



Blackdown Hills

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Photo: Liam Marsh



ANNUAL REVIEW 2019-2020

FOREWORD

This was my last full year with the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), saying farewell to a wonderful group of dear friends with whom I have shared many happy times. The qualities of the Blackdown Hills outstanding landscape were always clear to me but what I hadn't initially appreciated was the tremendous feeling that local people had for where they lived. Arriving in Stockland's Kings Arms Inn in 1987, I was immediately involved in the AONB and remained so since then but, after several health setbacks, I felt the time was right to complete my withdrawal from such an active public life.

Blackdown Hills AONB has continued to spread its wings, no more so than with the Connecting the Culm project. The project is exploring ways in which the River Culm and its catchment can adapt to the impact of climate change using nature-based interventions and working with local communities along the full length of the River to co-design a blueprint for its future.

In other parts of the Blackdown Hills we have been working with landowners to install interventions that use natural processes to reduce flooding and improve water quality.

At the National Association of Areas for Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB) conference in July 2019, Blackdown Hills AONB signed up to the Colchester Declaration. The resulting nature recovery programme, across all AONBs, aims to restore habitats and species on a landscape scale, and engage and inspire people. We are now working with

partners to formulate a nature recovery plan for the Blackdown Hills.

The Discovering Dunkeswell Abbey Project ran in partnership with Heritage, Arts and People. This enabled local people young and old to learn about this little-known 13th century Cistercian Abbey located between Dunkeswell and Hemyock.

Via the Somerset Nature and Wellbeing project, we continued to support members of the local community who might not ordinarily access the countryside to experience the Blackdown Hills.

Our volunteer co-ordinator, who works across both the Quantock Hills and Blackdown Hills AONBs, continued to recruit volunteers for activities such as biological surveys and practical conservation.

I will miss being a part of the Blackdown Hills AONB partnership management group but plan to keep in touch!

Best wishes,

PAUL DIVIANI

**Chair, Blackdown Hills AONB
Partnership**



PLANNING

We made substantive responses to 66 planning applications and considered 53 others. The number of applications in 2019/20 totalled 388, a reduction of 6% from last year. Blackdown Hills AONB was consulted in 31% of cases.

We responded to three local plan consultations and two other planning policy consultations.

blackdownhills.org.uk/planning

ENHANCING THE HILLS

November 2019 to October 2024

Following a successful application to National Grid's Landscape Enhancement Initiative, work got underway to restore and enhance some key landscape features on targeted sites in the vicinity of the National Grid high-voltage electricity transmission line. We supported four landowners to plant new hedges and trees, and restore small orchards, woodland and hedgerows. In future years the project will also support grassland restoration.

blackdownhills.org.uk/nationalgrid

COMMUNICATIONS

We continue to engage audiences through our website, social media channels, local media and printed publications. In spring 2020 we published a new visitor guide, including a map of the area, some easy-to-access walks, and details of places to see and places to eat and drink.

31,069 website visitors (20% increase from previous year)



EVENTS AND VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

To reach out to a range of audiences we combined our own events with contributions to the events of partner organisations:

- A Wild Day Out at Castle Neroche in partnership with Forestry England – a family event intended to welcome families to the countryside who might not otherwise visit.
- Stalls at Mid-Devon Show, Honiton Show and Stockland Country Fayre, with information about the Blackdown Hills AONB and activities for visitors.
- A children's nature and craft workshop In Honiton, East Devon District Council's family activity day.
- Volunteer events including nightjar survey training and crayfish pond surveys.
- Participation in Naturally Healthy Month across Devon and Somerset, including a Sing and Stroll activity for beginners.

These events were promoted via our seasonal events guide, social media channels and online calendar, along with many other events held across the Blackdown Hills AONB.

NATURE AND WELLBEING

January 2016 to August 2020

The Nature and Wellbeing project, funded by Public Health Somerset, has been helping members of the local community make the most of Somerset's AONBs by participating in activities that improve their physical and mental wellbeing.

Here are some of this year's highlights:

- An art competition and subsequent exhibition at the Museum of Somerset on the theme of 'does happiness grow on trees?'
- The establishment of an informal Somerset Nature and Wellbeing Network bringing together more than 100 providers.
- Ten community engagement volunteers now working across the Blackdown Hills and Quantock Hills, supported with training on topics including mental health first aid and dementia awareness.

In the Blackdown Hills AONB, the project has worked with groups including:

- Linking Taunton Young Carers with Otterhead Forest School, who are now keen to include visits in their annual programme.
- A wellbeing walk piloted for Somerset Wellbeing and Learning College (NHS) who support people with mental health issues. Following its success more walks are planned in 2020/21.
- Continuing to support activities previously established by the project with groups including Chard Memory Café, Green Days Day Care, and Chard Watch.
- While this was the project's final year, a new Somerset Nature Connections project is due to start in September 2020. This partnership project will be led by Somerset Wildlife Trust with Blackdown Hills AONB hosting one of three project officers.

Throughout the whole project there were 515 sessions, engaging 2,345 people.

www.blackdownhills.org.uk/natureandwellbeing



Photo: Kristen Lambert



VOLUNTEERING

We have been continuing our work to support volunteering around the Blackdown Hills AONB. This has involved linking prospective volunteers with community groups and nature projects in need of helpers, arranging and promoting volunteer activities relating to specific AONB projects, and working in partnership with other organisations to publicise and provide volunteering opportunities.

Examples include:

- Conservation work at locations including Otterhead Lakes, Dunkeswell Abbey and Longmead Meadows.

- Working with partners including Forestry England, Reptile and Amphibian Group for Somerset (RAGS) and British Trust for Ornithology to run volunteering events.

- Crayfish surveying and water sampling to help identify potential ark sites for the endangered white clawed crayfish.

97 people have participated in volunteering activities

www.blackdownhills.org.uk/volunteering

CONNECTING THE CULM

January 2019 to June 2022

Connecting the Culm is a three-year project which aims to make the River Culm and its floodplain more resilient to flood and drought, improve water quality, support biodiversity and habitat, and involve local people and organisations in the process. It is part of the wider EU Interreg 2 Seas funded Co-Adapt programme.

The project has been bringing together a broad range of specialists – in geomorphology, hydrology, archaeology, civil engineering, agriculture, ecology and community engagement – to share knowledge and help develop a better understanding of the River Culm and its catchment.

A key activity in this initial stage was to work with environmental consultants Jeremy Benn Associates (JBA) to create a baseline model of how the River and its tributaries move through the catchment and how it will react in different weather events now and with climate change in the future.

The River Culm Historic Character project, led by

Fjordr, provided information to Connecting the Culm about how the River has changed from early prehistory to the present-day. The results help us understand how people lived and worked with the river in the past, see how problems have arisen on the Culm, and identify potential improvements that would work well with the historic landscape.

These findings, alongside habitat and wildlife surveys, water-flow and water-quality data, supplemented with local and historical knowledge create a complete picture of this complex system.

The team also started to identify and talk with key stakeholders in the Culm catchment, including parish councils, farmers, community groups, schools, and relevant organisations, laying the foundations of a community engagement programme in the next stage of the project. This will involve collaborating with the people who manage, live and work in the catchment to develop a shared vision and plan for its future. As a result of the pandemic, from March 2020 many of these activities moved online.

www.connectingtheculm.com



WHITE CLAWED CRAYFISH IN THE RIVER CULM

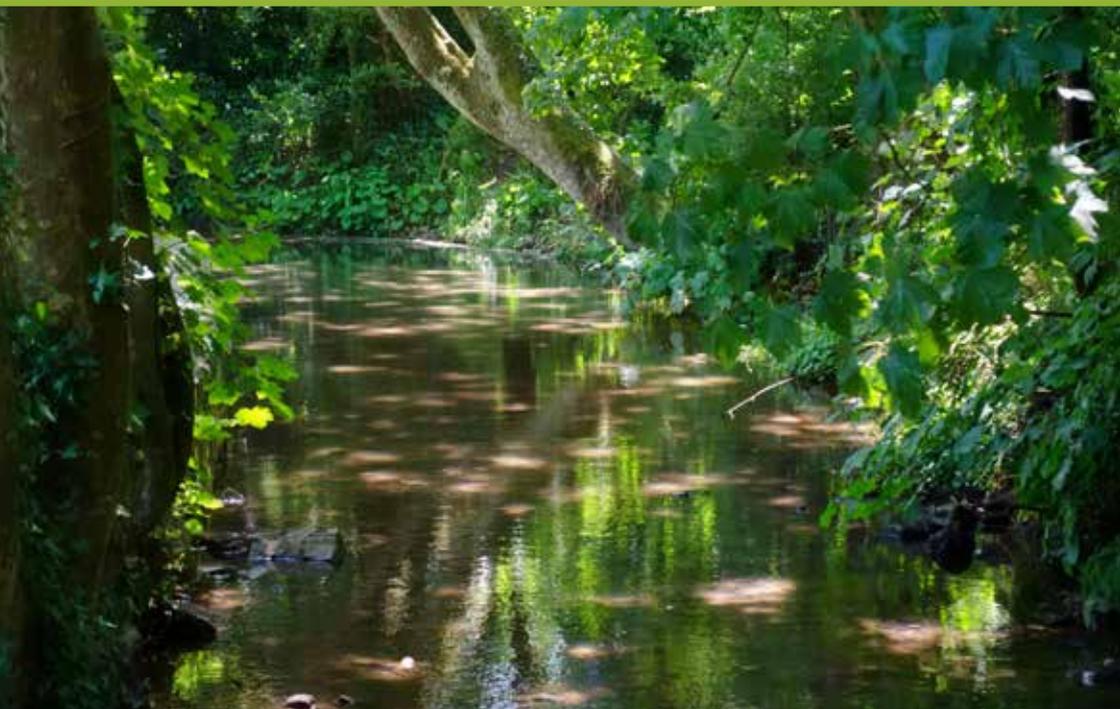
Following the Culm Community Crayfish project, Blackdown Hills AONB has been continuing to support the endangered white clawed crayfish in the River Culm. A study was carried out, with the help of local volunteers, to assess the feasibility of removing a population of American signal crayfish from a pond site beside the Bolham River,

Work has also been underway to identify potential ark sites that could be used as homes for captive-bred white-clawed crayfish, currently at Paignton Zoo.

Volunteers have been helping to assess the water quality and the invertebrate,

fish and crayfish populations on these sites to assess their suitability. Ark sites are important conservation tools, allowing local populations of native crayfish to be maintained where they are threatened with extinction.

www.blackdownhills.org.uk/crayfish





CORRY AND COLY NATURAL FLOOD MANAGEMENT

December 2018 to March 2020

Working in partnership with the Environment Agency, Devon County Council's Flood and Coastal Risk Team, East Devon AONB, Westcountry Rivers Trust and FWAG South West, we are leading this two-year project to tackle flooding and water quality in the Corry and Coly, the two sub-catchments of the River Axe.

www.blackdownhills.org.uk/corryandcoly

We worked with seven farms in these sub-catchments to install £50k of interventions that work with natural processes, creating:

- 44 leaky dams
- Five flow ponds
- Nine debris dams
- Three cross/ buffer drainage features
- Two flow spreaders
- 1230 metres of stock proofed watercourse (with alternative drinking supply)

WOODS FOR WATER

December 2017 to March 2021

The Woods for Water project is stimulating woodland planting and management in appropriate locations, using the 'right tree, right place' principle. The aim is to improve water quality, (managing phosphate levels in particular), and provide other benefits including flood alleviation, increased biodiversity and carbon storage.

The project team has been undertaking targeted visits and providing bespoke advice to landowners, encouraging and supporting them to manage woodland effectively.

The project is focussing on three areas: North Devon, the Camel Estuary, and East Devon, the latter taking in a large part of the Blackdown Hills AONB. Led by North Devon Biosphere, the project is coordinated locally by Blackdown Hills AONB. Other partners include Forestry Commission, Woodland Trust, East Devon AONB and the Environment Agency. The Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group South West (FWAG SW) are the primary farmer engagement partners.

www.blackdownhills.org.uk/woodsforwater



ENVIRONMENTAL LAND MANAGEMENT SCHEME (ELM) TESTS AND TRIALS

September 2019 to March 2021

Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is one of 12 AONBs in England taking part in a National Association for AONBs programme to provide information to help Defra in the design of the new Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM). Each is focusing on a different aspects of ELM.

The purpose of the Blackdown Hills AONB tests and trials project is to explore how investing in the capacity of landowners to liaise and build trust amongst each other might improve ELM take-up in landscapes of high nature value.

The project is focussing on two zones within the Blackdown Hills AONB, selected through a process of collating data on habitat, natural capital, water quality and natural processes, mapping that data, and reviewing farmer engagement, opportunities and challenges across the AONB.

The aim is to develop peer-to-peer collaboration, facilitated through 'farmer ambassadors', with a view to improving connectivity between nearby or adjoining holdings, allowing landowners to identify 'public goods' collectively and agree on appropriate approaches to their management.

www.blackdownhills.org.uk/elm



FARMING AND WOODLAND GROUP

June 2018 to June 2021

The Blackdown Hills Farming and Woodland Group (BHFVG) is one of over 100 Facilitation Fund networks across England, funded by Natural England to encourage information exchange between landowners, in order to promote better environmental practice. The Blackdown Hills group has now been running for two years and has a membership of 85 land holdings, ranging from large estate owners, through commercial livestock farms to smallholders and woodland owners.

Sixteen training and experience-sharing events took place during the year, encompassing a wide range of subjects including earthworms and healthy soils, insect pollinators, farmland butterflies, botanical identification, beavers on the River Otter, scrub machinery, and regenerative farming.

A conference on Climate Change and Farming in the Blackdown Hills took place at Monks Yard in November. This brought together issues surrounding soil conservation, flood management, pasture farming and woodland management, in the context of a changing climate. The conference was addressed by Prof Richard Betts, head of climate impacts strategy at the Met Office, and a lead author of the fourth assessment report of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Other speakers included Mhari Barnes from the National Farmers' Union and soils expert Dr Richard Smith from the Environment Agency. The audience of 70 undertook a series of workshop sessions which helped identify priorities for the Blackdown Hills farming community in adapting to and helping tackle climate breakdown which is already affecting this area.

www.blackdownhills.org.uk/farmingandwoodland



DISCOVERING DUNKESWELL ABBEY

April 2019 to April 2020

The Discovering Dunkeswell Abbey project, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, set out to raise the profile of Dunkeswell Abbey and help the local community to connect with and understand the site. The project was run by Heritage Arts and People CIC in partnership with the Blackdown Hills AONB and involved an archaeology programme, multi-generational engagement activities and the creation of on-site interpretation material.

Dunkeswell Abbey is a scheduled 13th century Cistercian abbey two miles north of the village of Dunkeswell. By the time of its dissolution in 1539 it was counted as one of the major monastic houses in Devon. Some upstanding remains survive, and parts of the Abbey church are incorporated into the Victorian church which still stands.

The project ran for one year and involved:

- River walking survey
- Earthwork survey
- Geophysical survey
- Test pit excavation
- Programme of learning with schools and community groups
- School education packs
- Tours and activities during Heritage Open Day

Heritage Arts and People worked with more than 30 volunteers on research fieldwork and learning opportunities. Volunteers worked alongside professional archaeologists, learning skills and gaining knowledge about both Dunkeswell Abbey and the techniques being used to further understand it.

During the test-pit investigation on land near the Abbey burnt material dating back to the late Roman period was discovered.

www.blackdownhills.org.uk/discoveringdunkeswell

EDUCATION PROGRAMME

An education programme supported primary schools across the Blackdown Hills AONB to extend their environmental education. 300 children took part in the programme of study, linked to the national curriculum, helping to develop their understanding, connection, and sense of responsibility towards their local river.

Pupils were given the opportunity to explore local rivers, wetlands and associated wildlife through images, maps, games and art activities. Key stage 2 children also investigated the issues and problems associated with rivers in the Blackdown Hills and how these could be addressed using nature-based solutions.

Whenever possible, learning about rivers and wetlands took place outdoors, either in the school grounds or at a water course that the children could walk to. Outside, the pupils engaged in a range of activities including river dipping, habitat hunts and creating nature-inspired river pictures.

www.blackdownhills.org.uk/schools19-20



“A really fantastic, engaging session. The children were interested from the very start and loved the practical pond dipping activity. We all found out lots about the importance of our local rivers. Thank you!”

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

AONB Income	Cost (£)
Income brought forward from 2017/18	28,287
Defra	168,311
Devon County Council	10,000
Somerset County Council	5,122
Mid Devon District Council	8,500
East Devon District Council	9,323
Somerset West and Taunton Council	10,000
Other income	31,462
Income carried forward to 2019/20*	- 42,639
Total Income	234,366

* Monies received for Blackdown Hills AONB ongoing projects.

External Project Income	Cost (£)
Enhancing the Hills - National Grid	26,248
Environmental Land Management	9,700
Connecting the Culm - Water Environment Grant	22,500
Connecting the Culm - Interreg 2 Seas	272,271
Corry and Coly - Natural Flood Management	39,736
Total External Project Income **	370,455

** Unspent income carried forward to 2020/21

AONB Expenditure		Cost (£)
Staffing		154,331
Office costs		19,397
Partnership costs		19,093
Partnership projects		40,545
Sustainable Development Fund		1,000
Total Expenditure		234,366

Sustainable Development Fund Projects 2019-2020		Cost (£)
Yarty Moor - Mire Restoration		1,000
Total		1,000

External Funding Expenditure		Cost (£)
Enhancing the Hills - National Grid		4,155
Environmental Land Management		9,700
Connecting the Culm - Water Environment Grant		22,500
Connecting the Culm - Interreg 2 Seas		239,271
Corry and Coly- Natural Flood Management		39,736
Total External Project Income		315,362

HOW TO CONTACT US

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Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is funded by Defra, Devon and Somerset County Councils, as well as East Devon, Mid Devon, Somerset West and Taunton, and South Somerset District Councils

We would also like to thank the many other organisations that have supported our projects. In 2019/20 we received additional project funding from EU Interreg 2 Seas, Water Environment Grant (Rural Development Programme for England), Environment Agency, Landscape Enhancement Initiative (National Grid), Public Health Somerset, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Local Levy (South West Regional Flood and Coastal Committee), National Association for AONBs, Whitley Wildlife Conservation Trust (Paignton Zoo), Devon Wildlife Trust, Butterfly Conservation, Blackdown Hills Trust, local parish councils and others.



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