

News from Neroche



February 2008



If you live ...

... in or around the northern part of the Blackdown Hills, the Neroche Scheme is working for your landscape, building on its special qualities, and providing a year-round source of inspiration and activities, whatever your interests.

A new 20 km off-road 'Herepath' trail is being readied for the spring, as described by James Maben in his article on page 2. And a rich year of story, music and visual art in the hills has begun, as described in James's article with Sally Clark on page 2.

Meanwhile the forest is continuing to change, as conifers are harvested, coppice re-cut, and cattle grazing areas for wildlife are extended – see Damian Ward's article on page 3. A group of local teachers are learning how to make the outdoors an extension of their classrooms, as described by Clare Neenan on page 3. And also on page 3, Tanya James describes the local history projects and opportunities which are blossoming here.

Whatever your circumstances, interests or abilities, the landscape is your friend. For a child it is a place to play, explore and learn more

about yourself and what you are good at. For adults with busy working lives it is a respite from hectic everyday life, full of calm. For the amateur historian or naturalist it is a treasure chest of wonders waiting to be explored. It is a source of work, food, timber, sport and artistic inspiration.

Between the cloudbursts and the swollen streams, there is a lot to see across the Neroche landscape at this time of year. The spikes of the new year's bulbs are showing through (the snowdrops at Otterhead are especially worth a visit), the catkins on the hazel and alder are swelling, the coppice cutters are at work in the forest, and the hedgelayers in the fields.

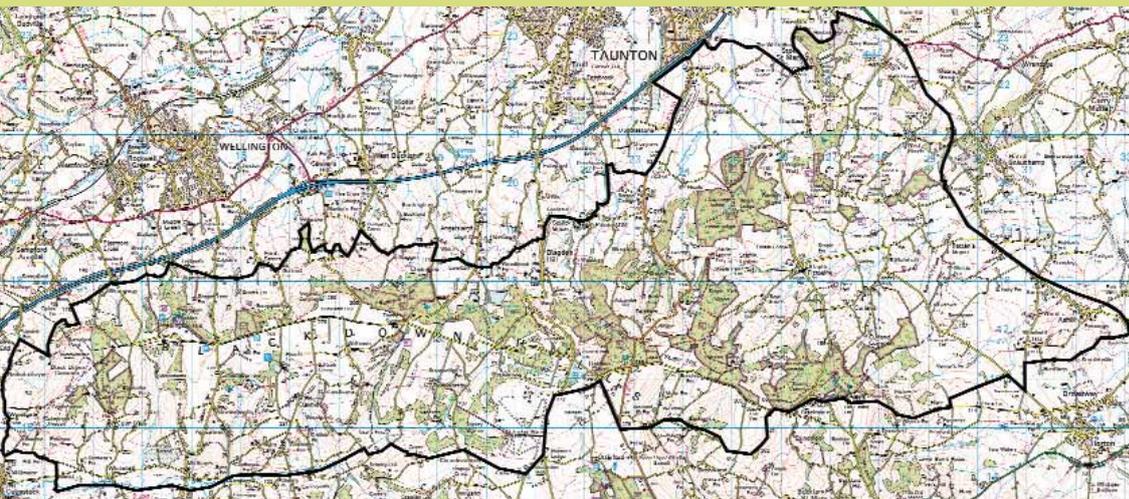
2008 is a big year for Neroche, with activity and interest aplenty – see our new events programme on the back page. For full and regularly updated news, events listings and information about the Neroche area, please be sure to visit www.nerochescheme.org.

Gavin Saunders
Neroche Project Manager

The Neroche Scheme area

Contents

Herepath Trails	2
Art, music and story	2
Forest School	3
Forestry	3
Community History	3
Events and volunteering ..	4
Contact us	4




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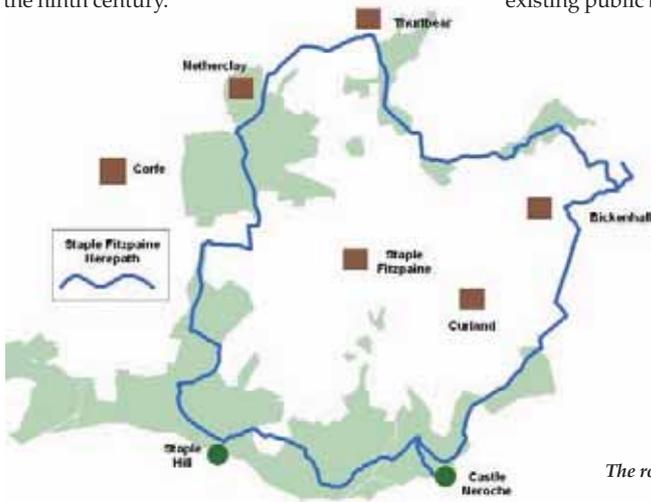
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Herepaths Trails

By James Maben, Access & Interpretation Officer

The Neroche Scheme is working to develop a 40 km (25 mile) network of connected multi-use trails to allow people to explore and enjoy the diversity of the north Blackdown Hills landscape. The network will comprise two circular trails, one in the west and one in the east of the project area, and a linear route linking them together. Following existing public rights of way and including some newly developed stretches, the trails are designed to be used by walkers and riders, with some sections suitable for use by those with restricted mobility. The new trails have been given the name 'Herepaths' - the Old English word for 'peoples paths' that were originally important military trackways during the ninth century.

After some major surface and drainage improvement work in 2007, the first Herepath Trail around Staple Fitzpaine will be officially opened on Saturday 10th May 2008. The Staple Fitzpaine Herepath forms a continuous 22km loop taking in Castle Neroche, Staple Common, Britty Common, Mount Fancy, Staple Park, Wych Lodge, Netherclay, Thurlbear, West Hatch and Bickenhall. The work carried out in 2007 tackled the worst - often impassable - wet and muddy sections of the trail but the very nature of the Blackdown Hills means that some short muddy stretches remain in places! Work is currently underway on a new 4km permitted bridleway at Bickenhall that will link with existing public bridleways to complete the trail.



The route of the first Herepath Trail



Work in progress on the new Herepath

There are two public car parks on the route, at Castle Neroche and on Staple Hill, and horse box parking can be arranged at local farms, pubs and livery yards on the route.

We are also developing a short 1 km all-ability loop trail, specifically designed for those with limited mobility, to run from the new Staple Hill car park, out to a spectacular viewpoint over Taunton Deane.

See page 4 for details of the forthcoming Trail Watchers volunteer scheme.

Revealing the Landscape – through art, music and story

By James Maben, Access & Interpretation Officer and Sally Clark, Arts Projects Coordinator

January 8th 2008 was an exciting day for Neroche, when three new artists joined the team, alongside Lead Artist Michael Fairfax, and Sally Clark, Arts Projects Coordinator. Together they constitute the 'Revealing the Landscape' team – set to really bring the arts in the area to life in 2008.

Fiona Barrow, a multi-talented musician, Jane Flood, a passionate storyteller and Sue Palmer, an accomplished sound artist, will be working with Sally throughout 2008. Jane and Fiona will be exploring how stories and music can bring a new dimension to enjoying the landscape of the area.

Sue will be using sound and images to explore the different experiences of local people. They are all keen to involve as many people as possible in their work so keep an eye out for events and gatherings in your neck of the woods!

Michael Fairfax's 'Touching the Seasons' explorations gathered momentum in 2007 with visits to Britty Farm, Quants and Quarts Moor, and most recently to Blackdown Common in January. Michael is seeking to reflect the feel of these special places through the seasons, through natural sculpture and photography, inviting people to join him in the process. Details of future 'Seasons' events are on page 4, and photos of past events can be found on the Neroche website.

After field testing in 2007, our Digital Interpretation project will take a step further during 2008. The artists team will be developing a 'digital guidebook' to the Staple Fitzpaine Herepath Trail, using small handheld computers and GPS technology. Available for hire from a

Arts team members Sally Clark, Fiona Barrow, Jane Flood and Sue Palmer



Michael Fairfax's 'Oak Limb in Chert Pen', Quart's Moor

local pub, the handsets will help trail users explore wildlife and historical sites along the trail. A simple touch-screen menu will give access to maps, illustrations and sound recordings describing the area, and the GPS positioning will provide an accurate navigational tool. The technology will mean users of the trail will have high quality information at their fingertips if and when they want it – without the need for us to litter the countryside with signboards!



Community History projects

By Tanya James, Community History Officer

There are plans afoot for a geophysical survey at Castle Neroche in March. A recent earthwork survey by English Heritage confirmed that the Castle was originally an Iron Age hillfort. Very little is known about this distant history of the site, over 2000 years ago, so we hope that a geophysical survey can provide a little more evidence of any unseen structures. The survey will be undertaken by a team of archaeologists from Exeter University's XArch Project.

In January Bill Horner from Devon County Council led a walk on Blackdown Common to look at surviving archaeological sites on the hilltop heath. It may be a quiet place to get away from it all nowadays, but in the past it was a busy spot. There are remains of iron extraction sites, whetstone mining, the earthwork remains of a former field system and a strange circular shaped earthwork enclosure, which is mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon charter for Culmstock Manor.

We're currently looking for volunteers to become involved with a number of other local

history projects. We are developing a Buildings Project, to enable people to investigate the date, character and form of the buildings across the area. We hope to recruit volunteers who could co-ordinate the collection of the information from people in their particular parish. Recording forms are now available from Tanya and will also be shortly downloadable from the Neroche Scheme website.

We are also looking for some volunteers for an Oral History project, to encourage people to share their memories of farming, forestry and local life in the Blackdown Hills. We can train people in how to record oral history, and how best to interview people effectively for those recordings. So, whether you have memories to offer, or time to spend recording other people's memories, this is your chance! Justin Owen (a local film maker) will be running an introductory training day in February or March, date to be confirmed – see website or ring the Neroche office for details.

The Forest

By Damian Ward, Forest Works Supervisor

The summer's work in the forest was, well, wet. The weather almost forced us to stop work altogether, but somehow we managed to complete all the work by the middle of November.

So what has been done? Forestry contractors Kleen Kutt have cleared a large area of dense conifer to make way for the next main grazing area on Staple Common. Some of the residues have been burnt, and the rest has been raked into habitat piles. At North Down and Staple Hill areas earmarked for heathland restoration have been felled, with stands of young trees still to be cleared. The fencing of the grazing area, by local fencing contractor Richard Steele is due to start shortly. When this has been finished, the cattle will have two large new areas to graze later in the year.

The next round of work will involve felling at Priors Park, this time to enable broadleaved woodland to regenerate on the areas cleared of conifers. There will also be further conifer harvesting on the north side of Staple Hill, to extend the grazing area there.

At Wych Lodge there will be further thinning operations this year in plantations opposite the grazing areas. The aim here will be to reduce the number of conifers and allow regeneration of broadleaves, while also enhancing the appreciation of the veteran trees in the area.

The Neroche herd of Longhorn cattle are enjoying their winter on Chris Salisbury's farm at Bickenhall, having been taken out of the forest in the late autumn. Over Christmas the herd produced its first progeny – two healthy female calves.



The newest member of the Neroche herd!

The Apprentice team of Chris Hill, Dan Starkiss and Stuart Bicknell are away now until the end of March on placements with partner organisations, to further their experience as part of their NVQ courses. They have done a great deal of work over the winter clearing vegetation at Castle Neroche, on the Herepath Trail and on the butterfly meadows, as well as learning how to lay hedges thanks to the Blackdown Hills Hedge Association.

Conifer harvesting on Staple Common

Forest Schools

By Clare Neenan, Forest Schools Officer

In December an intrepid group of thirteen teachers from ten schools across the area – Churchstanton, West Buckland, Buckland St Mary, Combe St Nicholas, Kentisbeare, Culmstock, Blagdon, Neroche, Ashill and Beechgrove in Wellington – came together in a wood at Brimley near Churchinford. This marked the beginning of a six month course of training and practical skills assessment, which will qualify the group as Forest School Practitioners. This is not a dreary desk-based course – it takes the participants out into the woods, giving them hands-on tuition in how to make the best of the outdoors in helping children learn.

Much of the course, which is run by the Devon-based Forest School Training Company, is practically based, looking at how to use the outdoor environment for learning and how to teach a range of practical woodland skills to others. There are also sessions on theories of learning and holistic development, the importance of play and how to raise self-esteem in learners.

The group will also run some Forest School sessions in their own schools to familiarise themselves with what's involved. In advance of this, we are currently running some 'taster' sessions in all the participating schools.



The Forest School trainees

Once qualified, these teachers will be able to use Forest School as a normal part of their curriculum, enabling children to experience the outdoors as part of their school year, in safe, carefully controlled sessions with experienced staff on hand. It will help redress the tendency, in these risk-averse times, for children to have less chance to become familiar with the natural world as an integral part of growing up.

Working alongside me is Jenny Archard, who is developing a 'Cluster Group' to serve as a network for people involved in outdoor education in the Blackdown Hills, enabling exchange of experience and collective working – see the website for more details as this network develops.



Neroche Events Programme

During 2007 the Neroche Scheme laid on nearly a dozen events across the area, ranging from local history walks to hands-on natural sculpture creation. Perhaps the highlight was the Family Bushcraft Day in October, which attracted over 40 people, and gave children and parents alike the chance to build shelters, make fire without matches, carve spoons and search for wild fungi.

The feedback we have received suggests that there is a lot of enthusiasm for Bushcraft-type events of this kind, and we want to respond to that in 2008 by holding two Family Bushcraft days, one in June and one in October – see the listing below for details. In addition, several other events will include a bushcraft flavour, such as a camp fire or a bit of wood carving. Everyone who experiences bushcraft comes away inspired - as well as smelling sweetly of woodsmoke for days!



Neroche Events to July 2008

All these events are listed in the new Blackdown Hills Countryside Events leaflet, available at all local outlets, and on the Neroche website.

Event Title	Location	Date & Time	Details	Other Information
Touching the Seasons- Spring	Quants, near West Buckland, near Wellington	Sunday 20 April 2008 10.00am to 4.00pm, with guided walk at 11.30am	Join Neroche Lead Artist Michael Fairfax to explore the spring woodland landscape at Quants through an artist's eyes. Also during the day there will be guided walk to discover more about the history and wildlife of the area.	Free Children welcome; dogs under close control
Dawn Chorus walk & breakfast	Thurlbear Wood and the Farmers Inn, West Hatch, near Taunton	Saturday 3 May 2008 5.00am to 8.00am	Fancy getting up early? Come and experience the cacophony of spring birdlife in the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Thurlbear Wood Nature Reserve, as part of International Dawn Chorus Day. With luck we may find Nightingales. The walk will be followed by a hearty breakfast at the Farmers Inn.	Walk free; breakfast £5 payable on the day Children welcome; dogs under close control
Herepath Trail - Grand Opening	Bickenhall Farm, near Staple Fitzpaine, near Taunton	Saturday 10 May 2008 10.00am to 4.00pm	Join in the celebration as the first long distance off-road trail in the Blackdown Hills is formally opened. Guided tours for walkers and horse riders, and other activities	Free. Children welcome; dogs under close control
Summer Bushcraft & Forest Open Day	Wych Lodge, Staple Fitzpaine, near Taunton	Saturday 14 June 2008 10.00am to 4.00pm	A family day in the woods. Learn how to build shelters, light fires, make tools and search for wild food. Guided walks to see the Longhorn cattle and the majestic veteran oaks, plus storytelling and other activities.	Children £4, accompanying adults free Sorry no dogs
Nightjar & Bat Hunt	Culmstock Beacon, Culmstock	Wednesday 16 July 2008 7.30pm to 9.30pm	Join local experts Richard and Alison Whiteside for an expedition across Culmstock Beacon in search of the mysterious heathland bird, the Nightjar. There will also be a chance to use electronic bat detectors to hear bats on the wing.	Free Children welcome; sorry no dogs
Touching the Seasons - Summer	Quarts Moor, near Wellington Monument	Sunday 20 July 2008 10.00am to 4.00pm, with guided walk at 11.30am	Join Neroche Lead Artist Michael Fairfax to explore the summer woodland landscape of Quarts Moor through an artist's eyes. Also a guided walk at Wellington Monument, to discover more about the history and current restoration programme for the monument.	Free Children welcome; dogs under close control

Volunteering opportunities

We are inviting local volunteers to **adopt a section of the new trail** and help us look after it, to ensure it remains open and easy to use for everyone to enjoy. All we will ask is that 'Trail Watchers' regularly walk the section of the path they've adopted and report any problems they come across such as broken gates, missing signposts and way markers or blocked drains. If you are interested in getting involved then contact the Neroche office to register your details.

As we go to press we are still battling the weather to hold the planned volunteer **Copping Day** in February.

There are a number of volunteer **conservation days** taking place on butterfly reserves in the area, during February and March – see the website or contact the office for details.

The Neroche Team are:



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The Neroche Local Stakeholders Group are:

Gordon Field, John Greenshields, Jane Hole, Dianne Hood, Bob Lloyd, Corinne Matthews, Len North, Jill Perrior, Guy Robinson, Martin Turner and Dr Rosemary Viant.

Contacts details

For all event bookings and other enquiries, please contact the Neroche office on 01823 680846. For further information on any aspect of Neroche, visit www.nerochescheme.org.

The Neroche Scheme is a Partnership between the Forestry Commission, the 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 and Somerset Art Week Ltd. Neroche is a Landscape Partnership Scheme supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Leader+.

