

## ENP Archaeological Volunteers 2004

Dunkery Beacon is not only the highest, but also perhaps the most well known place on Exmoor. Less well known are the remarkable group of Bronze Age burial cairns on the summit: the most visited - albeit inadvertently - archaeological site on Exmoor. The length of Dunkery Ridge is also littered with Bronze Age burial mounds, such as Row Barrow and Robin and Joaney Howe, perhaps as many as 25 burial mounds in all.

In recent years the pressure of visitor numbers has taken its toll on these vulnerable monuments. The cairns themselves survive as stony mounds, mostly devoid of turf cover. Visitors move the stones to create shelters, and this exposes the inner fabric of the mounds as well as gradually destroying the upstanding monument. The National Trust have taken steps to protect these sites by obtaining permission from English Heritage and by seeking planning permission. Permission has been granted on two of the cairns and hopefully once the methodology for conservation proves successful, the other vulnerable monuments will be tackled.

In the meantime the Exmoor National Park Archaeological Volunteer group are involved in a low impact but high profile method of protection. On a twice monthly basis the volunteers have been visiting the ridge, monitoring the damage and dismantling any shelters.

*If you would like to join the volunteers, please contact Jessica Turner on 01398 322289.*



Photograph - Simon Godden

*Dunkery Beacon: dismantling stone wind shelters built recently by visitors to the site*



Photograph - Jessica Turner (ENPA)

*101 reasons for not being an Archaeological Volunteer: No 1 - the Exmoor weather (dismantling wind shelters at Row Barrow)*

## HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT TEAM

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Further information about the projects in this review can be obtained from the Historic Environment team or from: [www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk](http://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk)



*Looking after Exmoor's environment for all to enjoy, in partnership with a thriving community*



## Exmoor National Park Authority HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT REVIEW 2004

March 2005

### This issue includes...

West Somerset Mineral Railway • Exmoor Archaeology Forum • Simonsbath Sawmill • The Moorland Initiative  
Hawkcombe Head • Holworthy Farm, Parracombe • Dunster • Porlock Beach • Exmoor Iron

### Introduction

2004 marked the 50th anniversary of the designation of Exmoor as a National Park. It was an opportunity to celebrate what has been achieved on Exmoor in the last 50 years and to consider what the future priorities for research and conservation should be. From the National Park Authority's perspective, most fundamental is the Environment Act (1995) which defines its duty ... 'to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, **cultural heritage** and wildlife of the area...and to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities by the public...'

The Authority used to rely on an Archaeology Advisory Group for guidance on the historic environment, but now has a team of three professionals dedicated to the historic environment. The creation of all of these posts has been supported by English Heritage and we continue to work closely with the agency in the delivery of much of our work programme.

2004 has seen the continuation of this commitment to the historic environment through the appointment, following advice from English Heritage, of one of the Authority's members as the 'Historic Environment Champion'.

Recent years have seen an upsurge in the level of research being carried out on Exmoor, and this continues apace, with some of the major projects being reported on here.

On the conservation side, we have now completed a Buildings At Risk Survey, Conservation Area Appraisals for all our major Conservation Areas; a Scheduled Ancient Monuments At Risk Survey is also nearing completion and we hope to complete our survey of the condition of prehistoric standing stones across the whole of Exmoor by the end of 2005.

As levels of understanding increase, there is a greater need to develop our interpretation of Exmoor's past. During 2004 we participated in the West Somerset Mineral Railway Heritage Project (led by the Exmoor Society) which seeks to interpret the remains of iron exploitation on the Brendon Hills, and we organised a series of events and activities reported on in this Review.



Photograph - Rob Wilson-North (ENPA)

*A recently broken standing stone on Pig Hill - the increased use of farm machinery on the moorlands is a major concern*



Photograph - Jessica Turner (ENPA)

*Conservation work at a prehistoric stone setting being carried out by Exmoor National Park Authority staff*

In 2004 a new Joint Statement on the Historic Environment in the National Parks of England and Wales was signed by all the National Park Authorities, English Heritage, Cadw, the Countryside Agency, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales and the Association of National Park Authorities to 'achieve continuous improvement in the conservation and interpretation of the historic environment in National Parks'.

## WSMR Project

During 2004 the Exmoor Society secured a Project Planning Grant of £46,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund, to collate information and develop proposals for the conservation and interpretation of the West Somerset Mineral Railway. This work was carried out by a consortium led by David Sekers Consulting, and a report was received in November. Exmoor National Park Authority have now undertaken to develop a bid for further HLF funding during 2005.

Also during 2004 English Heritage confirmed the designation of the West Somerset Mineral Railway incline as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The incline was purchased by Exmoor National Park Authority in 1998, and its recognition as a site of National Importance has been welcomed.

*The ruined Cornish engine house at Burrow Farm on the Brendon Hills forms part of the industrial legacy of which the West Somerset Mineral Railway is the artery*



Photograph - Heather Lawther (ENPA)

## 5th Exmoor Archaeology Forum

On 5 December 2004 the 5th Exmoor Archaeology Forum was held in Dulverton. Entitled **'The Future of Exmoor's Past'**, the day celebrated the 50th anniversary of the designation of Exmoor as a National Park.

The event was attended by 80 people and took the form of a series of workshop sessions examining specific projects. There was also a 50 minute round up of archaeological advances on Exmoor since 1954, and a series of talks which explored the future for archaeology on Exmoor and within National Parks as a whole.



Photograph - Rob Wilson-North (ENPA)

*The 5th Exmoor Archaeology Forum - workshop sessions in Exmoor House*

## The Moorland Initiative

During 2004, to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the designation of Exmoor as a National Park, the Exmoor Society commissioned a survey of the state of Exmoor's moorlands. This landmark report was presented at a conference, organised by Exmoor National Park Authority, held in Lynton in October. To help inform the debate, in April 2004, Exmoor National Park Authority and English Heritage produced a briefing paper entitled **'Exmoor's Moorlands - The Historic Environment'**. The paper set out why Exmoor's moorlands are historically important and identified, for the first time, 48 historically significant areas, ranging from complex prehistoric landscapes, through the remains of medieval farming landscapes to the evidence for reclamation and WWII training ranges.

*Looking down Weir Water with the elusive remains of Bronze Age houses in the foreground. Sites such as these are extremely rare in southern England.*



Photograph - Angie Squires (ENPA)



Photograph - Jessica Turner (ENPA)

*The Scheduled Ancient Monuments At Risk Survey - fieldwork in progress*

## Student Projects on Exmoor

During 2004 the historic environment staff at Exmoor National Park Authority have continued to support student projects on Exmoor. James Cooper from Exeter University has been looking at a group of Exmoor hillforts in order to produce a generic conservation plan and to assess the impact of public access on these sites in the light of the Countryside and Rights of Way legislation. Laura Pearce from Bristol University has been looking at the rise and fall of settlement on Exmoor between 1086 and 1500.

## The Portable Antiquities Scheme

The Portable Antiquities Scheme is a voluntary scheme for recording archaeological objects found by members of the public. The Finds Liaison Officers record finds, give advice and act as general liaison between the public, metal detector users and museums in order to build up a wider picture of the historic landscape. The scheme works on a county basis so contact your County Council for more details.

A finds liaison day was held in Dulverton on the 27th July as part of Somerset Archaeology Fortnight.

During 2004 a prehistoric quern stone was reported from near Landacre Bridge. Quern stones were used for grinding corn, and although relatively common, hardly any have been found on Exmoor. The Landacre quern stone has been submitted to Somerset County Museum Service for formal identification. It is hoped that it will eventually be displayed in Dulverton.

## SAMs@Risk

### The Scheduled Ancient Monuments At Risk Survey

During 2004 we have carried out a condition survey of Exmoor's Scheduled Ancient Monuments. This is the first time that a comprehensive continuous field based survey of Exmoor's SAMs has been attempted. When the results are analysed we will be able to draw up a list of Monuments At Risk and this will allow us to prioritise future conservation work.

The Scheduled Ancient Monuments At Risk survey has been carried out by Angie Squires as a 9 month conservation placement. It was sponsored by Ambios - a European funded project - which provides work placements for conservation volunteers. The project has also relied on the willing co-operation of land owners and English Heritage's Field Monument Wardens.



Photograph - Angie Squires (ENPA)

*Damage to Brightworthy Barrows has been caused by livestock in the past, but wild ponies and other horses continue to degrade this prominent Bronze Age burial mound*

## Agri-Environment Scheme Changes

The ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Area) Scheme continued to be used successfully to protect and enhance the cultural environment on Exmoor. Particularly significant this year has been the recognition and restoration of Exmoor's cornditches. Large tracts of this type of boundary have been restored on Ilkerton Ridge, Withycombe Allotment and Twitchen.

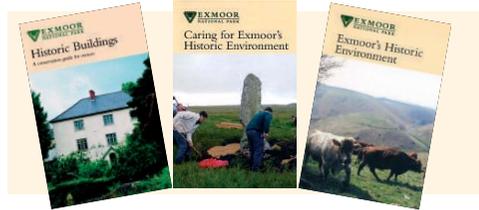
In April 2005 a new Agri-Environment scheme will be launched, replacing the existing ESAs and Countryside Stewardship Scheme. The new Environmental Stewardship scheme will be used to secure environmental benefits nationwide and the scheme is available to all farmers in England. The scheme comprises of three elements - Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) on which acceptance is guaranteed if the requirements are met, Organic Entry Level Stewardship (OELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) which aims to deliver significant benefits to high priority areas and cases such as the historic environment.

A requirement of the HLS is the production of a Farm Environmental Plan which will be funded by Defra.

Exmoor National Park Authority will be providing this service to Exmoor farmers using their Natural and Historic Environment specialists.

## Historic Environment Advice

Through this period of change we continue to provide advice to farmers, landowners and agencies in order to ensure the protection and enhancement of Exmoor's Historic Environment. During 2004 we produced a series of information leaflets designed to assist this process: "Exmoor's Historic Environment", "Caring for Exmoor's Historic Environment" and a "Guide to Historic Buildings"



*These publications are available free of charge from Exmoor National Park Authority.*

## Romans Day

On Saturday 12th June 2004 soldiers of the Ermine Street Guard re-enactment group set up camp on Old Burrow Roman Fortlet. The event was to celebrate the launch of the new interactive CDROM 'Revealing Exmoor's Past - Old Burrow Roman Fortlet', which was on display in the Exmoor National Park Centre at County Gate.

Old Burrow Roman Fortlet was built around 50 AD high above the coast in order to monitor the Bristol Channel. This dramatic location provided a wonderful setting for the Ermine Street Guard who demonstrated what life must have been like for the soldiers stationed there.

Over three hundred people attended the day and were able to take part in more Roman activities on the lawn outside the National Park Centre, including mosaic-making and Roman cookery. Parracombe School Drama Group presented their own version of the story of Romulus and Remus which was extensively researched and greatly enjoyed by everyone.



Photographs - Jessica Turner (ENPA)

## Exmoor's Oldest Structures

During July work continued on the excavation of the Mesolithic hunting camp at Hawkcombe Head near Porlock. The work was directed by the University of Bristol and Exmoor National Park Authority and was funded mainly by the University's Widening Participation Office which aims to encourage young people on to higher education. This year the excavations continued in the Ven Combe area where in excess of 20 trenches were opened. The results of fieldwork over the last two years are also being brought together in the form of a geophysical report. We have also obtained three radio-carbon dates for the site which have established that two features excavated in 2002 (a posthole and a hearth) date to the Late Mesolithic period (around 8000 years ago) - this makes them the oldest man-made structures so far found on Exmoor.

## Holworthy Farm, Parracombe

*Terry Green, Chairman of the North Devon Archaeological Society (NDAS), reports on excavations at Holworthy Farm during July 2004:*

On 19th July 2004, 20 volunteers including members of NDAS and of the Tiverton Archaeological Group as well as four students from Exeter University began the third season of excavation on the Holworthy hillslope enclosure.

The 2003 season had turned up a Bronze Age Trevisker ware vessel left upright on an early ground surface (reported in last year's Historic Environment Review). The plan for 2004 was to open up a larger area so that the pottery and a gully, previously exposed, could be seen within a broader context. We also wanted to explore features revealed by magnetometry. This meant open-area excavation as well as subsidiary trenches. The gully (partly revealed in 2003) which had been thought perhaps to represent a drip-gully, in fact turned out to be part of a shallow trench snaking across the site. It was filled with soil containing large amounts of charcoal. A number of flint thumbnail scrapers were scattered through the fill and most surprisingly, we found the carbonised remains of a wooden bowl apparently abandoned in the ashes.

We also found clear evidence for a roundhouse in the form of seven large stone-lined postholes which clearly formed two thirds of a circle. It is assumed that these represent the major supporting posts of the house, which was probably 12m-13m in diameter. The Bronze Age Trevisker ware vessel could now be seen to have been left upright on the floor of this building. Near to its location a quantity of pottery sherds were also found, mostly in association with a shallow scoop containing charcoal or carbonised wood. Within the area of the apparent roundhouse we also found a small saddle-quern, a clay loom-weight and - in a post-hole - a stone tool which may have been used for leather-working. We are not yet certain but it seems as if the charcoal-filled gully pre-dates the roundhouse. A number of

the post-holes used in the building of the roundhouse had been sealed off with large stones. This may suggest a deliberate removal of the wooden posts and a 'closing' of the site when it was abandoned. Such ritual closing ceremonies are well attested in south-west England and beyond in the Bronze Age.



*Figures (and a bucket!) indicate the positions of some of the post holes which supported the roof of the Bronze Age roundhouse at Holworthy near Parracombe*



*Several of the post holes had been blocked as if in a deliberate 'closing' ritual. Similar examples have been found elsewhere in Britain*

Photographs - Rob Wilson-North (ENPA)

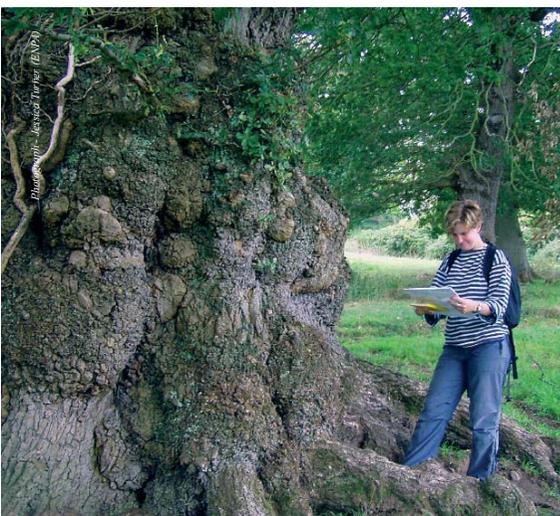
## Dunster

The Dunster Working Group was set up to bring together all the parties with an interest in Dunster.

A constant theme for any discussions concerning Dunster is the lack of parking especially at peak periods. Dunster is a mediaeval town with tightly packed houses along its streets whose visual appearance is over shadowed by parked cars. In an effort to overcome this problem a proposal to extend the existing carpark on the edge of the village was put forward. This proposal would need to use some of the land that surrounds the National Trust's Dunster Castle.

In order to evaluate the impact such a proposal might have on this historic setting a full landscape survey was carried out. This important survey has shown that the designed landscape extends beyond the boundary designated by the English Heritage parks and gardens register. This in depth-survey has unearthed some exciting finds including the old carriage way which brought visitors past viewing points and follies as they approached the castle. The records describe viewing platforms complete with picturesque buildings where refreshments could be taken while admiring the various views, some extending over to Wales. Designs were also found for eye-catcher buildings that were never built.

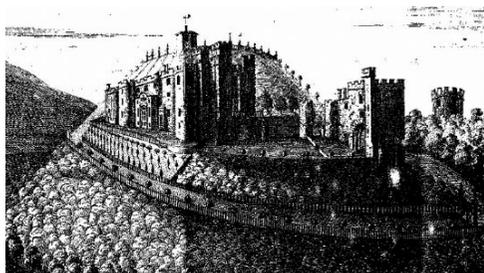
The grounds around the castle are not associated with a recognised garden landscaper but are the result of a cooperation between members of the Luteral family and local artists, which has produced a landscape that encompasses hills, parkland, marsh and sea.



Kate Felus carrying out the designed landscape survey at Dunster



Woods painting showing in the bottom left hand corner the "lost" garden that was recently surveyed by Martin Papworth.



Drawing of Dunster Castle in the 1770s by S&N Buck

## Porlock Beach

Archaeological discoveries on Porlock beach continue to be made. Last year a piece of worked timber was discovered near the breach and dated to c. 900AD. This year several more bones were discovered close to the site of the aurochs which was discovered in 1998. Then in December 2004 Vanessa Straker discovered several posts and some horizontal timbers protruding from deep clay close to the breach in the shingle ridge - the first 'built structure' to be found on the beach. Exmoor National Park Authority commissioned Richard McDonnell to investigate and excavate these timbers.

This has now been completed and the tentative interpretation - and it is early days - suggests that the 'structure' is perhaps associated with the fishing industry and may be a part of a fishweir or fish-fence. Timber samples will be processed and submitted for radiocarbon dating in 2005.



The possible fish weir on Porlock Beach (scale = 1 metre)

## Simonsbath Sawmill wins award

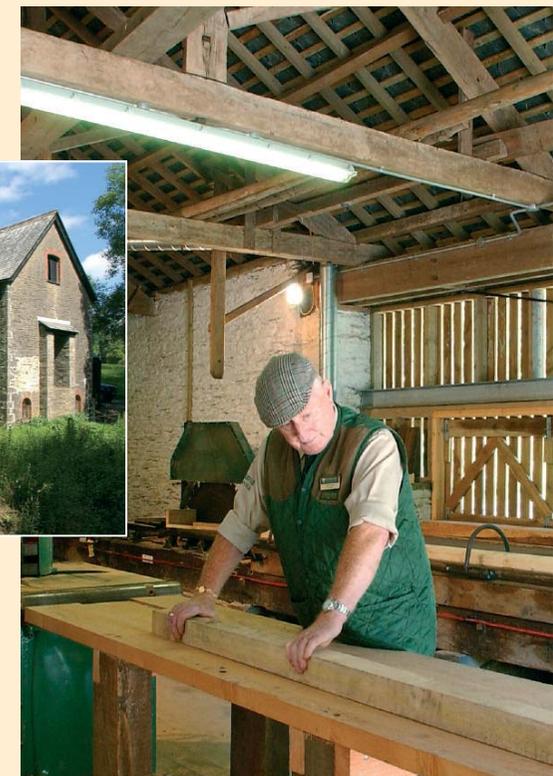
During 2004 the effort to conserve Simonsbath Sawmill was recognised by the Somerset Building Awards. The sawmill was highly commended in the Conservation Category.



These Awards are sponsored by Tauntfield Ltd (the Stansell family company) in memory of William Stansell (1910-1987). The Somerset Building Preservation Trust was founded in 1988, its main purpose being to help preserve the architectural heritage of Somerset for the benefit of the people of Somerset and of the country as a whole. The Trust also exists to educate the public on the importance of preserving and enhancing the built environment.

The first objective of these Building Awards is to raise the standards for design and construction of new buildings and for the alteration, conversion and repair of old buildings in the County. The secondary objective is to draw attention to the positive contribution that well designed and conserved buildings make to their surroundings.

The sawmill restoration project was led for Exmoor National Park Authority by local firm Louise Crossman Architects.



## Monument Management Scheme

This annual programme is jointly funded by Exmoor National Park Authority and English Heritage and helps to ensure the protection and enhancement of Scheduled Ancient Monuments on Exmoor. Scheduling is the only legal designation for archaeology and is a vital tool in the conservation of the historic environment. The Monument Management Scheme not only targets vulnerable Scheduled Ancient Monuments but is also used to improve knowledge about specific archaeological sites and to enhance interpretation.

The Monument Management Scheme is being used to conserve the WWII pillbox at Roadwater. Another recent project has been the consolidation work on the ruins of Barlynch Priory - this has resulted in the owner granting limited public access to the site. During the winter of 2004 the scheme has funded repairs and erosion control on some of Exmoor's vulnerable burial mounds and gorse will be cleared from Holwell Castle.



This early iron mining site near Ralegh's Cross on the Brendon Hills was cleared of forestry once its archaeological importance had been recognised. The area will be fenced off using Monument Management Scheme funds to enable it to revert to grazed heathland

emerged into the gloomy pit. There followed great debates about whether the rock face beneath the moss could be ore bearing (it seemed to be at the correct East-West orientation for Exmoor's mineral lodes) or was it just a stone quarry for the building of the farm? If it was a mine, when was it exploited?

A walk round the site revealed potential waste dumps and a small leat, created to supply the farm with water. Intriguingly, the leat was piped for c. 38m in the area in front of the quarry entrance. Mrs Sturgess's hunch about this large hole was proved correct: this was indeed a very interesting landscape feature. We decided to make a detailed survey and dig a small trench to investigate the relationship between the leat, pipe and waste tip.

It became clear that the last working of the mine (we were now convinced it was a mine) coincided with or post-dated the creation of the leat which, in turn, could be dated to the building of the Farm, but could it have been any earlier and was it the ore source for our smelting site? Without extensive excavation we may never know this but, whilst cutting through the rhododendrons for the survey, we thought there was a possible earlier entrance to the north of, and higher than, the existing entrance. (SG)

## NOT SO ROMAN LODE

### Early Bronze Age dates for mineral extraction?

In last year's newsletter we reported that our excavations at Roman Lode, the long openwork mining trench at Burcombe near Simonsbath, had revealed an area of intense burning at the lowest level of the stratigraphic sequence. Our hope was that radiocarbon dating the charcoal from this feature would give us a date for the earliest mining activity at the site. Samples were dispatched to English Heritage's dating section and the results came back to us just before Christmas 2004. To our surprise, we had indeed dated the earliest evidence of human activity on the site but, rather than being Roman or Iron Age, as we might have hoped, the two samples analysed give a date range of 1950-1740 BC, that is in the Early Bronze Age (EBA)!

A whole new set of questions now present themselves. What were the people of the EBA doing at what we know as an iron mine? The lode would have looked quite different then, not the gaping slash across the moorland that we see today. It would have been a significant feature in the landscape, identifiable by changes in vegetation and strewn with dense and colourful minerals. Were they collecting hematite, not for its metallic content but for pigment, or for personal items such as bead-making? Were they perhaps seeking the quartz that often lies along the lode boundaries



Trench fever: some of the excavation team

or, were there copper minerals in the upper part of the ore body, now long since mined out, that they were exploiting? Although we do not have evidence that Roman Lode yielded copper in historic times, copper does occur with many of the ores on Exmoor

and the possibility that it was present at Roman Lode is plausible. For whatever purpose, the extraction of minerals from Roman Lode in the EBA is contemporary with copper mining at sites such as Mount Gabriel in Ireland and Parys Mountain and the Great Orme in Wales. Our limited excavation has not yet recovered contemporary stone tools but this exciting new evidence suggests there is still much to be done at Roman Lode. (GJ)

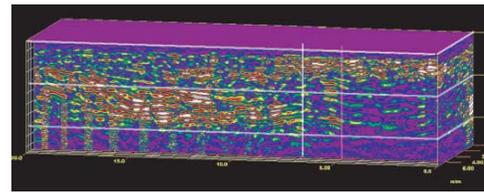
## WHAT THE EYE CAN'T SEE

### New use of Ground-Penetrating Radar

This winter saw Exmoor Iron employing a new geophysical technique in its investigations: ground penetrating radar (GPR). This technique involves firing pulses of radar into the ground that reflect from hard surfaces and objects to a depth of up to four metres. These reflections are then processed by computer and interpreted by the archaeologist. Although GPR itself has been around for some time in archaeology, as far as we know Exmoor Iron has achieved two firsts in using it to examine mine workings at Roman Lode and smelting slag heaps at Sherracombe Ford. So far, interpretation is in the preliminary stages but already the results are very promising.

At Roman Lode GPR has substantiated over a wider area the results gained from excavation, confirming that each surface hollow overlies a mining pit.

At Sherracombe the survey focussed on the main slag heap. The pattern of deposition, shown by the GPR results, indicates at least three major phases of dumping, each at slightly different locations.



Inner working: a view of the Sherracombe Ford ground penetrating radar data looking into the body of the slag heap. Two large masses of dense slag-rich material are visible as bands of brighter colours, one to the lower left and the other on the upper right. These are the result of two different phases of slag dumping. More detailed examination in 3-D enables individual layers to be distinguished and analysed.

Using the GPR data it is possible to pinpoint individual slag-rich deposits, examine them in 3-D and calculate their volume and thus the amount of slag each contains. In turn it is then possible to estimate the amount of iron smelted to produce that quantity of slag. The results suggest that each year the iron-workers at Sherracombe were kept busy producing almost a tonne of processed iron! But the work didn't stop there. To make this amount of iron required the production of almost 19 tonnes of charcoal from 131 tonnes of wood, and also the mining of nearly ten tonnes of iron ore. When we consider that these figures can probably be doubled to account for the iron production indicated by the second slag heap at Sherracombe Ford it becomes obvious that the tranquil valley in which the site is situated today must have been a noisy, dirty and smokey place 1800 years ago! (LB and CC)

Contributors: Lee Bray, Chris Carey, Seán Goddard, Gill Juleff, Richard Sandover, Valerie Sturgess



Exmoor Iron • Exmoor Iron

## NEWSLETTER No. 3, February 2005

Year three of the project saw **Exmoor Iron** move forward in time from the Roman period and Sherracombe Ford to the period after the departure of the Romans, now called the Early Medieval. The first part of the Early Medieval, the 5th-7th centuries, before the emergence of Anglo-Saxon influence in the South West, is popularly known as the Dark Ages and Exmoor more than lives up to this evocative term. Almost nothing is known about this period on Exmoor. The field evidence for Dark Age activity on Exmoor comprises two memorial stones of the 5th century, the Caratacus stone on Winsford Hill and the Cavudus stone near Lynton, and the Culbone stone, inscribed with an early Christian symbol. Clearly, any new evidence from the period would be a significant contribution to the general understanding of Exmoor's past. Exmoor Iron, through its fieldwork at Blacklake Wood in 2004, has been able to shed new light on Exmoor's Dark Ages. (GJ)

## THE EXCAVATION SEASON

### Blacklake Wood 2004

The existence of a large slag heap in Blacklake Wood near Marsh Bridge in the Barle Valley, first came to the attention of Exmoor National Park Authority almost a decade ago. As with other iron smelting sites, the first question is one of chronology. When not closely associated with more readily datable settlements, smelting sites dedicated exclusively to one activity are notoriously difficult to date from surface evidence only. One of the first tasks, therefore, when the site was assessed during the pilot stage of the project, was to extract a charcoal sample from within the slag heap for carbon 14 dating. The results that came back, AD 415-654, were the first indication that this could be a site of regional if not national importance, known smelting sites of the Early Medieval period being of exceptional rarity. The question was how well preserved was the site. Had the cutting of the adjacent road destroyed part of the site and had recent conifer planting and timber management disturbed what remained.

Before excavation began, a geophysical survey showed the extent of the slag heap and suggested a working area with a number of potential 'hot spots' immediately upslope of the heap. The strategy adopted for the site mirrored that

used at Sherracombe. A narrow trench was cut through the deepest part of the slag heap, down to 'natural', to investigate the sequence of waste dumping and the scale of operations on the site and a larger, open-area trench was excavated over much of the upslope working area to investigate the technological operation of the site.

Despite low expectations of site preservation and two weeks of rain (more typical Exmoor summer weather after two seasons of sun at Sherracombe), the site began to yield up a surprising wealth of evidence. The trench through the slag heap revealed an undisturbed sequence of slag dumping. Pottery and charcoal retrieved from the heap will allow us to date the main activity on the site with accuracy. In the same trench, the earliest activity identified, before the bulk of the slag was deposited, was the footprint base of a small furnace. No unstanding structure survived but the dimensions could be recorded.

In the main working area of the site the 'hot spots' identified by geophysics turned out to be not furnaces but the bases of small hearth features used to roast ore. The intensity of the geophysics signal in this case was probably caused by the lack of interference from overlying slag debris. Thick deposits of charcoal across the whole area suggest that fuel was abundant and did not present a problem in terms of resource management. No evidence



Bailing out: it rained every day for the first two weeks of the project making difficult working conditions

for permanent structures sheltering the working areas was found and the sequence of working surfaces and episodes of soil build-up suggests the site operated on a seasonal or discontinuous basis. From an unprepossessing site in murky conifer woodland we appear, on initial assessment, to have important new evidence that will help bridge the technological gap between the Roman period and the later Saxon and Medieval periods. (GJ)

### The Site Owner

Things happen slowly in archaeology, or so it seems to someone of my rather limited patience. I was first approached by the ENPA about the site in Blacklake in 1998. I was aware the site existed – a large mound and lots of bits of slag lying around, but nothing that appeared to me to warrant undue excitement. Some things were removed for carbon dating and I heard no more until 2001 when Gill and Lee came to see me. They reported that the carbon dating recorded a time between 400 and 650 AD – the Dark Ages! Now that was exciting. They asked if they could excavate the area and I couldn't wait for them to start.

In mid August 2004 about 18 students and volunteers with 4 or 5 chiefs arrived in my yard to proceed with the dig. Their arrival coincided with a fortnight of almost incessant rain and the poor things wallowed and slithered about on the site that came increasingly to resemble the Somme. And then the sun came out, and with it enthusiasm and cheerfulness. I found it all fascinating and very much appreciated the forbearance of the team to my endless questions and to my nosing about as they tried to get on with the probing and scraping.

Sadly it all had to stop in mid September. I am told that there is still a lot there to be revealed so I would be more than happy to see them all again next year. (VS)

### A First-Year Student

Kitted out in my wellies, waterproof trousers, knee pads, coat and with ear-muffs in my bag, I stood with equally expectant friends at the beginning of our excavation at Blacklake Wood; we were not going to be disappointed.

Having endured a few of the typical good-natured jokes of sending a poor first-year student for a bubble for the spirit-level or a left-handed trowel, attention quickly turned to the task at



Careful excavation: substantial deposits of slag and furnace debris in the slag heap trench.

a great archaeological experience, it was a lot of fun and entertaining. I'm sure none of the students on the project would trade this time at Blacklake Wood for anything. (SL)

### The Raw Recruit

Last summer I had the good fortune to become part of the team that excavated the iron smelting site at Blacklake Wood, just outside Dulverton. As a part-time student with the Exeter's Department of Lifelong Learning, this excavation, my first, proved to be a wonderful experience. The Blacklake team was a careful mix of professionals, experienced students and about ten tyros, from the University, assisted by a small team of volunteers (some with many years of experience).

The project was blessed by the keen interest of the landowner, who not only agreed to the excavation going ahead but provided storage and office facilities in the dry, comfortable stables, only a few hundred yards from the site. With the on site facilities and a minibus to run us between our hostel in Dulverton and the site, we were set for a fascinating four weeks.

Apart from occasional work as a surveyor, finds recorder and tea-maker, I spent all my time working in trench 2. This trench proved to be as productive as hoped and allowed some quantification of the amount of iron production undertaken on the site and also allowed some

interesting comparisons between the technologies used here and those employed by the Romans at Sherracombe Ford. It also exceeded expectations by yielding 5 sherds of pottery as well as the base of a furnace where iron had been smelted.

The experience was truly wonderful and exactly what I needed to cap two years of studying the archaeology of the South West of Britain. I have become a committed excavator, willing to have a bash at anything now – even

hand. Under the supervision of Martin Gillard everyone had the opportunity to participate in real archaeology through surveying, excavation, planning and teamwork but perhaps even more importantly we learnt the skill of adaptation. We have scaled slag heaps, skidded down banks, survived the rain, battled with wasps, struggled against ticks and coped with the trench supervisors!!

Talks and local field trips helped to illuminate the site's history and importance in a regional and national context. The excavation gave us the opportunity to work with a wide selection of people ranging from the amateur to the professional, and the surreal (Exmoor Safari) to the educational (both for us and local schoolchildren!). Not only was this

the garden looks more interesting than it did in former years. (RS)

### Fascinating Finds

Iron production sites are generally not the places to find the bric-a-brac of daily life from which archaeologists build their models of past societies. We are accustomed to a diet of slag, and yet more slag, with some broken fragments of furnaces, spent charcoal and the occasional discarded lump of ore for variation. This is what Sherracombe Ford gave us, in industrial quantities, and was what we expected of Blacklake Wood. But, as the dig progressed, where at Sherracombe we saw ever-increasing optimisation and standardisation of the process, at Blacklake we began to get glimpses of a more fallible, human hand at work.

First there was the small heap of iron ore left waiting to be roasted and prepared for the furnace. Perhaps this was a single packhorse load or the product of a day's work at the nearby surface mine, carried to the site in baskets or sacks. Then there was the dump of slag and waste that included a complete 'frozen' smelt. This fascinating find appears to be the contents of a small cylindrical furnace as it would be in mid-smelt, frozen solid, with partially reduced ore sitting above the hot zone where air was pumped into the furnace and molten slag formed, below which a solid furnace bottom of slag was accumulating. What happened to cause this smelt to fail, wasting not only the contents of the smelt and all the effort that went into it, but also the furnace structure itself. Who stopped pumping the bellows and why? And then, in the same waste dump, we recovered several lumps of metal, now quite

corroded but still recognisable as the raw product of smelting. The largest of these weighs c. 400g and constitutes a perfectly respectable small iron bloom. A section cut through this piece showed it to be predominantly well-consolidated metal that would be readily forgeable by a skilled blacksmith. Why would such valuable material be discarded? Archaeologists are famous for their fascination with ritual. Is there more going on at Blacklake than just poor management and clumsiness? (GJ)



The curious case of the 'frozen' smelt: the contents of a failed furnace. Scale 20cm

### Pottery at Blacklake Wood

During the period in which Blacklake Wood was occupied, the population of the south west was not thought to have used ceramics so perhaps the most surprising finds made during the excavation were five sherds of pottery. They represent at least two different vessels, both of them bowls with forms derived from a Roman tradition. One possibility was that these vessels may come from the continent as imported wares are found on high status sites of this period such as Tintagel, but consultation with experts familiar with



Cut and polished: a section through an iron bloom showing the solid metal and slag. Scale in mm

such material has shown that this is not the case. Instead, the sherds are composed of two different clay fabrics, one of which contains minerals derived from granite, raising the possibility that it has a relatively local origin. The question now is; had the people of the south west really forgotten about pottery during the centuries following the end of Roman rule? The excavations at Blacklake Wood may provide us with an answer. (LB)



Pottery: it may not look much but it is from the Dark Ages. Scale in mm

### Mine or Quarry?

It's sometimes hard to keep an enthusiastic landowner down. Not content with being the custodian of what might prove to be one of the most important iron smelting sites in the UK, Mrs Sturgess kept asking if anyone was going to investigate the quarry. We relented and beat our way through the dense rhododendrons to the entrance and



COMMUNITY ACTION Whenever possible, the Project likes to involve the local community and usually holds an open day. This year, safety concerns with the treacherous conditions on site prevented this. But we were able to accommodate smaller groups of school children from Dulverton and West Anstey when the ground conditions improved.

