

Neroche History and Nature



The Neroche area offers a cornucopia of wildlife and history, both familiar and commonplace, for everyone to discover. Find out about royal forests, castles, hillforts, farmsteads, grand estates and manors, famous families, churches, military activities, butterflies, rare flowers, ancient woodlands and grazing cattle.

What does 'Neroche' mean?

'Neroche' is thought to have derived from the Old English word *nierra* and *rechich* or *rachich*, meaning the 'camp where hunting dogs were kept'. Rache were a type of hunting dog. The earliest record of this word is from 1235.



Forest of Neroche - The king's hunting ground

The Forest of Neroche was a royal forest until 1633. Royal forests were areas of common land, which were subject to Forest Law giving the king exclusive privileges. These included the rights of *vert* (rights over all the timber and other forest produce as well as rights to pasturage for deer) and rights of *venery* (the deer themselves). Royal Forests were deeply unpopular with the local inhabitants who struggled to maintain their rights against the king's passion for hunting and greed for money. From 1450, the famous Portman family owned the area now covered by the parishes of Staple Fitzpaine, Orchard Portman, Bickenhall and Thurlbear, until 1940's when most of the estate passed into Crown ownership. The Forestry Commission leased the forested areas from 1947.

Blackdown Common - Open heathland with breathtaking views

(near Culmstock ST 110 152)



This is the largest expanse of dry and wet heath in the northern Blackdown Hills, and it affords breathtaking views west towards Dartmoor, and north to Exmoor, the Brendons, the Quantocks and Wales. The heathy vegetation is dominated by ling, western gorse, bilberry, purple moor-grass, cross-leaved heath and bell heather. Curlew nest in the open heath, and nightjar also breed on the site. A favourite place for riders, the Common includes Culmstock Beacon at its southern end, which was used as a warning system to

signal the arrival of the Spanish Armada in Tudor times.

Quants Wood - Butterflies, twentieth century farmsteads, reservoirs and military training

(Near Forches Corner ST 186 176)



The name Quants may have been derived from the British (Celtic) word *cantuc* meaning a border or district. Quants is now partly managed by the Forestry Commission and the Somerset Wildlife Trust nature reserve, but in the 19th and 20th centuries it was an active place. In the 19th century there was a hamlet called Quants, which used to be a thriving community, but today only the ruins of Quants Farm and Huckers Cottage survive. In the 1940s construction of a reservoir began, to supply Taunton, but was never completed. During the Second World War it was also used as a military training ground. Now this area is an important butterfly reserve, and is undergoing large-scale habitat creation work involving the clearance of conifers and introduction of low-intensity Longhorn cattle grazing. The existing grassland is rich in wildflowers, including orchids, and supports several fritillary and other butterflies.

Priors Park Wood and Adcombe Wood - 'Green Patch' woodland glades

(near Holman Clavel Inn ST 221 162)



The complex of Priors Park and Adcombe Wood forms the largest area of ancient semi-natural woodland on the Blackdown Hills. Designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, the woodland is mostly dominated by oak and ash, with some areas of conifer plantation. There is extensive scrub made up of hazel (some of it old coppice), alder, willow and hawthorn. The rich clay soils support a diverse ground flora. One rarity present in the wood is Herb Paris. Amidst the woodland are a number of small glades, notably the so-called 'Green Patch', visible from Blagdon Hill. This small open area supports a very diverse flora including bee orchids, autumn gentian, common centaury and other plants.

Wych Woods

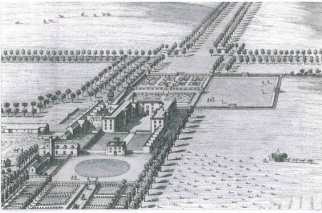
(near Staple Fitzpaine ST 248 196)



Wych Lake was created in the 1900s by Henry Berkeley Portman, 3rd Viscount Portman (1860–1923). The lake was created as a duck decoy lake for duck shooting. However the steep surrounding slopes made duck shooting almost impossible and the lake was used instead as a boating and ornamental lake. It is now a stocked coarse fishing lake leased by the Taunton Angling Association.

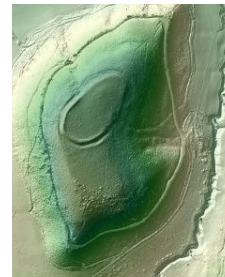
Orchard Portman Estate - The story of a famous family and their estate

(behind Taunton Racecourse ST 243 217)



An estate covering the eastern part of the Neroche area was first mentioned in 854 AD when Aethelwulf (King of the West Saxons) gave the estate called *oceard* to the Minster Church in Taunton. The estate is most famous for its occupation by the Portman family between 1450 until 1942. Famous family members included Sir William Portman (1498-1557) who was Lord Chief Justice of England but died in the Tower of London for his support of Charles I during the Civil War. Later William Portman, Sixth Baronet

(d.1690) supported James I during the Monmouth Rebellion (1685). Orchard House, a huge Tudor and Georgian manor, was abandoned and demolished in 1843. Today Taunton Racecourse (established by the Fifth Viscount Portman in 1927) covers the site where the house once stood. The medieval church in Orchard Portman village is all that remains of this once magnificent estate.



Orchard Wood Hillfort

(Netherclay, near Orchard Portman ST 250 204)

Orchard Wood Hillfort was occupied during the Iron Age (800BC-50AD) and is located at the northern end of a hilltop that offers commanding views across the Vale of Taunton. Remarkably the site remained undiscovered until 1986. The hillfort is oval in shape, comprising a single bank and ditch, and encloses an area of c. 1.9ha with an entrance possibly on the eastern side of the fort. The hillfort may have been linked either with the Dumnonii or Durotriges Iron Age tribes and was probably abandoned in 50AD.

Britty Farm - Living memories of an abandoned farm

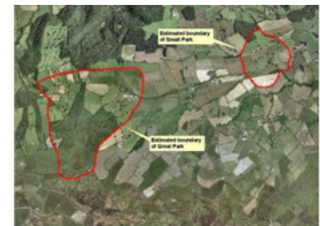
(Between Staple Common and Mount Fancy ST 257 160)



Britty Farm was once a thriving smallholding built in the 18th century on Staple Hill. From the 1920's until 1960's the Rooke family occupied the farm. Descendent Ted Rooke has recently recorded his recollections of the farm as part of an oral history archive, which are available on the Neroche website. The farm was abandoned in 1975, today only the outer walls and chimneystacks remain.

Staple Deer Park and Staple Lawns - Medieval Deer Hunting

(near Staple Fitzpaine ST 247 187)



During the 13th century there were two deer parks in Staple Fitzpaine: Staple Park and a smaller one at Park Farm. In 1595 Sir John Clifton sold Staple Park to the Portman family who were keen huntsmen. They added a pale (wooden perimeter fence) to the park boundary, which required royal permission to erect since deer were the property of the king. In 1690 a lodge and kennels were built. The deer park seems to have been abandoned in 1790. The remains of

the park survive on the ground today as a curving boundary represented in places by substantial double banks. Ancient (pollarded) oaks in Piddle Wood and the neighbouring fields around Staple Lawns indicate the former areas of wood pasture. Some of these trees are more than 800 years old.

Mount Fancy - Butterfly haven

(near Staple Hill Car Park ST 249 163)

A mixture of pasture and woodland with marshy grassland and bracken makes this area an attractive place for butterflies to flourish. The site is important for a number of rare butterflies including small pearl-bordered fritillary. The area is managed by Butterfly Conservation Trust with help from grazing Exmoor ponies who maintain the areas of open ground essential for butterfly habitat.

Thurlbear Manor, Church and Wood - Domesday period manor, church and ancient woods

(Thurlbear Church ST 266 211 and Woods ST 270 210)



Thurlbear has a long history dating from the Domesday period. The Montacute Family owned the manor of Thurlbear until 1556 when Sir William Portman bought the manor for £80 and it remained with the Portman family until 1942. The Church of St Thomas at Thurlbear was built of local stone between 11th and 15th century and is one of the earliest surviving aisled churches in Somerset. Thurlbear Wood is now a 40-acre Somerset Wildlife Trust nature reserve and a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The wood lies on a limestone scarp and plateau and consists of predominantly ancient woodland with many open glades and rides. Part of the

secret of Thurlbear's richness is the way it has been managed down the centuries through the practice of coppicing whereby hazel and other trees are repeatedly cut to the base every 15-20 years and allowed to re-grow. The wood supports a rich array of spring flowers, and a diversity of other wildlife including dormice. The butterfly reserve at Quarrylands, on the eastern edge of the wood, is home to nightingales in the summer months.

Castle Neroche

(near Curland ST 272 158)



Located on the edge of a very steep natural escarpment Castle Neroche would have been an impressive sight in the past overlooking central Somerset with views on a clear day to the Mendip Hills and Glastonbury Tor. The castle had a motte and bailey, enclosures and several ramparts. There were three main phases of activity: 'Prehistoric' (Later Iron Age 800BC – 100AD), 'Post Conquest' (Norman 1066-1087AD) and 'a period of civil war and anarchy' (1238-1248). Famous periods of history include its use

in the Norman period as a base for the campaign against Exeter in 1067 led by Count Robert of Mortain (William the Conqueror's half brother). Today all that remains of the castle are huge ramparts hidden amongst the trees, which is a great place to wander but be careful on the steep scarp edges!

About the Neroche Scheme

Neroche is a Landscape Partnership Scheme supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and a range of local organisations. Led by the Forestry Commission and based in the Blackdown Hills AONB, Neroche is working closely with the local community, to protect and celebrate the heritage of the area.

To find out more please visit www.nerochescheme.org

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