

Quantock Hills

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



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March Newsletter – Issue 11



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What is Deep Peat and why are we interested in it?

Iain Porter

Quantock Hills AONB Development Officer

You may have seen in the news recently the Government's decision to prevent the burning of heather and grasses, called swaling in the south-west, on areas of 'deep peat'. So why have they done this, does it affect the Quantocks and what is deep peat anyway?

Let's start with the peat. Peat is a soil type that is unique. It is formed by the accumulation of organic material – plants and mosses – that have grown and died through natural lifecycles at that spot. Where the water level is stable near the peat surface, the remains of the dead plants do not fully decompose due to the absence of oxygen. This allows a layer of organic material to accumulate over time. This takes a long time, with some of the UK's peatlands estimated to have been forming for 10,000 years.

There are a few different definitions, but most people agree that the organic layer needs to be at least 30cm thick for a soil to be classed as peat. Across the world there are 6 types of peatland, one of which is the blanket mire of which the UK has about 13% of the world's area.

So why is peatland important? Peatlands perform an array of ecological functions, and its significance is increasingly being recognised. This includes biodiversity provision and protection, water quality and flood risk regulation and as the largest carbon store on land.

In the UK it is estimated that 80% of our peatlands have been degraded through drainage for agricultural improvement, commercial forestry, inappropriate management and commercial extraction for horticulture.

Each year the carbon released from inappropriately managed peatlands or peat extraction is estimated at 24.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents (MtCO₂e), making up 3.5% of the UK's carbon emissions.

IMPACT ON ECOSYSTEM SERVICES IN A DAMAGED PEATLAND

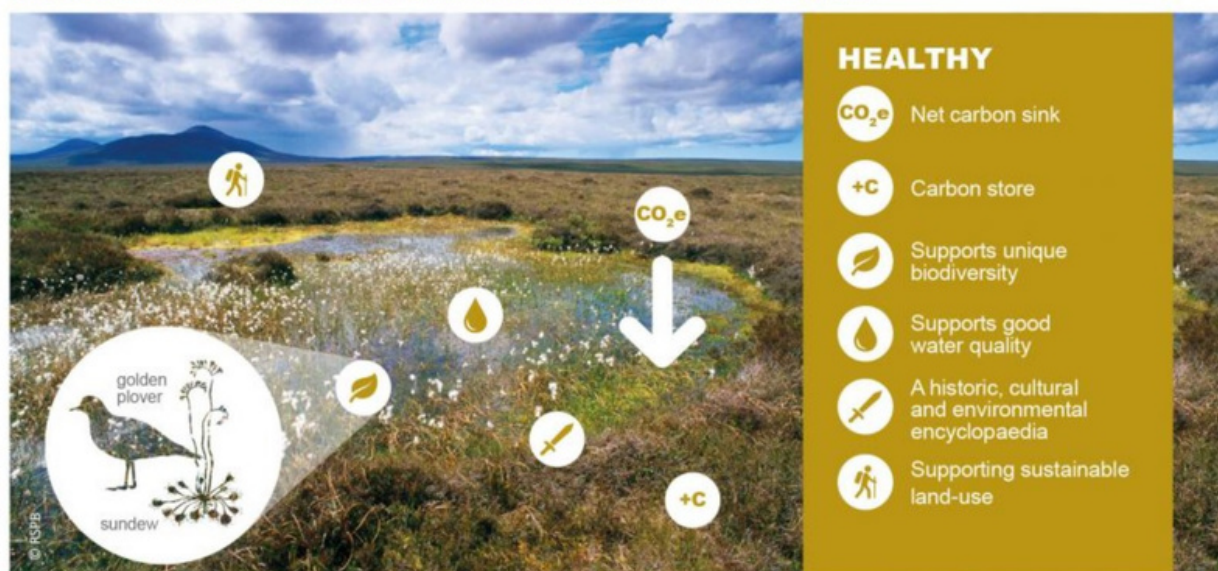


The government is looking to protect and restore peatlands with measures such as removal of inappropriate tree planting, reduction in peat extraction for burning and the horticultural industry and support for re-wetting in the UK's uplands. The ban on burning on deep peat is the latest measure designed to protect these incredibly valuable habitats.

What is the impact on swaling on the Quantock Hills? Swaling has been undertaken on the Quantock heathlands for centuries – [see our website for more info Swaling on the Quantock Hills](#). Our heathlands have very small areas, thought to be less than 15Ha, of deeper peat (though none is deeper than 40cm) and these are classed as 'no burn areas' meaning swaling will not happen on them. The vast majority of our heathlands are on shallow soils and swaling is undertaken to conserve the heather habitats. The management of the heathlands is continually reviewed by the AONB Service and its partners to ensure it is undertaken inline with the latest research and guidance.

But what about the peat on the Quantock Hills? The AONB Service with partners are undertaking a number of projects, such as the Level Up Project, that will enhance these mire / bog areas through re-wetting, tree removal and temporary fencing to reduce poaching. The aim is to enhance the existing areas but also to increase the area of mire / bog across the Quantock Hills.

ECOSYSTEM SERVICES IN A HEALTHY PEATLAND



With a little help

Owen Jones

Quantock Hills AONB & Forestry England Partnership Ranger

We are all aware that the Quantock Hills AONB is a special area and home to a range of animals and plants. In order to ensure that these species have a healthy population the AONB Service, along with other organisations including National Trust and Forestry England undertake regular monitoring of key species. One of the selected species that we monitor are Nightjars, *Caprimulgus europaeus*, which is a bird species that travels to Europe from Africa to breed.

It's a ground nesting bird, meaning that it incubates its eggs in a shallow scrape on the ground, so the habitat has to be just right. Enclosed enough to ensure it isn't predated or obvious but open enough to allow it to see its surroundings. The species is crepuscular, feeding mainly at Dawn and dusk, eating moths and other flying insects whilst on the wing. The birds breed in the UK and we utilise this behaviour to understand how many of them we have in key areas. This is done by listening for the distinct 'churring' male calls who do so to gain a territory and attract a mate. The singing starts when they arrive in April/May and continues into July, before they head home in August/ Sept. There are records that go back to the 1960/70's on the Quantocks but these are patchy, covering random areas so the requirement was to try and generate a survey that we can use into the future.



In 2019 the AONB Service decided to monitor 11 suitable km squares across the Quantocks. The squares were chosen on meeting the right requirements for vegetation, they were in quieter areas and represented a good cross-section of the Quantocks. The survey was undertaken using volunteers with both a dawn (on site for 06:00) & dusk survey (home for 23:00hrs) with people plotting where males were heard calling from. The results were promising with all but one survey square yielding results. On average there were 2.5 (not sure how you can have a half!) singing males per square. Moving on to 2020 everything changed slightly due to Covid and we made the difficult decision to just undertake one survey at Dusk.

We also removed one survey square as further on site analysis suggested that it wouldn't be suitable. Of the 10 squares surveyed again there was a result of 2.5 males per square. This shows that were consistently getting a good number per survey area, meaning vegetation and prey species are available. We'll continue to undertake this survey going forward and hopefully once a few more years have passed the data will start to show us trends of where birds are present, where issues might be and the overall general health of the Quantocks.

Building Resilience in SW Woodlands

Did you know the South West is home to a very special type of rainforest?



The damp western coastline of the UK is home to Atlantic Woodlands, globally rare temperate rainforests full of biodiversity. Plantlife have funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to conserve, record & protect the species found there in the **Building Resilience in SW Woodlands** project. Working with a range of partners across the South West, including the Quantock Hills AONB they are planning essential woodland conservation work as well as creating opportunities to engage schools, public and families and improve our knowledge of these barely known temperate rainforests.

CALLING ALL HOME SCHOOLERS!

Plantlife are thrilled that over 300 families so far have registered to take part in their exciting science project and will be helping us to find out how healthy the south west's rainforests are. Behind the scenes Kate from Plantlife has been beavering away sending out packs to everyone. But they still have survey packs available.

If you live in the South West of the UK we have an exciting citizen science project for you to get involved in. We need you to go to a local woodland and record some important features, just as a scientist would. These include what tree species are there and what type of wood it is. We also want you to score different features for us. For example is there is lots of ivy or not very much at all. All this information we will use to help identify if your woodland is a rainforest, and help us manage and protect it. To receive your free survey in the post please follow the below link and fill out your details. Plantlife also have some supporting videos they will share with you. This survey was created for children aged between 7 and 12. The survey is for woods in the south west of England. Please follow all government guidance in regards to exercise and travel at this time.

Please use this link to the form –

'How healthy is your rainforest?' Home school resource

<https://youtu.be/9lpAs3li5Gs>

If you are a teacher Plantlife have extra resources you can use please email kate.hind@plantlife.org.uk.



IT'S QUIZ TIME!

Quantock Quiz – Dark Ages

1) Which Somerset location is often claimed as the site of King Arthur's Camelot?

- a. South Cadbury
- b. Brent Knoll
- c. Athelney

2) What is the name of the monster that Beowulf defeats?

- a. Wiglaf
- b. Grendel
- c. Cookie

3) From where do we get the names for our days of the week: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday?

- a. Viking Gods
- b. Anglo-Saxon Gods
- c. Celtic Gods

4) Who do most experts believe was laid to rest in the ship burial at Sutton Hoo?

- a. Aethelred of Mercia
- b. Ivar the Boneless
- c. Raedwald of East Anglia

5) Who became the first Archbishop of Canterbury in AD 597?

- a. St Columba
- b. St Neot
- c. St Augustine

6) What was the Witan?

- a. The advisors to the Anglo Saxon Kings
- b. An epic poem
- c. The name of a mythological monster

7) Where is King Alfred reputed to have taken refuge from the Vikings, later founding an Abbey there?

- a. Glastonbury
- b. Thurloxtton
- c. Athelney

8) What was the Danelaw?

- a. The area of England controlled by the Vikings
- b. The Viking legal system
- c. A Viking chief's council of advisors

9) Who attacked Watchet in AD 918?

- a. Celts
- b. Vikings
- c. Saxons

10) The Battle of Cynwit, where Saxons and Vikings fought in AD 878, is believed to have taken place close to which Somerset location?

- a. Cannington Camp
- b. Norton Fitzwarren
- c. Brent Knoll

(Answers on page 7)

Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Update



Bill Jenman
Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme Manager



Jon and I have been spending quite a bit of time redeployed so with that and lockdown there is less to report on than usual. However behind the scenes we have been getting on with seeking quotes for various bits of archaeological and other work ready for next year and continue to develop our community contacts. We have also been advertising for a replacement Natural Heritage Officer to start in spring (closing date 4th March) and I have been revising the budget and work programme yet again... Covid must end sometime surely!

To their credit the National Lottery Heritage Fund have continued to be very supportive and flexible throughout – so thank you Lottery players.

One of our projects, “In the Footsteps of the Romantic Poets”, is a programme with local schools to explore the legacy of Coleridge and Wordsworth, both artistically and in terms of the huge influence they had on how we think about landscapes and nature in general. They invented the idea of landscape as something to admire and be inspired by rather than just an area that grows corn or timber. SPAEDA, the Somerset arts and environmental education charity, is leading delivery of this work for us.

We had planned to take young people out onto the hills for a series of artist-led workshops. The hands-on art projects would increase their understanding, awareness, and sense of place and would all be linked specifically to the curriculum. But, of course, none of that has been possible recently, so we’ve switched to an online offer for now. The website www.quantockhillseducation.org is designed with the participating schools in mind, but if you’re home-schooling or just looking for a way to occupy a wet weekend the Home Learning Resources have ideas and activity sheets for several enjoyable craft-type activities that would be easy to do at home.

Do have a look – getting your hands dirty outside is always good!

Cothlestone Tree Update

Andy Stevenson
Quantock Hills AONB Ranger



Following the removal of all of the ash trees along the road, around the car park and beside the paths at Cothelstone Hill in the autumn (due to ash dieback disease) you may have noticed we have been invaded by an army of green tree shelters.

Since Christmas the Rangers, AONB staff and members of the Working Well group have planted over 1000 trees to fill the gaps left by the ash trees. A mixture of broadleaf trees were planted including hazel, oak, hornbeam and wild cherry were planted. We may find that some of the ash trees recover and send up new shoots as well but the replacements are a guarantee that there will be tree cover in years to come.



'Cantucuudu' – The Quantocks in the Dark Ages

Dan Broadbent

Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme, Historic Heritage Officer

The recent release of *The Dig*, the film telling the story of the excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial, has created a surge of interest in the Dark Ages, that enigmatic period between the departure of the Roman legions from Britain in the early 5th century and the emergence of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms towards the end of the 7th.

Historical evidence for the period is famously scarce and the few written sources we have portray a Britain collapsing into ruin, helpless as incoming tribes of Saxons, Jutes and Angles exploit the power vacuum and ravage the land. This view has been challenged ever since the magnificent discoveries at Sutton Hoo, and other similarly breath-taking discoveries, such as the Staffordshire Hoard and the so-called Prittlewell Prince, further attest that this was far from a cultural or economic dark age. The recent discovery of a post-Roman mosaic in Gloucestershire further emphasises the point.

Yet, despite such high-status finds, there remains a paucity of archaeological evidence for the period as a whole. In many ways our understanding of the period is informed as much by myth as by fact; this is after all the period of both Arthur and Beowulf. When it comes to the Dark Ages, it remains difficult to disentangle myth from reality, particularly so as we move westwards across the country, tracing the expansion of the Anglo-Saxon settlers from their early strongholds in the East. But, if we know where to look, there are traces of this period to be found, even on and around the Quantocks.

Indeed, the earliest written record of the Quantocks comes from this period, in a charter recording a grant of land at West Monkton from King Centwine of Wessex to Glastonbury Abbey in AD 682. This charter, describes the area as being close to the famous wood called 'Cantucuudu'. These wooded hills would not become a formalised royal forest until the Norman Conquest, but the charter suggests it may already have been an established Saxon hunting ground.

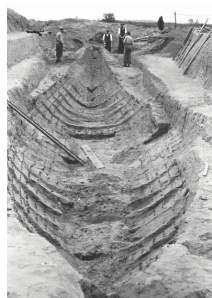
Excavation of Roman farmsteads at Maidenbrook and Hinkley Point suggests that occupation ends in the 4th century, but elsewhere the picture is one of economic change rather than collapse. At Yarford, for example a mosaic-floored room of the Roman Villa appears to have been converted into a workshop, and at Carhampton excavations unearthed an iron-working site with finds including sherds of imported pottery of 5th or 6th century date.

West Somerset has a particular concentration of cemeteries from this period, the most spectacular at Cannington where as many as 5000 people may have been buried between around AD 400-700. At least some of these people continued to have access to high status goods including glass and imported pottery and the presence of objects crafted from bone and antler have led to speculation of an association with the horned pagan god Cernunnos. A further 300 graves dating from the 5th to 7th centuries were unearthed during recent excavations at Hinkley Point while a further five graves from the same period have been identified at Stoneage Barton.

Another glimpse into life at this time can be found in form of Old English place names. The eastern boundary of the West Monkton charter, for example, is marked by the Wealaford, modern day Walford, which can be literally translated as 'Ford of the Welsh', Welsh being the Anglo-Saxon term for the native population. The inference of native activity in the area at the time of English incursion into Somerset may be supported by the presence of a nearby series of cropmark enclosures which have yet to be archaeologically investigated. The Quantock Landscape Partnership Scheme has many archaeological works planned over the next four years. We might not find a ship burial but who knows, perhaps we might be able to shed further light on the Quantocks' own Dark Ages.



Some of the Staffordshire hoard



Sutton Hoo Ship burial



Helmet from Sutton Hoo

Word Search

u d k d w c o t h l e s t o n e n d m q g p y c
y o h h p r k n h o b k u f l w t b y h o s s a
g f l o d c e r e r e l l o n k c i b m u t v r
g g i c l r b l h s a h q t i e m b p k o h c v
n y x x k f a w c c r o w c o m b e e g p r r i
e p e c t t o e e e o q m f x d n m u v t h r h
t w h w t t o r d s r t u k u m d m o m l u r l
h d t c o i i y d y t f p f q e b m o c s i r t
e l t t x t y m m n l q c f d e c e t m s i k k
r e i m v t s y n a o s u a r a g d u c e m s g
s i e q e r l r n l n y p a b b d q l v e n a c
t f f c i r p o e q e a e o n a n g a o l y k r
o m t o c x r g h v x u n u h t g q n g s w f r
w o l f q p p i v s o h x t s s o b l c g t c x
e o h t c b k f d m i h e p s r i x o i v u r o
y r s n l l e t p g l a a v p r e b h r d e b q
u b x m f t b u r v e x r m l n u x k e o g a r
c x x b r x f w k w t h s m m i k h s s a u u r
b e g b b q s d n o y r a o x d b s t p h d g o
p n o n f c o p n v q g r l v b x g r a o s d h
k f s u k b o e p m k e e h s x s x q t o x q s
t n t r y p b x q v y l k i x w n d f g b g p t
c d a e h x o t n a u q t s a e a f b i l s h m
v r b u s y g k y p a s k h i n o y u k k e n f

Aisholt
Bishops Lydeard
Crowcombe
Goathurst
Kilve
Over Stowey
Stogumber

Bagborough
Broomfield
East Quantoxhead
Halsway
Merridge
Ramscombe
Triscombe

Bicknoller
Cothlestone
Enmore
Holford
Nether Stowey
Spaxton
West Quantoxhead

Quiz Answers from page 4

- 1 a. South Cadbury
- 2 b. Grendel
- 3 b. Anglo Saxon Gods
- 4 c. Raedwald of East Anglia
- 5 c. St Augustine
- 6 a. The advisors to the Anglo Saxon Kings
- 7 c. Athelney
- 8 a. The area of England controlled by the Vikings
- 9 b. Vikings
- 10 a. Cannington Camp



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