Farming. 800 children from 35 local schools visited Staple Farm at Staple Fitzpaine to see where food comes from and experience how it is planted, grown and harvested. They were also able to taste the fruits of their labours, with a meal of fresh local ingredients.

This year each school will harvest and mill the wheat they planted, and bake a loaf with the flour. A prize for the best bread will be awarded at a special ceremony.

Project Phoenix

Project Phoenix aims to create and promote a network of user-friendly circular horse-riding routes in the Blackdown Hills AONB. The project was devised by local resident John Presgrave with support from the AONB Partnership. During 2007/08 Devon and Somerset County Council Rights of Way teams carried out improvements to the routes while John designed circular rides to help riders get the most from the area. Attractive packs were produced detailing the rides, which will also be available to download from the AONB website.



Working together

Looking after the Blackdown Hills is not something the AONB unit can achieve in isolation. We are managed by a partnership of agencies and organisations which all carry out vital work to protect the AONB. We also work closely with local bodies and contribute to regional and national efforts to promote protected landscapes.



Local organisations

Staff in the core unit worked with a host of local organisations on the ground this year. These include the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG), Devon and Somerset Wildlife Trusts, Blackdown Hills Business Association, Blackdown Hills Hedge Association, Butterfly Conservation and many more.

The AONB family

The Blackdown Hills AONB is an active member of the South West Protected Landscapes Forum, and the National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Staff share ideas at regular meetings of national and regional counterparts, as well as representing the Blackdown Hills at events such as the national AONB conference and the UK Outdoor Show.

Natural England

This is the government agency with responsibility for the countryside, and our main funder. We worked closely with Natural England to locally achieve their overall purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural environment.

Local authorities

The Blackdown Hills area is covered by Devon and Somerset County Councils, East Devon, Mid Devon, and South Somerset District Councils, and Taunton Deane Borough Council. All of these authorities not only sit on our management group and contribute to funding the core AONB unit, but help to safeguard the Hills through their own work. Examples of achievements during 2007/08 include:

Water Vole Recovery Project

East Devon District Council's Water Vole Recovery Project worked in the Rive Axe catchment area. The aim of this three year project is to see the successful natural re-colonisation of Devon's rivers with the water vole, which has been extinct for some 50 years in the county. The project officer worked with local farmers to carry out mink control while the council led talks with local communities and provided funding for fencing to help improve the bank-side habitat for water voles.

Somerset Landscape Scheme

This scheme conserves and restores the best traditional features of the Somerset landscape, such as orchards,

ponds, hedges and dry stone walls. It also creates new features and improves wildlife habitats. It is jointly funded by Somerset County Council, district councils in Somerset, the Aggregate Levy Fund and the Environment Agency.

Projects supported in the Blackdown Hills in 2007/08 include woodland management, native tree and shrub planting and hedgelaying.

Historic Landscape

The book 'Ancient Country: The Historic Landscape Character of Rural Devon' was published this year, describing the results of historic landscape characterisation work carried out by Devon County Council and English Heritage. It provides a fascinating record of the evolution of the Blackdowns Hills landscape.

Neroche

The AONB has been a key partner in the continuing delivery of the Neroche Landscape Partnership Scheme, which is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and a partnership of local authorities and agencies. The AONB office in Hemyock hosts Neroche staff, who are employed by the Forestry Commission.

During 2007/08 the AONB team gave specific support to the following Neroche-led projects operating in the northern part of the AONB:

- The development of long distance circular Herepath Trails. The first of these, a 13.5 mile circular trail centred on Staple Fitzpaine, was officially opened in May 2008.
- Support with landscape considerations in the development of a wood pasture landscape within the Forestry Commission estate.
- Joint working on the development of opportunities for conservation grazing of marginal land.
- Funding support through the Sustainable Development Fund for an Oral History Recording project, as part of the Neroche Community History Project.
- Funding support through the Sustainable Development Fund for a mobile Camera Obscura, to promote public appreciation of the AONB landscape.
- Joint promotion of Neroche and AONB events through the Blackdown Hills Countryside Events booklet, and a bi-monthly page in the View from the Blackdown Hills.
- Liaison in the development of the AONB and Neroche websites.
- The Neroche Scheme has commissioned a LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) survey across the northern third of the AONB during 2008, with funding support from the AONB. This will provide detailed topographical images of the land surface which will show in unprecedented detail the impressions left on the land by centuries of human activity. The images will be used to add to our knowledge of the archaeology of the area, and stimulate community research into landscape history.

East Devon AONB

Staff at Blackdown Hills and neighbouring East Devon AONB work closely together on projects and issues which span the whole area. Initiatives on which we worked together this year included the Grazing Animal Project, increasing take up of Entry Level Stewardship and putting together a joint Local Action funding bid. We shared a marquee at the Honiton Show in August and arranged joint events in our programmes for the first time. The aim of this was to give the public enjoyable ways of experiencing both areas and understanding how they are linked by geology and landscape.

The resignation of the permanent AONB manager at the Blackdown Hills gave us an opportunity to carry out a formal review of how the two AONBs work together and identify opportunities for closer working in the future.

Funding and finance

Blackdown Hills AONB is publicly funded by the government and our local authorities.

The core work of the Blackdown Hills AONB is funded by Devon County Council, Somerset County Council, East Devon District Council, Mid Devon District Council, South Somerset District Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council and Natural England. We also receive a project budget which allows us to carry out additional projects during the year.

Our funders are signatories to a six year Memorandum of Agreement, and are key members of our management group.

Separately to our own budget, this year we also administered Natural England's Sustainable Development Fund, and the EU Leader+ fund locally.

2007/08 saw the final stages of the Leader+ fund. During the year staff worked on developing proposals for new funding to replace it.

EU Territorial Co-operation

Throughout the year we contributed to developing a regional proposal for funding from the EU Territorial Co-operation programme. We were involved in discussions with Devon County Council, the South West Protected Landscapes Forum and other Devon AONBs to help put together a proposal to link the protected landscapes of South West England and North West France. Ultimately, this could lead to sharing valuable experience and undertaking joint activity.

Local Action for Rural Communities

Considerable efforts were made this year to secure Local Action funding for an area spanning the Blackdown Hills and East Devon. This is European funding which is being administered through the Regional Development Agency as part of the Rural Development Programme for England. If this bid is successful it will build on Leader+. Like Leader+, it would help us to support local producers and businesses, and improve the quality of life for people living here.

Close working with East Devon AONB has resulted in a proposal which covers both areas and the surrounding market towns. Work on this proposal has generated impressive local support. If the bid is successful we will know in July 2008, with work starting almost immediately.

Financial information 2007/2008

Core Income		Core Expenditure	
Natural England	£149,800	Staffing	£145,015
Devon County Council	£10,700	Office Costs	£23,944
Somerset County Council	£10,700	Partnership Costs	£42,749
Mid Devon District Council	£10,700	Printing & Publicity	£14,502
East Devon District Council	£10,700	Carried forward to 2008/09	£19853*
South Somerset District Council	£10,700		
Taunton Deane Borough Council	£10,700		
Rental Income	£10,000		
Other Income	£1548		
Income carried forward	£20,515		
Total Income		Total Expenditure	£246,063
* Income carried forward due to the gaps in employment of the AONB Partnership Manager i.e. employment costs and slippage in certain work programmes as a result.			

Project Income		Project Expenditure	
Natural England	£10,000	Blackdown Tales	£5,953
Somerset County Council	£1,000	Entry Level Stewardship	£15,974
Mid Devon District Council	£1,000	Grazing Animal Project	£2,000
East Devon District Council	£1,000	Local Action for Rural Communities	£4,050
South Somerset District Council	£1,000	Carried forward	£2987*
Taunton Deane Borough Council	£1,000		
Blackdown Tales	£1,490		
Leader +	£7,974		
East Devon AONB	£500		
Devon County Council	£3,500		
Core funding	£2,500		
Total Income		Total Expenditure	£30,964
* Income carried forward due to the bid for Local Action for Rural Communities spanning the 07/08 and 08/09 financial years.			



To order a large print version of this review, call 01823 680681

www.blackdown-hills.net

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**Blackdown
Hills AONB**

Photo credits: Dan Bryan, Chris Goodman, Keith Gould, Natural England and Harriet Pottinger.

