

## Archaeological Survey Of The Quantock Hills AONB

Hazel Riley from English Heritage worked with the Quantock Hills AONB Service to discover some hidden features of the landscape.

### **Setting the scene**

The Archaeological Survey and Investigation Team of English Heritage have recently completed a survey of the historic environment of the Quantock Hills AONB. The survey was set up by English Heritage at the request of the Quantock Hills AONB Service and the Somerset County Council Historic Environment Service who both recognised a big gap in our knowledge of the history of the Quantock Hills landscape.

We have been looking at the landscape of the Quantock Hills from the air, by analysing aerial photographs, and from the ground, by the time-honoured method of walking across it. The English Heritage project team included archaeologists, experts in the interpretation of aerial photographs and architectural historians. The team were interested in all aspects of the historic landscape, from the earliest prehistoric features to buildings associated with the Second World War and the Cold War. This has been a partnership project, with the Quantock Hills AONB Service and Somerset County Council as our two main funding partners, and support from the Friends of Quantock and the Fairfield Estate. As well as funding, partnership has meant working together, often at a very practical level.

### **Diverse landscapes: new challenges**

The diverse landscapes of the Quantock Hills offer their own challenges for archaeological survey. The enclosed land on the edge of the hills was best approached by the study of air photographs, which showed a dense concentration of settlements and field systems of Iron Age and Roman date, underlying the present day landscape of farms and fields – itself dating from the early medieval period. In the oak woodlands of the eastern combes we faced a surveying challenge: how to record the hundreds of charcoal burning platforms, dating from the medieval and post-medieval periods when the oak-bark tanning industry thrived in the Quantock Hills. One of the greatest challenges working on the beautiful open heath of the Quantock Hills was the vegetation, particularly the gorse. The open heath is the place where prehistoric archaeology – the remains of burial mounds, settlements and field systems over 3000 years old – is the most likely to survive. Some of these monuments, like the big cairns and barrows on the western side of the Quantock Hills are substantial sites, but others are low mounds or banks, less than a metre high and easily obscured by gorse and leggy heather.

### **New discoveries: Bronze Age burial monuments**

The Quantock heath is managed by an annual programme of swaling (carefully controlled burning), organised by the Quantock Hills AONB Service. By working with the rangers, targeting particular areas of interest and walking areas after burning we were able to locate several new prehistoric sites on the hills. The importance of local knowledge was emphasised by the report from Quantock Hills AONB Senior Ranger Tim Russell of a circular bank and a

mound which he found after an area of thick heather was burnt off several years ago. After a site visit, we were able to identify this as a previously unrecorded Bronze Age ring cairn and round barrow. These sites had been constructed over 4000 years ago to commemorate the life and death of people who lived and worked on and around the Quantock Hills at that time.

Wills Neck, the highest summit of the Quantock Hills, is crowned with several ring cairns and barrows. It also has its fair share of gorse and this was obscuring a site described in our records as a cairn. From what we could see (which wasn't a great deal), there seemed to be a circular bank, but the gorse was too dense allow us to make much sense of what was happening here. The Quantock Hills Volunteer Rangers came to the rescue. We spent a happy Sunday clearing the gorse from the site. As we were at the end of a hot dry summer, we couldn't burn the gorse on site and it had to be loaded onto trailers for burning off the heath. However, after a good few hours of very hard work, we uncovered enough of the site to record it and begin to understand its importance.

We planned the exact form and location of the site using differential GPS (Global Positioning System) survey equipment. The site was revealed as a low, circular bank, with a small mound inside. The whole thing was nearly 30m in diameter. This is similar in form to many of the ring cairns on the Quantock Hills (and elsewhere in Britain), but quite a lot bigger, emphasising the importance of this spur of land in the Bronze Age.

### **Putting sites on the map**

The Quantock Hills Volunteer Rangers also dared to go where I hesitated to ask my colleagues to venture. There is a curious bank and ditch, off-puttingly known as Dead Woman's Ditch, which runs right across a great spur of land, from Rams Combe to Seven Springs. The earthwork is about 1km long and was probably built in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC to define or protect this area. Only the northern half of it had ever been properly mapped and when I first visited it I quickly realised why. The northern half ran down into the lovely oak woodlands below Dowsborough Hill. To the south it ran into a very dense plantation of conifers, part of Great Wood, and virtually impenetrable in places. However, with the help of the intrepid Volunteer Rangers we managed to locate and survey about 300m of this prehistoric bank and ditch in the plantation, allowing us to put the whole thing onto the map for the first time.

### **Understanding the historic landscape**

An important aim of the project was to use the historic landscape to enthuse and inform both locals and visitors to the Quantock Hills. We have led guided walks with a heritage theme as part of the Quantock Hills AONB Service Events Programme, given talks and presentations to local groups, and run a training course for the South West CMA. New information panels have gone up at two Scheduled Monuments, the medieval chapel at Adscombe and the 12<sup>th</sup>-century motte and bailey castle at Nether Stowey, where there had previously been no on-site interpretation.

The survey project is explained in a leaflet: 'Recording and Understanding the Historic Landscape of the Quantock Hills', which forms part of the Quantock Hills AONB Service Technical Papers series. The results of the survey work are encapsulated in a new English Heritage book, 'The Historic Landscape of the Quantock Hills' by Hazel Riley (ehsales@gillards.com). The Quantock Hills AONB Service commissioned reconstruction paintings of aspects of the Quantock Hills landscape through time. As well as illustrating the book, these images by artist Jane Brayne are being used in displays, presentations and educational material.

### **Working together: what have we learnt?**

Partnership working is:

- Not just about ticking the right boxes in a project design
- Essential to get the best results with limited resources
- About being willing to work in different ways
- Good fun (apart from the gorse)

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### Images

The Trendle Ring, a prehistoric enclosure, on the open heath. Beyond, a landscape of farms and fields dates from the early Medieval period (NMR 21946/01) (© English Heritage)

Elaine Jamieson, English Heritage Investigator, surveying the ring cairn on Wills Neck. (Dave Pusill)

Andrew Davies, Recreational Ranger, and Ron Carlson, Senior Volunteer Ranger, surveying Dead Woman's Ditch. The archaeology is hidden in the trees behind them! (Hazel Riley)

A Bronze Age funeral ceremony on the Quantock Hills. (© Jane Brayne)