

The notable 1990s: an important decade for the historic environment of Exmoor

Veryan Heal

This short contribution outlines how the Exmoor National Park Authority has been working during the 1990s, with considerable support from English Heritage (EH), the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) and local groups, towards its purposes for the preservation, understanding and enjoyment of the historic environment of Exmoor.

The historic environment was implicitly included in the term “natural beauty” used in the legislation which set up National Parks, but was explicitly stated in the Environment Act of 1995 which revised national park purposes, when the preservation of the “cultural heritage” was included with that of the natural beauty and wildlife in the primary purpose. This change also underlines an increasing recognition that National Parks are not wildernesses, untouched by human hand, but historic landscapes, in which the provisions of nature have been widely and repeatedly modified by people over thousands of years.

The historic environment of Exmoor has been at some disadvantage in gaining that recognition, due to the relative paucity of antiquarian activity and 20th-century archaeological investigation, and the absence of staff dedicated to the historic environment until 1991. By comparison with the more apparent archaeological charms of Dartmoor and Wessex, or the rare wetland wealth of the Somerset Levels, Exmoor’s more subtle appeal had attracted fewer admirers. The occasional antiquarian reported, rather unenthusiastically, for example, in the early

17th century Camden records in *Britannia* “... a weely and barren ground named Exmore, neere unto the Severne Sea... wherein there are certain monuments of anticke work, to wit stones pitched in order, some triangle wise, others in a round circle...” (quoted in Chanter and Worth 1906).

These lithic monuments have been the exceptional attraction for antiquarians and archaeologists. Chanter and Worth, writing in 1906, were both concerned about the destruction of the lithic monuments and cairns by farmers, road menders and hedgers and aware that Exmoor had much to offer “whatever antiquarian work is to be done, must be quickly done, and in any event the district affords a fruitful and little-worked field for operations” (Chanter and Worth 1906).

They were also aware, despite these depredations, how important Exmoor was for its generally high level of preservation in comparison with other areas “Especially is it interesting, as showing how much must have been lost elsewhere in the county, as the tide of agriculture flowed” (ibid). Some ninety years later, the nationwide Monuments at Risk Survey reported “National Parks stand out as exceptionally important for the future because of the relatively slow destruction rates suffered in recent decades and the high level of areal survival represented” (Darvill and Fulton 1998, 215).

The “exceptional importance” of our historic environment and the need to address its preservation and understanding was given proper recognition in the early 1990s, with the appointment by the National

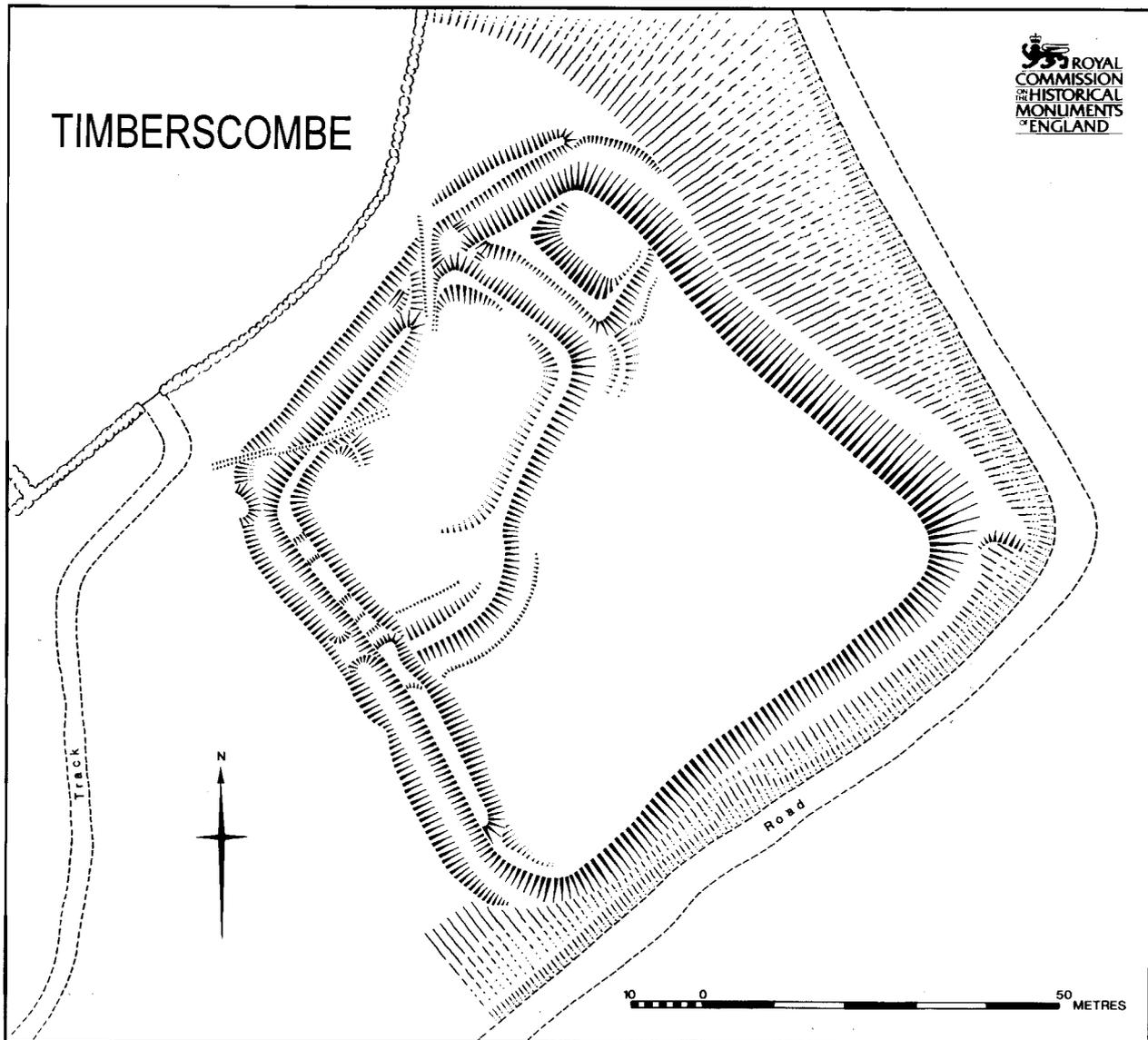


Figure 19.1: *Timberscombe Hillslope Enclosure: plan by the RCHME showing excellent preservation of the internal features as well as the outer bank and ditch.* (© Crown copyright. NMR)

Park Authority (NPA) of an archaeologist in 1991 and, subsequently, a historic buildings officer in 1996. The establishment of both posts was supported and partly financed by English Heritage. A Joint Accord between the national agencies and all the National Park Authorities in 1995 agreed that each authority should have at least one archaeologist and one historic buildings specialist on its staff and that is now the accepted practice.

The (almost) ninety years which elapsed between the exhortation in 1906 to get on with the work quickly and the serious attempt to do so by the National Park Authority, did see some attention being paid to Exmoor's archaeology. In the 1960s Lady Fox and Professor Ravenhill excavated at Old

Burrow and Martinhoe Roman fortlets (Fox and Ravenhill 1966), the former had also been investigated by Harold St George Gray (Gray and Trapp 1912).

In 1970 Grinsell published *The Archaeology of Exmoor*, which covered an area greater than that of the National Park and has, for some time, been out of print (Grinsell 1970). During the 1970s and 1980s, Ellison and Fowler wrote compellingly of the archaeological potential of Exmoor, Aston considered deserted medieval settlements, Richard McDonnell carried out aerial photographic surveys and some palaeoenvironmental sampling was carried out (Ellison and Fowler 1977; Aston 1983; McDonnell 1980; Straker and Crabtree 1995). In the

field, The National Trust carried out surveys of its own estates on Exmoor and Charles Whybrow, Hazel Eardley Wilmot, Ernest Mold and Mike Jones located and recorded sites ranging from the prehistoric to the industrial (*Exmoor Review*, passim). However Exmoor's location in the more remote parts of two counties, its little known and relatively slight antiquarian records and the lack of focus on the area, militated against recognition of its real wealth.

Perhaps predictably, it was the lithic monuments which were the first target for concerted effort. The RCHME, with financial assistance from the NPA, completed a survey of the lithic monuments of Exmoor in 1992; this was a considerable and valuable achievement (Quinell and Dunn 1992). In 1630 Westcote had tried to visit a sample of the sites and reported "Now you expect and hope for more pleasing objects, and more comfort after these uneven rocky, tiring, stumbling, melancholy ways; but let us find these stones, which I never could as yet, neither can they that I have purposely employed in quest of them find any such..." (Westcote in Chanter and Worth 1906). As a result of the survey, a further thirty lithic monuments were subsequently scheduled in a joint English Heritage/Exmoor National Park project.

Having had first hand experience of the archaeology of Exmoor and recognising the difficulties for management and research presented by the poor record for the area, the RCHME agreed to commence a six year archaeological survey of Exmoor. The survey set out to correct and enhance the NMR and SMR records for Exmoor and has done so with considerable success. It has also succeeded in demonstrating the wide range and well-preserved condition of sites, and in indicating patterns and relationships in space and time. This work is also providing the basis for an historic environment database, integrated within the Authority's GIS, which will assist management of the historic environment and the whole landscape of Exmoor.

The conclusions of the RCHME Survey are currently being written up and the book, designed for a broad market, will be published next year. The whole exercise has been of incalculable benefit to the understanding of Exmoor and the wellbeing of the physical evidence for its past.

During the 1990s we have been able to work with many partners towards achievement of the Authority's objectives for the historic environment. We have worked with national heritage agencies, the

National Trust, other national parks, local groups and consultants on a range of projects in both the investigation and care of sites, monuments and buildings and the wider historic landscape. All work on Exmoor has not been instigated by the Authority or funded by it, but we have sought to work with, support and encourage others whose work complements our own objectives. The few examples which follow demonstrate the range of activity which has burgeoned and has already borne fruit.

Working with English Heritage, we have been able to carry out management works on scheduled monuments through a jointly-funded monument management scheme. The projects have included woodland and scrub clearance from earthworks, re-erection of a standing stone, repairs to masonry structures, erosion monitoring and metric surveys of newly revealed structures or those being monitored.

Sites which have benefitted from clearance include: Bury Castle, Bury, Somerset, a motte set within a late prehistoric enclosure re-used as its bailey; Oldberry Castle, Dulverton, Somerset, a small hillfort; Holwell Castle, Parracombe, Devon, a text-book example of a motte and bailey, with traces of the buildings within; and Berry Castle, Porlock and Timberscombe Hillslope Enclosure, Timberscombe, Somerset, both hillslope/spur enclosures of probable late prehistoric date. The enclosure at Timberscombe was purchased with assistance from English Heritage and after clearance, was planned by the RCHME, showing excellent preservation of internal features (Figure 19.1 on the facing page).

A survey prior to repairs was carried out by the RCHME at St Nicholas' Priory, Barlynch, Brompton Regis, Somerset, a 12th-century site with extensive earthwork remains of the precinct and its buildings. Other work included re-erection of one of the Lyn Longstones, Lynton, Devon, a setting of two stones, and repairs to Dunster Pottery Kiln, Dunster, a rare, if not unique survival, of a simple updraught kiln of the eighteenth century.

The NPA was also able to establish a Conservation Area Partnership with English Heritage, which enabled works of appropriate repair to be carried out at several farmsteads, including Leigh Barton, Leighland Chapel, Roadwater, a grange of Cleeve Abbey at which a remarkable group of farmhouse and buildings survive. Farmsteads are recognised as a vital element in the historic landscape, embodying much of the social, economic and technological history of Exmoor. The CAP Scheme included a

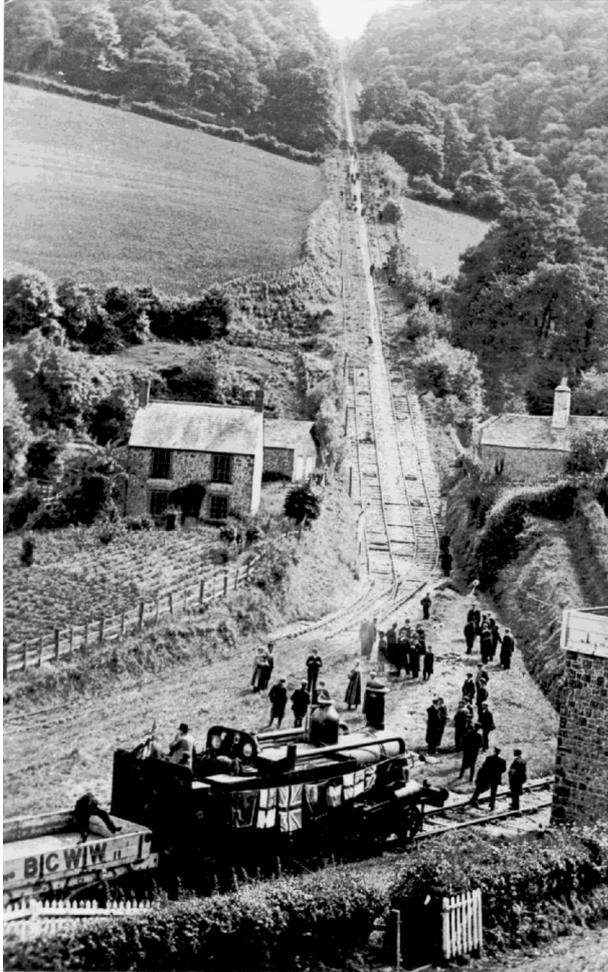


Figure 19.2: *The Brendon Hill Incline in operation* (Courtesy MH Jones)

survey of all the farmsteads of the national park, to provide guidance for the grant scheme, as well as basic data on the form, functions and age of farms across Exmoor.

Surveys for management of the Authority's own estate have been completed for much of the open land, these have revealed a far greater density of sites than was previously recorded, some 15 records per km², ranging from prehistoric to twentieth century, and provide essential management information. The next major target is completion of surveys of woodland, in which initial surveys by the Authority and the National Trust have shown a wide range of sites, some large and never before recorded, at a density of some 45 records per km². Work in Horner Wood revealed the existence of a deserted medieval settlement and its farmed landscape, a late-prehistoric hill-slope enclosure and a Tudor iron mill, as well as a

multitude of smaller sites. The RCHME provided surveys of the large sites and subsequent excavations at the settlement and iron mill are among the first excavations to modern standards since the 1960s, providing important occupation, technological and dating evidence (Isabel Richardson, pers comm; Gill Juleff, pers comm).

Among the many sites now recorded on Exmoor are those representing industrial activity. Iron, copper, silver, lead, slate and limestone have all been worked at various locations across the National Park and in 1992 a symposium brought together those who had been working on the different aspects of our industrial archaeology which led to the formation of the Exmoor Mines Research Group.

Perhaps the best known aspect of industry has been the 19th-century mining of iron, which has been well-researched on both the Brendon Hills and the former Royal Forest (Jones 1997; Atkinson 1997b). During the 1990s the Authority, with support from the Rural Development Agency, has been able to commission a survey of the extant remains of the West Somerset Mineral Railway and incline, which was built to serve the mines of the Brendon Hills and the mine sites themselves. This work has been carried out by Mike Jones and has produced both an accurate record of the complex and guidance for the Authority in seeking to manage it appropriately. In 1998 we were able, with assistance from English Heritage, to acquire the Brendon Hill Incline and winding house. This fine example of mid-Victorian engineering, three-quarters of a mile long at an slope of 1:4 (Figure 19.2) and the winding house for the self-acting cable system are being consolidated and will be open to the public once works have been completed.

Since 1996 the Authority and The National Trust have funded the Greater Exmoor Early Ironworking Project, designed to investigate evidence for pre-19th-century extraction and processing of iron ore. The project, led by Dr Gill Juleff, has recorded and investigated mining and smelting sites and, by strategic sampling, has begun to elucidate the technologies used, the scale of operations and the true antiquity of the exploitation of iron on Exmoor. Smelting sites have been shown to extend from 2000BP through the immediately post-Roman, early and later medieval and post-medieval periods (G Juleff, pers comm). The project continues to locate

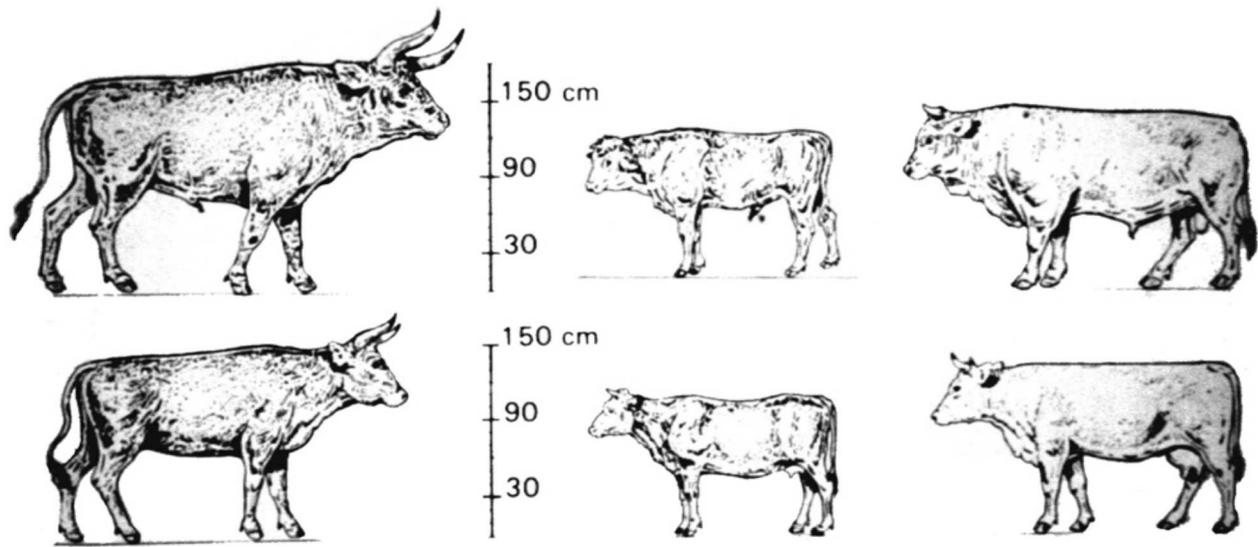


Figure 19.3: An aurochs, skeletal remains of which were recovered during monitoring on Porlock foreshore (RRJ McDonnell)

and record sites and is also developing a sampling methodology which enables the nature and scale of operations to be assessed without significant disturbance of fragile and rare furnace remains, leaving them intact for later examination. The project will also assess the impact of the ironworking activities on the environment and seek to establish their socio-economic role.

The palaeoenvironmental context of past human occupation and the effect of communities upon their surroundings are critical to our understanding of the historic environment. In addition, awareness of the genesis of the present environment can also inform appropriate management of the land today. Exmoor includes tracts of blanket bog and wet flushes with good preservation of palaeoecological remains, there are also buried soils and structures engulfed by peat, where analysis and dating could tell a great deal about the age of monuments and the environments in which they existed. Thus palaeoenvironmental survey and analysis has an important role in helping the NPA fulfil its purposes of preservation and enhancement as well as increasing understanding. In the last few years we have been able to carry out sampling which has begun to fill out the picture of vegetational change and anthropogenic influence (Straker and Crabtree 1995).

In 1995 the threat of marine inundation at Porlock Marsh prompted surface survey and a programme of sediment coring in order to evaluate the archaeological and palaeoenvironmental record in advance of the breaching of the pebble ridge which protected the marsh from the sea. This work, funded by English Heritage, in association with work by Jennings, has produced a record of sea level and environmental change through some 8000 years, as well as recording the surface archaeology before it was flooded (Canti *et al.* 1995).

Monitoring erosion on the foreshore since the breach and inundation has revealed drainage ditches, wooden structures and palaeochannels, which are being recorded. In one palaeochannel the remains of an aurochs (Figure 19.3) were found which were dated, with funding from the National Trust, to 1747–1449BC; this elderly male is one of the last recorded in Britain (McDonnell, Straker and Sergeantson, pers comm). Monitoring continues to reveal more of the human and environmental history of Porlock Bay and Marsh.

A masterly survey of the vernacular buildings of the Holnicote Estate, Selworthy by Isabel Richardson of the National Trust, has set the standard for building recording on Exmoor. Not only has this shown the true age of many buildings, but it has

discovered much important historic fabric surviving and available for closer study. Some sampling of smoke-blackened thatch has been possible and dendrochronological dating of a rare true cruck cottage, the date of which AD1315/16, overlaps the range of C14 dates from excavations of the deserted medieval settlement on Ley Hill, Horner Wood (Isabel Richardson, pers comm). This work on historic buildings is most important, not only to characterise, sequence and date the vernacular architecture in general and buildings individually, but also to break down the artificial division between “archaeological” buildings, represented by earthworks and standing buildings, often still in use.

These examples of recent projects show something of the range of work which has taken place on Exmoor during the 1990s. The National Park Authority is developing an historic environment strategy which will provide a framework for future research and investigation where resources, partners and opportunities come together to enable us to continue and expand our efforts to establish a better understanding of the human history of Exmoor. We are keen to involve others in this work, particularly local people and organisations, like the Exmoor Mines Research Group and the Tiverton Archaeological Group, who have been part of the Early Ironworking Project, and owners who can help us manage the historic environment. It is through involving not only professionals, but also those who live on and around Exmoor that we will best be able to ensure the future of this rich historic landscape, for those who care for Exmoor and enjoy participation in our work will be the best guardians of its future in the next millennium.