

Neroche

Enhancing and celebrating the Blackdown Hills



The Neroche Scheme, named after a medieval forest and an Iron Age hill fort, covers 10,000 hectares on the Devon/Somerset border. The area is characterised by low-intensity livestock farming and a large area of public forest, containing wet heath and pasture. This landscape has a rich natural and cultural heritage, and provides a recreational resource for Taunton. The £2.9m scheme will celebrate and enhance local heritage by restoring grazing land and broadleaved woodland, and securing historic features. It will create new walking and horse riding opportunities, expand the Forest School scheme, and train young people for countryside management careers.

objectives

- To initiate a landscape-scale programme of habitat restoration to reconnect wildlife habitats.
- To secure the future of the most prominent built heritage features of the area.
- To bring new life to the exploration of local history.
- To create a network of promoted access routes, giving access for all abilities.
- To feed a sense of inspiration and passion for the landscape through the arts.
- To make the Neroche landscape and its heritage available for learning.
- To enable residents to build a greater sense of local ownership of their landscape, sharing in the task of caring for its heritage features.
- To equip current and potential future managers of the landscape with the skills and knowledge to allow them to make a living from the sustainable management of the landscape into the future.

actions

- Natural heritage: 279 hectares of forest habitat created (44 ha open pasture, 31 ha open heath, 97 ha wood pasture, 43 ha wooded heath, 54 ha broadleaved woodland regeneration, 10 ha coppice restoration), through conifer harvesting followed by grazing using a herd of 60 longhorn cattle.
- Built heritage: enhanced visitor management for Castle Neroche, and investment in long-term repairs to the Wellington Monument.
- Cultural heritage: parish-based projects to research, record and celebrate local history, archaeology and landscape heritage.
- Access: 40 kms of trails offering long distance off-road access for walkers and horse riders, all ability trails and links into nearby towns and villages.
- Creative interpretation: use of the visual arts, music and storytelling to bring alive the landscape and its features.
- Public participation: volunteering opportunities and programmes of events.
- Forest School: expanding the Blackdown Hills Forest School to provide outdoor learning opportunities to all local schools.
- Training for employment: An NVQ-based apprenticeship scheme.
- Advice for land managers: guidance in landscape heritage management based on networking for the sharing of skills and equipment.
- Project management steered by an active Partnership Board and Local Stakeholder Group.

- achievements**
- 75 hectares of conifers cleared to create new open spaces for grazing and broadleaf regeneration, following an agreed Forest Design Plan.
 - Recruitment of project staff, including an Access & Interpretation Officer, Forest Works Supervisor and Community History Officer.
 - Recruitment of three local young people as an Apprentices Team.
 - Recruitment of a Schools Coordinator to develop Forest School provision.
 - A pilot project to test the use of hand-held digital devices for mobile interpretation.
 - Survey results showing the area is of national importance for ancient veteran trees.

background

The Blackdown Hills AONB comprises 360 sq km of unspoilt countryside punctuated by small villages, hamlets and isolated farmsteads. Straddling two counties it includes 40 parishes, four local authority districts and supports a population of 13,500. There are many micro businesses in the area providing all types of goods and services and the IT revolution has led to a growth in home working. Recent years have seen a resurgence of locally distinctive products predominately within the food and drink sector and the arts. The AONB team has a strong community ethos and manages a partnership to promote environmental, social and economic initiatives.

Since 2003 the Forestry Commission has worked with the AONB Partnership and other statutory, private sector and local interests to build a shared vision for the area. This was used to gain funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund's Landscape Partnership Scheme for a three-year programme of project activities. The Forestry Commission regards this as a first step in a long-term commitment to conservation and recreation in the area, and the Scheme includes provision for developing a successor initiative beyond 2010.

quotes

"The initiatives which form the Neroche scheme, ranging from land management to the arts, from public access to heritage interpretation, will undoubtedly provide examples of best practice for other projects elsewhere in the Blackdown Hills." Steve Marston, Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership manager.

partners	Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership	funding	Total	£2.9 million
	Devon County Council		Heritage Lottery Fund	£2m
	Mid Devon District Council		Partner cash and in-kind	
	Natural England		support	£900,000
	Somerset Wildlife Trust			
	Somerset Art Week Ltd			
	Somerset County Council			
	South Somerset District Council			
	Taunton Deane Borough Council			
	The National Trust			

- lessons learnt**
- The establishment of a Local Stakeholders Group has proved a highly successful way of engaging the community and enabling meaningful dialogue and exchange.
 - Landscape-scale habitat restoration can be pursued holistically and relatively rapidly in the large area of public forest.