



Neroche is a Landscape Partnership Scheme led by the Forestry Commission and based with the Blackdown Hills AONB. The LPS is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and a partnership of agencies and authorities, with the close involvement of the community of the area. The current main funding programme began in autumn 2006 and runs until spring 2010.

The Forestry Commission, Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership, Natural England, Somerset County Council, Devon County Council, Taunton Deane Borough Council, Mid Devon District Council, South Somerset District Council, The National Trust, Somerset Wildlife Trust, Butterfly Conservation, Somerset Art Works, and the Community of the northern Blackdown Hills

Main project headings and lead staff/partner organisations

NATURAL HERITAGE PROJECTS

Forest harvesting and grazing unit establishment	Steve Eyres, Damian Ward
Cattle grazing and overwintering	Chris Salisbury, Grazing Management Group
Nature reserves	David Northcote-Wright / Somerset Wildlife Trust
Ecological monitoring	Gavin Saunders / SERC

BUILT HERITAGE PROJECTS

Castle Neroche	James Maben, Damian Ward
Wellington Monument	The National Trust
Ringdown Barn <i>Complete</i>	David Northcote-Wright / Somerset Wildlife Trust
Wych Lake <i>Complete</i>	Taunton Anglers Association / Gavin Saunders

COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECTS

Playstreet village	Tanya James / SCC HES
Group and individual projects	Tanya James
The Book of Neroche	Tanya James / Gavin Saunders

ACCESS PROJECTS

Staple Fitzpaine Herepath	James Maben
All-ability loop trail at Staple Hill <i>Complete</i>	James Maben
Culm Davy Herepath	James Maben
Valley Heads Herepath	James Maben
Timber tracks	Steve Eyres, FCE

ARTS PROJECTS

Digital Trail Guides	James Maben, Michael Fairfax
Touching the Seasons	James Maben, Michael Fairfax
Revealing the Landscape	James Maben, Sally Clark / SAW
Fixed interpretation	James Maben, Gavin Saunders

LEARNING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROJECTS

Neroche Forest Schools	Clare Neenan, Jenny Archard
Volunteering	Toria Hare, Neroche Team
Health Walks	Lisette George
Neroche events	Neroche Team

SKILLS AND HERITAGE MANAGEMENT PROJECTS

Neroche Apprenticeships Project <i>Complete</i>	Steve Eyres, Damian Ward, Ambios Ltd
Land Management Advice	Jake Chant/FWAG, Somerset Wildlife Trust

NATURAL HERITAGE PROJECTS

Forest harvesting and grazing unit establishment



Harvesting is now complete at Culm Davy Plantation (above), representing the last of the major fellings to create grazing units. This plantation occupied former dry heathland, similar to that on Blackdown Common to the west, and heathland regeneration is expected. Nightjars have already been reported as nesting in these newly opened areas, barely six months after felling. The 24 ha grazing unit will be fenced later this year, for first grazing in spring 2010.

Mount Fancy has now been fenced, following felling last winter. This picture shows part of the 50 ha grazing unit, which has yet to establish new vegetation on the exposed mineral soils. This area of generally acid soils is expected to develop a wet heath vegetation with base-rich flushes in due course.



Meanwhile a major thinning will take place at Castle Plantation, below Castle Neroche, this autumn.

Cattle over-wintering corral

The woodchip-based corral at Curland Common is now virtually complete, and successfully housed the Neroche herd through the past winter.



Cattle grazing

The Neroche Longhorn herd stands at just under 100 animals, and has been grazing in the Forest since April. Good, consistent patterns of grazing have been observed, with the cattle developing favoured grazing areas. Vegetation growth has been prolific in most areas this year, and an assessment of scrub growth will be made at the end of the season to gauge whether stocking density is sufficient.



Ecological monitoring



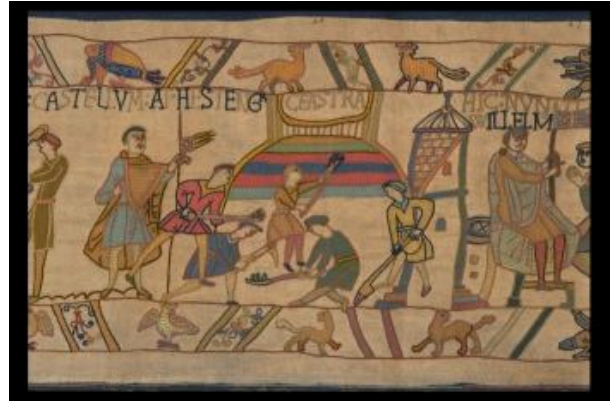
A comprehensive vegetation monitoring structure has now been established, using a combination of fixed quadrats, transects across ecological clines, and fixed point photography. A proportion of the quadrat monitoring is being carried out by volunteers, 10 of whom have received training in botanical identification for the purpose.

Monitoring is demonstrating a rapid spread of botanical diversity in cleared open space, including a marked proliferation of butterfly foodplants. The left hand picture shows part of the Wych Lodge unit in October 2006, soon after felling. The right hand picture shows part of the same area in summer 2008, less than 2 years later, with up to 25 species of flowering plant to a 2x2 metre quadrat.



BUILT HERITAGE PROJECTS

Castle Neroche



A new interpretation panel, based on specially commissioned reconstruction paintings, has now been installed in the old car park at Castle Neroche. A second, featuring an extract from the Bayeux Tapestry with a connection to the Castle, will be placed in new car park area later this summer.

Wellington Monument

The Report following the National Trust's survey of the condition of the Monument last autumn, was published in the Spring, and a press release setting out the Trust's aspirations for the restoration of the Monument was issued in June. Meanwhile the Monument car park has been extended.



Ringdown Barn

The vernacular barn on the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Ringdown Nature Reserve has been restored, by specialist contractors. The barn was the subject of a number of paintings in the early twentieth century by the Camden Group of artists, including Robert Bevan and Spencer Gore, who stayed at nearby Applehayes.



COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECTS

Playstreet Village

Following the community excavation last autumn, an exhibition of finds from the site of the former medieval village of Playstreet took place in March. The exhibition attracted over 250 people and displayed the hundreds of pottery finds from the excavation, together with evidence suggesting the village was at one point the site of a small iron smelting industry, using iron ore dug from the greensand, and firewood from the Forest of Neroche, which lay just to the south.



A further product of the project was a reconstruction painting by David Lawrence (above), showing how the village might have looked in its heyday.

Field archaeological survey

Volunteers have taken part in a series of surveys of other archaeological features in the forest, originally identified through the forest survey undertaken in 2005/06. Volunteers have been trained in field survey techniques and have recorded at Quants, Hawks Moor and other sites, while members of the Neroche Parishes Local History Group have undertaken survey work at Britty Farm.



The Book of Neroche



The primary focus of the Community History Project for its remaining months is the Book of Neroche, which will bring together the work of a range of local volunteers and experts to relate the rich history of the Neroche landscape, set in the context of its natural history and the artistic journey through the area by Lead Artist Michael Fairfax.

ACCESS PROJECTS

Staple Fitzpaine Herepath

Following the upgrade of surfaces at Bickenhall Wood and Ben's Copse, the route is now in a consistently good condition through all of its 13.5 miles. Usage continues to be high, from horseriders, walkers and mountain bikers. A monitoring regime is in place involving both FC staff and volunteer Trailwatchers, and long term trail maintenance arrangements are to be agreed between FC and SCC.

All-ability loop trail at Staple Hill

A 1 km Loop Trail at Staple Hill was completed in the spring. The trail, which also benefited from funding support from the Blackdown Hills SDF, offers an all-ability surface, complying with the BT Access for All standard in terms of surface and gradients. It has also given access to a new spectacular viewpoint over Taunton Deane. Since opening the Loop Trail has been consistently and heavily used by families, the elderly, the disabled, and general able-bodied audiences.



Culm Davy Herepath

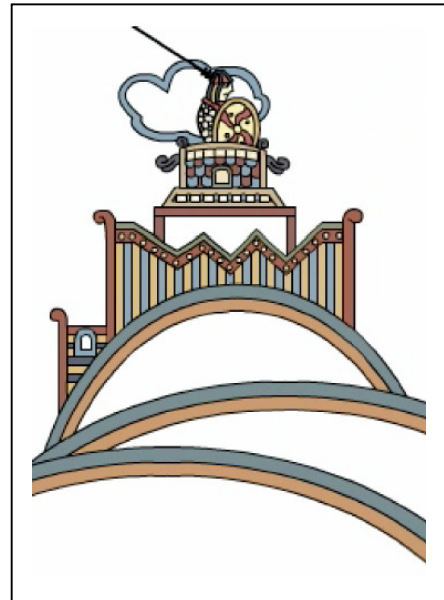
Development of the second Herepath route, centred on Culm Davy continues, though progress is slow due to problems with identifying feasible crossing points over the ridge road, and the requirements of Natural England on Blackdown Common SSSI. Here, a visitor survey and breeding bird survey has been undertaken to allow the impact of the proposed promoted trail on ground nesting birds to be assessed. A link to the Wellington Monument

car park is proving difficult to agree, leading to concerns about a promotable car parking point for the new trail.

ARTS & INTERPRETATION PROJECTS

Digital Trail Guides

Following feedback from trials in 2008, the content and operating platform of the DTGs have been upgraded, with the involvement of a specialist digital interpretation company, Zolk-C, based in the Republic of Ireland. As a result, a much more robust product is close to completion, including new animations, GPS-triggered 'hot-spot' information about special places along the Herepath Trail, and newly recorded audio commentaries. A further set of public trials will take place during July and August, and the DTGs will become available for public hire by the end of August.



Touching the Seasons



Arts-based events at each season of the year have continued, and have been broadened to include an opportunity for children to explore their surroundings through drawing and making, led by artist Sally Clark, while adults spend time with Michael Fairfax as he constructs a focal piece of natural sculpture.

Revealing the Landscape

Jane Mowat's al fresco relief sculpture, created directly into the flank of a fallen oak at Mount Fancy, is continuing to take shape.



LEARNING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROJECTS

Forest School training



The ten participants from 6 schools who took part in the 2008 Level 2 course to become Forest School Assistants have now all qualified. A second Level 3 Forest School Leader course began in late 2008, with 14 participants from 8 schools. Overall 34 teachers, TAs and others, representing 16 schools, have been through the project. A second Level 2 course is open for booking for autumn 2009.

The Blackdown Hills Forest Education Cluster Group is now well established and meeting bi-monthly, sharing skills and enabling networking. Neroche has provided financial support to the Group in its project to produce a promotional DVD about Forest Schools in the Hills.

Volunteering

The mid-week Neroche Conservation Volunteers events have gained a momentum with regular attendance from a core group of about ten volunteers. The group has tackled blackthorn cutting at Wych Lodge, tree tube removal, trail maintenance and vegetation clearance on the Loop Trail, scrub management at Quants, and balsam pulling at Castle Neroche.

Volunteer involvement more widely on trails work, archaeological surveys, botanical monitoring and practical management is healthy, and the Neroche Scheme has amassed over 500 days of volunteer time to date.



Health Walks

Health Walks Coordinator Lissette George has continued to run on average one Health Walk per week throughout the year, on 18 different sites. Many events have been simple walks for around 10 people, around circular routes with good surfaces, while others have been family days in the forest. Events have been targeted towards and designed for audiences with learning difficulties from day centres, wheelchair users, over 55s, and groups of young mothers from Chard and Taunton.

Neroche events

The June Family Bushcraft days catered for 40 people, and elicited a further set of highly positive responses from families taking part, such as this one.

“A superb day – I have a child – 5 years old – you really see another side to them. Loved making fire and using tools – every child should experience this. They were much more confident and free out of doors and they will remember this as a highlight of their childhood. An excellent way to bond with your child – learning new skills together.”



A Dawn Chorus walk in May at Thurlbear Quarrylands was led for Neroche by local ornithologist Donald Campbell. A Nightjar & Bat Hunt in early July was led by led by Richard Whiteside of Wildside Education. An Ancient Tree Hunt, based on the idea of Dartmoor Letterboxing, took place in June and has been extended to the summer holidays.

Events funded by Neroche have been run by Butterfly Conservation during the summer period, including a successful moth day at Thurlbear School.

SKILLS AND HERITAGE MANAGEMENT PROJECTS

Land management advice

Advice and assistance with conservation management has continued to be offered on private land across the area, through FWAG. Capital funding has been provided on one site, while agreement has been reached with owners of an area of neglected common alongside a Neroche Forest for it to be brought into the forest grazing unit later this year. FWAG are also developing Higher Level Stewardship applications within and outside of the Forest on behalf of Neroche.

Gavin Saunders
10 July 2009