

### Forest Grazing

The Neroche herd of longhorn cattle are leaving the forest during September and will be overwintering away from the Blackdown Hills. The project has suffered difficulties during 2010 following a sustained campaign against the project by two local members of the public, itself sparked by problems experienced by the project over last winter on the woodchip corral built as part of the forest grazing project. As a result the corral will not be used this winter, and the cattle management arrangement between FC and Chris Salisbury has come to a close. FC remains fully committed to the project however, and plans for the 2011 grazing season are currently being developed.

Meanwhile the positive effects of the grazing programme in helping to restore important habitats in the public forest continue to be seen. A large-scale ecological assessment has been undertaken this summer by SERC, alongside continuing vegetation surveying by trained volunteers.



### Volunteering

To date the Neroche Scheme has clocked up over 1000 volunteer days, translating into over £60,000 as in-kind match funding to help draw down Lottery investment in the Blackdown Hills.

The Neroche Conservation Volunteers is now a thriving group, carrying out monthly work on FC and Somerset Wildlife Trust sites. As well as helping to manage wildlife habitats, a group of volunteers has now begun training with Butterfly Conservation members to be able to carry out butterfly transect recording from next year.

Meanwhile ecological survey and archaeological survey volunteers, together with trailwatchers and health walks volunteers continue to make a huge contribution to the Blackdown Hills landscape.



### Neroche evolves beyond HLF funding

Thanks to on-going support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the scope for Neroche to continue and evolve beyond HLF funding is looking very positive. HLF has now agreed to extend the time-frame for our Lottery budget to be spent through to September 2011, with a maintenance budget being sustained for a further period beyond that. This arrangement gives the Neroche Team maximum flexibility to spend remaining capital budgets to best effect.

The Lottery-funded Landscape Partnership Scheme will therefore formally end next September, and an end-of-Scheme event will take place next summer.

Meanwhile five members of the Neroche Local Stakeholders Group have established a new trust – the Blackdown Hills Trust – in order to continue community involvement in supporting projects similar to the ones promoted through Neroche. The Trust is awaiting Charity Commission approval after which it will begin developing its plans.

### Herepaths and interpretation

A programme of upgrades and maintenance on the Staple Fitzpaine Herepath has taken place over the summer. Major stretches have been upgraded and re-surfaced at Curry Mallet Drove, Bickenhall Farm, Sturms Hill and Staple Hill, and faulty riding gates have been re-set in several locations. Meanwhile options for resolving the poor field-edge conditions around Staple Lawns are being explored by an access consultant. These works are being carried out in partnership between the Neroche Team and Somerset County Council Rights of Way staff.

A new road crossing has been installed at Staple Hill car park, allowing access from the Herepath southwards into Otterford parish and on towards the Phoenix Trails. Meanwhile planning work is progressing on the proposed 'Valleyheads' route between Hemyock and Staple Hill, thanks to development work undertaken for Neroche by Devon County Council Rights of Way staff.

Given the huge popularity of Staple Hill Loop Trail (part supported by the Blackdown Hills SDF Fund), Neroche is investing further in this facility, with two major pieces of interpretation due to be installed this autumn. One is an information panel describing the management of the forest visible from the Loop Trail, and the second is a major sculptural work which will illustrate the geology of the Blackdowns scarp. Made from local oak, the piece will show a slice through the hillside and the layered rock types which give the landscape its character.



Meanwhile the popular Neroche Ancient Tree Hunt has been running again this summer and autumn, and the Neroche Digital Trail Guides are available for hire at Taunton TIC and the Greyhound Inn, Staple Fitzpaine

## Well-being and woody skills

Neroche is working with Somerset Team for Early Psychosis (STEP) to use the forest as a venue for therapeutic work. Mental health staff from Somerset NHS Trust are bringing small groups of adults to a specially-developed site where they spend the day doing bushcraft activities, led by Jenny Archard and Richard Whiteside. The Neroche Team hopes to build on this in the future.

Meanwhile a new, permanent bushcraft site is being developed near Staple Fitzpaine, as a venue for an expanded range of activities. Plans for this new site were advertised at the Honiton Show, and drew interest from a range of new volunteers. A programme of events in October at the new site will include introductory Green Woodworking days (led by Tim Beazley and promoted jointly with the BH Hedge Association), a Family Bushcraft day, a Woodland Art day led by Sally Clark and an introduction to letter carving in wood led by Michael Fairfax.



Neroche was pleased to support the Blackdowns and East Devon Woodland Association's Woodland Fair in July, which proved to be a highly popular event.

## Forest Schools

A new season of Forest School training has begun, with 16 teachers from schools across the Blackdowns and Taunton area working towards qualifying as Forest School Leaders, to join the 35 teachers previously trained by the Neroche project. Taster days are being run by Forest Schools officer Clare Neenan this term at Trinity, Staplegrove and Norton Fitzwarren and Thurlbear schools.

Meanwhile Forest School has become a normal part of school life in a number of schools where teachers have previously been trained through Neroche. For example at Culmstock School, Year 3 and 4 children now spend every Wednesday morning in the Parish Council-owned woodland at Hillmoor, doing Forest School activities which contribute to many aspects of the curriculum.

## Evaluating Neroche

The Neroche Partnership has commissioned the Social & Economic Research Group at Forest Research (the research arm of the Forestry Commission) to undertake a detailed evaluation of the impacts of the Neroche LPS on a wide range of stakeholders, participants and beneficiaries. This work will be used to help guide future activity.

Neroche is a partner in a regional research project called Good from Wood, led by the Silvanus Trust, which is documenting the social and emotional benefits of organised activities in woodland settings. Neroche's activities are serving as a case study in this work.

## Community History

The Book about the northern Blackdown Hills, produced as part of the Neroche Community History Project, is due for publication around Christmas. The lavishly-illustrated book has 33 chapters covering many aspects of the heritage of the area, written by some 25 local amateur and professional historians, artists and environmental writers.

The LiDAR images of the Neroche area continue to be assessed to allow on-going validation on the ground of features they have highlighted. Meanwhile the project is currently updating the Somerset Historic Environment Record with all the findings from this and other archaeological surveys over the last three years.

Community History Officer Tanya James is leaving Neroche at the end of October to return to archaeological consultancy. We will all miss her and we wish her well.

## Beef & Butterflies

A partnership bid to Making It Local, developed by the Neroche Team/Forestry Commission, Butterfly Conservation and Natural England, and supported by the Blackdown Hills AONB, has been granted outline approval.

The project aims to encourage collaborative working amongst the Blackdown Hills livestock farming sector in the management of wildlife-rich marginal rough land. It will promote exchange of experience between practitioners through the creation of an informal 'Springline Association' open to any landowner, tenant or contractor involved in the management of marginal rough land.

The project will facilitate the submission of Higher Level Stewardship applications by landowners, and will broker collective approaches to common issues in managing difficult land, such as scrub management and fencing, and collective approaches to grazing of marginal land. The project will also seek to increase community engagement in the issues surrounding the project, and volunteer involvement in wildlife habitat monitoring and management.

It is hoped that a coordinator for the project will be recruited by early 2011. The coordinator will be employed by Butterfly Conservation and based with the Neroche Team.

## UK Landscape Award

Neroche has been entered for the UK Landscape Award 2010, thanks to the efforts of Rosemary Viant of the Neroche Local Stakeholders Group who wrote the text for the entry. Neroche is one of only five entries in the South West region, and the winner will be announced in early November.



*Working together to conserve and celebrate the heritage of the northern scarp of the Blackdown Hills AONB*