

Countryside Matters



National Nature Reserve edition



PEBBLEBED HEATHS
CONSERVATION TRUST

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FOREWORD



There is little doubt that the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths are as precious to wildlife and visitors as they have been to generations of my family who, as stewards of this wonderful part of Devon, are responsible for handing the land over in a better condition for future generations.

The Heaths have always held a special place in our hearts and minds.

Until the late 1800s the Commoners were tenant farmers on the Estate who exercised their rights to graze animals and collect wood, heather and gorse. As the demands for recreation and space for exercise increased, and the use for agriculture declined, my great grandfather, the 21st Baron Clinton, signed a deed in 1930 to bring the whole area under the 1925 Law of Property Act, giving the public rights of “Air and Exercise.”

My family and I are delighted that this special landscape, the ‘spine’ of the East Devon Estate, has been recognised as a National Nature Reserve. This declaration reflects the hard work of so many people across the Estate and the wider community and I thank them all for their huge contribution and passion.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'C. Clinton', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Lord Clinton

‘CROWN JEWELS’ CAN HELP NATURE THRIVE ACROSS THE COUNTRY – A VIEW FROM NATURAL ENGLAND

By Tony Juniper CBE, Chair of Natural England

National Nature Reserves (NNRs) – like the one I’m proud to help launch at East Devon Pebblebed Heaths – are often regarded as the UK’s “crown jewels of Nature conservation”. Representing our most important places for habitat, species and geology, they now number 223 in England.

But this description, although it captures something of the value and beauty of these incredible places, doesn’t quite convey the life they contain within them or their potential to help Nature spread beyond their boundaries.

They can span vast areas like England’s largest NNR – the Wash at 8,800 hectares - which is home to 400,000 birds in winter and 10% of our saltmarsh habitat. Or they can be relatively small but still of exceptional importance, such as the 0.3 hectare Horn Park Quarry in Dorset which opens the door to our Jurassic past through its world-famous exposed fossil beds.

NNRs were first set up by law in 1949 to protect our finest Nature sites and enable them to be used as “outdoor laboratories” for research. Most are also great places for people to experience the joys of the natural world.

Today, as we understand the extent to which our Nature has become depleted and the climate emergency facing us, NNRs are playing a new role: they are at the heart of helping us to set about restoring Nature and to bring green space and wildlife to everyone, including those living in towns and cities.

Core to this is a partnership approach which encourages landowners, local authorities and conservation groups to come together to restore and enhance Nature at a landscape scale so that it becomes more connected, allowing species to thrive beyond existing Nature sites. This will increase our resilience to climate change and provide improved Nature-based solutions that give us clean air, soil and water while offering more leisure opportunities for people to enjoy.

The NNRs most recently declared – culminating in East Devon Pebblebed Heaths – really embody that approach. South London Downs, for example, boasts flower-rich chalk downland, dense woodland and rare species within easy reach of 385,000 people. Launched in 2019 it brings together two landowners to allow conservation work to take place across borders so wildlife can flourish.

This was taken a stage further last year with the UK’s first “super NNR” at Purbeck Heaths in Dorset. Involving seven partners it combined three existing NNRs with new land, creating a single nature reserve which is restoring natural functions across the landscape. Wildlife will be able to move more freely, benefiting the sand lizard, Dartford warbler and the silver studded blue butterfly, not to mention the 2.5 million people who visit Purbeck annually.

Pebblebed Heaths is a truly exceptional addition to this new breed of NNRs. Possessing the largest block of lowland heath in Devon, it deserves recognition not only for its international Nature conservation value but also for the commitment of Clinton Devon Estates and its partners the Devon Wildlife Trust and RSPB to managing this wonderful place.

Clinton Devon demonstrates how a private estate can contribute to Nature recovery and provide services for wildlife and the public, in addition to support for local businesses, through forestry, agriculture and recreation. Its own charitable body, the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust (PHCT), has shown exemplary conservation management and the Estate’s ‘Space for Nature’ prospectus sets out a clear ambition to improve its wildlife habitat. The creation of new intertidal land in the lower Ottery valley and support for the River Otter beaver reintroduction show what can be achieved when estates and landowners pick up the baton of Nature recovery.



Picture by Eleanor Church

“NNRS ARE PLAYING A NEW ROLE: THEY ARE AT THE HEART OF HELPING US TO SET ABOUT RESTORING NATURE AND TO BRING GREEN SPACE AND WILDLIFE TO EVERYONE, INCLUDING THOSE LIVING IN TOWNS AND CITIES.”

With over 400,000 visits a year, guided walks, active volunteer groups and a Friends of the Commons Group, the Pebblebed Heaths NNR is truly a place where people can connect with Nature.

These inspiring places all have a vital role to play in delivering a key element of the government's 25 Year Environment Plan – the Nature Recovery Network (NRN). Natural England is leading the NRN Delivery Partnership of government, businesses, local authorities, land managers, and conservationists, that seeks to create the NRN across the length and breadth of England.

Protected landscapes such as NNRs, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (including East Devon AONB) account for over 25% of the country and can make a huge contribution to the NRN. Not only do they have the sheer size needed to make significant progress, they also have the vital local links to turn vision into reality.

I am very proud that Natural England is part of the NNR partnership of owners and managers of NNRs, which include National Parks, Forestry England, Local Planning Authorities, environmental NGOs and private land managers and estates. With the collaboration witnessed in the newest NNRs – not least here in East Devon – I am very confident that we will see even more such places coming forward, providing the backbone of a flourishing Nature Recovery Network.

If you're interested in becoming an NRN Delivery Partner please contact:

NDPNaturerecovery@naturalengland.org.uk .
See **GOV.UK** for further information.

WEALTH OF EXPERIENCE TO GUIDE NEW NNR

A new board, under the chairmanship of Chris Woodruff, the manager of the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership, has been established to guide and advise the operational management partners – the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust, Devon Wildlife Trust and the RSPB – in the management of the new NNR.



CHRIS WOODRUFF,
East Devon AONB
Partnership

A former RAF engineer turned countryside manager, Chris has worked for nearly 30 years in countryside management roles in Berkshire, Surrey, Merseyside, Lancashire and Devon, where he moved to in 2002 with his wife and two young children to take on the role as Manager for East Devon AONB.

Much of the work of the AONB Partnership revolves around working with others so as Chair for the Pebblebed Heaths NNR Board Chris is looking forward to playing his part, alongside his fellow board members, in guiding and advising the operational management partners in the successful management of the site



CHARLOTTE RUSSELL,
Historic England

Charlotte is an archaeologist at Historic England where her role is centred around protecting heritage at risk and working with partners to encourage positive management of nationally important historic places and sites so that they are conserved for the future. She is pleased to support the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths NNR Advisory Board by providing advice on the management of the historic environment. The nature reserve is located within an important historic landscape which is home to a number of nationally important archaeological remains, including a significant relict prehistoric landscape with early settlement and funerary features.



CHARLOTTE WALLIKER,
EDPH Conservation Trust

The daughter of a Royal Marine, Charlotte was born in East Devon and the Heaths feature in her earliest recollections. She served in the Royal Navy before working in the food industry and as a management consultant. She has a BSc in Environmental Science and an MBA. She joined the Board of Trustees of the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust in 2019. Charlotte represents the Conservation Trust on the NNR board, is an EDPHCT conservation volunteer and a Friend of the Commons. She is committed to helping the new National Nature Reserve thrive for the future.



COLONEL SIMON CHAPMAN
Royal Marines

Royal Marines have trained on parts of East Devon's Pebblebed Heaths since World War 2. The Commando Training Centre Royal Marines (CTCRM) still uses the heaths extensively for initial and specialist training today and, as such, Service representation on the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths NNR Advisory Board offers another unique perspective for the land's conservation, use and evolution, including for military activity.

Colonel Simon Chapman, the current Commandant at CTCRM, first stepped onto the heaths in 1990 and has since served twice at the Centre. In the intervening period, he has deployed across the globe, most recently to Afghanistan and the Middle East.



CLARE JAMES,
Clinton Devon Estates

Clare is a Chartered Surveyor and part of the Property and Land team at Clinton Devon Estates. On the Advisory Board she represents the interests of the Estate's owners. She has worked with the Conservation Team on the Estate to update the public access under the CROW Act 2000, and support them with licencing the many activities that are carried out on the heaths. She says the heaths are a wonderful mix of all that our countryside has to offer; a space for nature, a place to exercise to find peace and a place to learn about our history and sense of place.



DAGMAR JUNGHANNS,
Natural England

Dagmar is a Senior Advisor for National Nature Reserves (NNRs) covering the South West, and leads on NNR declarations in this area. She has been working with Clinton Devon Estates, Devon Wildlife Trust and the RSPB to create this new NNR; a fitting accolade for the work they each do to manage this fantastic area. Her role with the Board is to help them get the NNR off to a flying start as one of the top nature reserves in England, developing a shared vision for the whole site that will make it even better for wildlife and people.



PETER BURGESS,
Devon Wildlife Trust

Peter has spent more than 26 years living, working, learning, and exploring in Devon. He finds the habitats and species supported in the county infinitely inspiring and says there are few counties which support such diversity, in both land and sea. Peter says a jewel in the crown are our lowland heaths such as the East Devon Pebblebeds – some of the most rare and threatened habitats in Europe.

He is experienced in developing and delivering conservation and land management projects in the South West and played a key role in one of the earliest landscape-scale projects – the Greater Horseshoe Bat Project in 1999.



NEIL HARRIS,
East Devon District Council

As the Habitat Regulations Delivery Manager for East Devon, Exeter and Teignbridge Councils, Neil and his team work hard to deliver effective, specialised and lasting projects to protect the internationally important East Devon Pebblebed Heaths, Exe Estuary and Dawlish Warren.

Neil's career in conservation began in 2005 as a volunteer with the Scottish Wildlife Trust. He later went on to become Countryside Ranger for Teignbridge District Council, managing 40 hectares of SSSI lowland heath.

Neil says he is honoured to have a place on the NNR advisory board and to work alongside such qualified and experienced members.



CLLR GEOFF JUNG,
East Devon District Council

As District Councillor for the East Devon District Council and Parish Councillor for Woodbury for some years, Geoff's experience has enabled him to be involved in many biodiversity projects. His local knowledge and understanding of the environmental issues in this area will allow him to facilitate communication to local people, councils and management teams for the Pebblebed Heaths.

Geoff believes we all appreciate the importance of the biodiversity of the Pebblebed Heaths and must continue to acknowledge the juxtaposition of public access for health, well-being and education, whilst protecting fauna and flora, addressing the effects of global warming, and working towards a carbon neutral 2040.



SARAH SLADE,
Devon Countryside
Access Forum

Sarah is a Chartered Surveyor and the Chair of the Devon Countryside Access Forum. Her professional roles have included South West Regional Surveyor and National Access Adviser at the CLA, and she remains a member of Defra's Rights of Way Advisory Group. She farms organic dairy shorthorn cattle and has an interest in minority breeds and their role in conservation, having previously been Breed Secretary for the Longhorn Cattle Society. Sarah grew up close to the Pebblebed Heaths and has fond memories of walks and rides across 'Woodbury Common'.

She is delighted to be able to contribute towards this next stage in the heaths' restoration and enjoyment.



SIMON STENNETT,
RSPB

In the early days of Simon's career, he worked on the Dorset Heaths, the Norfolk Broads and in the Yorkshire Coalfields, before moving to Devon to take on a role leading the RSPB's reserves operation in SW England 16 years ago. In 2018 he became the West Country Area Manager, leading the RSPB's work in Somerset, Devon & Cornwall.

He says he has been lucky enough to deliver some very exciting and cutting-edge projects including the development of major new visitor operations, large-scale creation and restoration of nature rich habitats, the development of strategic partnerships and the acquisition and set-up of new nature reserves.

A RARE AND RICH LANDSCAPE FORMED OVER MILLIONS OF YEARS

By Sam Scriven
Jurassic Coast Trust



Artist's impression of the environment of the Pebblebed Heaths during the Triassic period by Neil Rogers.

The sights, sounds and smells of the wonderful Pebblebed Heaths are inherited from a long-vanished past. Just like we cannot deny the legacy of our forebears, the heaths cannot escape the sandy seabed, mountain chain, river and desert that led to their creation.

Imagine Brittany, roughly 450 million years ago, and this entire region underwater. Trilobites crawl across the sandy sea bed whilst brachiopods filter food from the gentle currents. Time passes, until around 350 million years ago when sand layers are transformed as the sea bed is squeezed, thrust and buckled into mountains. The sand is crushed so hard by these forces that the edges of individual sand grains melt into each other, solidifying to form a hard rock called quartzite. And there the mountains sit, exposed, vulnerable...rain falls, wind blows, quartzite cracks.

245 million years ago, still in Brittany, and a desert to the north gapes wide, inviting the flow of flash floods out from the mountains and into the plains. Thundering down from the peaks come torrents of water carrying rocks and boulders that are smashed and worn into pebbles. Rivers carve their way through sand dunes to dissipate and leave their cargo strewn across the desert floor. Piles of quartzite pebbles accumulate, stacked up in loose layers. Eventually the rivers slow, then cease. What was a dynamic, elemental place of creation becomes dry and desolate, where dust is lifted from between the toes of river-born stones and carried off by arid winds.

These are some of East Devon's earliest days, when it resembled the surface of Mars more than the green and pleasant land we know now. It isn't long before water returns, bringing sand and life once more to the dunes. The story of environmental change continues, but we must jump ahead. From 100 million years ago our region experiences several phases of upheaval. Not the kind that wrenches rock and tears continents, but something more gentle. The geology here is lifted above sea level and begins to erode away. What was once buried is exposed again.

Two million years ago – we're getting close now – and ice ages begin to come and go, intermittently freezing the ground and causing sea levels to rise and fall. The landscape we know begins to emerge, a coastline starts to slice through the countryside. Ancient pebbles fall from russet cliffs and weather out of frost-shattered soil. Twenty thousand years ago the last ice age ends. The modern coastline takes shape and behind it an acid-landscape hosts a forest of oak and hazel. Then humans arrived, and at the edges of their stone tools the trees fall and the heath is born.

The pebble deposits near Budleigh Salterton and Exmouth are 450 million years in the making, and as the foundation for the landscape they dominate its character, from the shape of the hills and valleys, to the flow of water and the nature of local soils. But without the intervention of our ancestors, forest would still dominate this place. Geology and people are mother and father of the Pebblebed Heaths, and that is as true today as it ever was.

We protect the pebbles themselves where we find them at the coast, wielding legislation and designations like 'Site of Special Scientific Interest', and 'World Heritage Site'. Inland we protect what the pebbles provide, a rare and rich landscape filled with precious wildlife and a unique natural beauty. From Budleigh Buns to 'the little savannah', the intimate connection between geology, landscape and people is rarely more alive than it is on the Pebblebed Heaths.





A sketch by Jane Read of how life at Woodbury Castle may have been for its inhabitants

HOW OUR ANCESTORS LEFT THEIR MARK ON THE LANDSCAPE

We know that, geologically, the story of the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths begins 240 million years ago.

The human history of the heaths is much shorter, of course, but there is evidence of occupation going back many thousands of years. Flints uncovered on Woodbury Common are believed to be from the Mesolithic era (middle Stone Age) and are perhaps more than 5,000 years old.

People from other nearby settlements also visited the heaths, using them as a source of pebbles for use in pottery, and for building memorials. Pebbles from the heaths have been found at Neolithic (late Stone Age) sites at High Peak at Otterton, and Hembury near Honiton.

The heathland emerged as trees were felled and was managed by the first farmers of the Neolithic onwards.

Substantial evidence of human settlement on the Pebblebeds can be seen by anyone driving along the

B3180 as it crosses the heaths at Woodbury Castle. This Iron Age hillfort dates back at least 2,500 years, although excavations show even earlier structures which could have been built in the late Bronze Age (which in Britain ended in around 750 BCE), perhaps some 250 years before the main hillfort. Also during the Bronze Age, the open heathland ridges were often a focus for burial mound (barrow) construction, and two well-preserved barrows can be found near Woodbury Castle.

Woodbury Castle shows how important the heaths were to early Britons. Its builders chose its location well: it sits at the highest point of the landscape.

As commons linked to neighbouring villages, the heaths were grazed by cattle and sheep which kept down scrub, and swaling was used to create good grazing.

The heaths' largely peaceful existence was shattered in 1549 when they were the scene of the Battle of Woodbury Common during the Prayer Book Rebellion.

Troops loyal to King Edward VI were on their way to relieve a siege of Exeter when they were attacked in a dawn raid by rebels who objected to the monarch's religious reforms.

There were heavy losses on both sides, and hundreds of rebels were captured by the Earl of Bedford's soldiers.

They were among the 900 men massacred the next day at Clyst Heath just outside Exeter.

Records indicate that regular military training took place on the heaths from the late 18th century.

But the landscape, and its status as common land for local villagers, changed very little over the years until the early 20th century. In 1930, Lord Clinton dedicated the commons for public access under the newly introduced Law of Property Act 1925. This legislation enabled the public to use the heaths for 'air and exercise' – a right which is today covered by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

World War Two brought considerable change to the commons, and in 1941 the army built Dalditch Camp which at its peak housed around 8,000 troops.

Other infrastructure included a fake airstrip designed to draw enemy bombers away from Exeter airport which was then an RAF station.

The camp soon became a major training centre for the new Royal Marine Commandos. In the build-up to the D-Day Normandy landings, Hawkerland Common was used as a storage area for the United States Navy, linked to the supply depot based off Topsham Road in Exeter which was the largest in southern England.

After the war, the land returned to Clinton Devon Estates, and much of the equipment was taken to Exton to what was by then called the Infantry Training Centre Royal Marines Lympstone. The camp, which covered around 140 hectares, was demolished by 1954.

Little remains of the wartime camp, although one or two brick structures can still be found, including a decontamination chamber, and a firing range wall.

The camp also left its mark on the ecology of the heaths. Because it was built of non-local material, including lime, the surrounding vegetation includes species which are not usually found on lowland heaths.

If you come across an area which is unusually flat, you could be walking over what was once a dummy airfield, a barracks or parade ground – or even the camp cinema!

The heaths are still used by the Royal Marines, and in 2015 the Gibraltar Stone Memorial was unveiled on Woodbury Common to honour all Royal Marines who had trained on the site since the Second World War, and also to commemorate the corps' connection to Gibraltar.

But as peace returned to the heaths, so did the local people.

Today, it is estimated that the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths are visited 400,000 times a year, by dog walkers, cyclists, horse riders, school classes, university students, scientists and nature-lovers – and by those simply seeking some air and exercise, as promised almost 100 years ago.



Military training on the heaths in the Second World War.





Aaron Brooks;



Eleanor Storey

CAPTURING THE SPIRIT OF THE HEATHS

By Andy Thatcher



Sally Gibson



Diana Wackerbarth

Special places play a crucial role in many lives, and more so than usual over the past year. They help us let off steam, escape, be with one another, connect with our past, inspire and nurture us, and be where we go to work.

My family moved to Exeter in 2008 and Woodbury Common was our very first local walk, memorable from the get-go as the spot our three-year-old spotted an adder. As it happens, another large heathland area, the Ashdown Forest, is a special place from my childhood and somewhere my parents continue to visit, and so Woodbury Common has become an adoptive home of sorts; indeed, following a period of illness, it was to there I wanted to return first.

I'm interested in capturing the essence of what makes places special, that spirit of place, through my photography and I've been doing that intensively up at the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths since 2019. And though my camera might be more expensive than most, I'm just as interested in how people generally connect with places through taking photos - being able to take reasonable quality shots from a phone has given most of us a new and very easy way of capturing and sharing sights and moments that encapsulate what spirit of place is to us.

I'd been volunteering for the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust since late 2019 and, since early 2020, talking about

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some kind of community photography project with site manager Kim Strawbridge and education officer Kate Ponting. We thought a photography project would be a rich and accessible way to learn about the diverse ways people connect with the heaths, and so we came up with The Heath and Me. THAM wasn't a competition, and it was important to get across that we were looking for photos that communicated something well rather than simply being beautiful shots - though of course we got those anyway.



The Heath and Me was launched in July 2020. Each week, heath users were prompted through social media and on-site signage to think about different ways they might engage with the Pebblebed Heath. We also appeared on BBC Spotlight, in the Western Morning News, and talked to Radio Devon. We kept the project open for submissions until the end of September, asking people to either email in their photos or hashtag #theheathsandme on social media. Photos came in steadily and we were thrilled at such a diversity of entries until suddenly we were working with over 300 images.

I'd always intended to add my own creative response to a small selection of submissions. Originally, I'd thought to do this through photography, and we'd talked about having some sort of exhibition for the National Nature Reserve, rescheduled for May 2021. However, I'm also a film maker, and it seemed more fitting to create a series of short films of the shortlist - and as the launch is largely now to be virtual, this also makes THAM more accessible. Making films both kept the photos intact rather than overshadowing them with my fancy camera, and it also gave a chance for the entrants to expand on their images - what their relationship is with the Pebblebed Heath, the story behind the photo, and why the photo expresses spirit of place for them.

Asking people to bring and talk about personal photos is a well-established social science methodology, and what we learned has been fascinating. We drew up a

shortlist of 10 images which we felt had something interesting to say and between them covered a range of themes and moods. Each interviewee talked in impressive depth about their photo, as you can see in the films from February to April 2021. The sense of responsibility and care for the heaths shown by each interviewee turned out to be considerable, and in fact was one main reason for taking part in The Heath and Me. And, needless to say, for all those able to visit during the Covid-19 lockdowns, the place had played a vital role in getting through very tricky times.



What really impressed me was how differently people engaged with the Pebblebed Heath. For some participants, it's a social place to be with family, friends and to go to work, while for others it's a place of much-needed solitude. It can be a place experienced aesthetically, as a prompt for thought and reflection, and it can be experienced bodily through its smells and physical sensations.

Some participants have a long-standing relationship, sometimes going back generations, while those more recently arrived in the area have loved the sense of discovery of such a special place a short hop from their new home. And for everyone, the diversity of the Pebblebed Heath is something precious. With its endless range of views, terrains, tracks and the way the place changes throughout the day, through the year and with the weather, everyone agreed that every trip up is different.

Helping develop and execute this project has been hugely beneficial to me, too. I'm mainly drawn to the heaths as a photographer; looking at all the entries and getting to know the shortlisted entrants has helped me see this special place through very different eyes - an ex-Royal Marine, a horse-rider - and that's connected me in a deeper way with the people I bump into whenever I'm up there. It's also let me, too, give something back to a place that continues to give me so much.



Paul Swain

LANDSCAPE AND PEOPLE MAKE OUR JOBS SPECIAL

To say the work of the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths rangers is varied, would be something of an understatement. Working around the clock, they are ready to react and respond as and when they are needed, across the commons.

They are responsible for the day-to-day management of the site to make sure the rarest species thrive and that the greatest wildlife benefit is delivered, through ensuring a mosaic of habitats of different age structures.

Tasks include scrub control, controlled burning and habitat creation and management in winter, livestock management, control of invasive species and species monitoring in the summer. They also liaise closely with the emergency services and the Royal Marines, with keeping the heaths safe for the public to enjoy, a key priority.

Operational Manager Paul Swain has worked on the Estate for 23 years. He says: "The driving force behind what we do is we are protecting wildlife and rare habitats and balancing that with the people who use and visit the heaths.

"We are not what you would call rangers in the traditional sense of the word to be honest – we are very unique and it's really just Ed and myself working on our part of the site which covers over 800 hectares. One of the differences is in how we operate. We are constantly looking ahead and planning our next 12 months, two years, four years, and so on."

A critical part of their work is engaging with the public and it's that connection with the people who use the heaths, that Paul feels is so crucial.



Ed Lagdon

He says: "One of the most important things this site needs is communication and our engagement rates are phenomenal. We operate on a 24/7 call out, so there is always someone available if needed. We have a duty of care to our visitors which we take incredibly seriously. Giving advice and encouragement is so important.

"I feel in a lucky position to be able to do what I do. I love the fact that we are looking after an important historic landscape and I am proud to be a part of it."

Ranger Ed Lagdon studied Countryside Management at Aberystwyth University and has worked in heathland management since 2004. He's been a part of the Trust's team now for 12 years and specialises in wildlife surveys, including those of nightjars and Dartford warblers.

Ed says it's the variety of the work he does, that he loves the most. He says: "The landscape and the people who we work with are what makes it so special.

Although we have a job to do we are exceptionally lucky really. Different challenges will always occur and that's what makes it so interesting. It's very seasonal as well so you will never be bored. It's wonderful to do something that feels so worthwhile."

SPACE FOR NATURE



By Dr Sam Bridgewater
Head of Wildlife and Conservation, Clinton Devon Estates



Heath potter wasp – John Walters

“THE SITE REVEALED THE PRESENCE OF OVER 3,000 SPECIES, 375 OF WHICH HAVE CONSERVATION DESIGNATIONS AND ARE REGARDED AS RARE OR SPECIAL IN SOME WAY.”



Common brimstone butterfly – Charles J Sharp

Devon is arguably England's most wildlife-rich county. But even in Devon most species and habitats have to eke out a meagre existence from the last remaining natural space left for them to occupy. A fragment of ancient woodland here, sandwiched between urban developments; a marsh there, the last undrained remnant of a floodplain valley; a species rich meadow humming with insects isolated within the fabric of arable fields that surround it.

A patient and dedicated naturalist can eventually enjoy a sighting of Devon's rarest wildlife. But for the majority of us, such experiences are usually rare and frustratingly out of reach. This is one of the reasons that makes the Pebblebed Heaths National Nature Reserve so special: it is the largest remaining tract of lowland heathland in Devon and this nature-rich landscape is literally on the doorstep of over 140,000 people. Even for those who visit the heaths for reasons other than wildlife – and many do – the natural world and its splendid ecological webs surrounds them for the entirety of their visit. It might not necessarily always be noticed but wildlife here is in good working order nevertheless and there is something reassuring about that. It will be there when we need it.

What follows is a brief life story of a single species, one that has found space to live within the National Nature Reserve: the nationally scarce heath-potter wasp. This species is an artisan, a master potter, and its wares are fashioned from a mixture of water and clay industriously mined from the ground. Each pot is exquisite, a tiny Grecian amphora the size of your fingernail carefully fixed to a twig of heather. This thing of beauty belies a macabre function, for here is stored the paralysed caterpillars of a range of heathland moths, all preyed upon by the wasp and entombed alive for the benefit of its offspring. The larvae will need food when they hatch before becoming adult themselves to take flight over the heaths in search of a mate to continue the cycle. This is only one tale. There are thousands more equally striking and they happen day after day, season after season.

East Devon's Pebblebed Heaths are best-known as a regional stronghold for the Dartford warbler, the nightjar and the southern damselfly. It was in part to protect these three species that the site was awarded its raft of conservation designations decades ago. But the site's wildlife importance is far, far greater than these few creatures alone would suggest. In 2016 a biodiversity audit of the entire site revealed the presence of over 3,000 species, 375 of which have conservation designations and are regarded as rare or special in some way. Indeed, more than nine per cent of England's rarest and most threatened species can be located within the NNR. All this a stone's throw away from the conglomerations of Exmouth and Exeter. This is why the site warrants its declaration of National Nature Reserve. The Pebblebed Heaths not only provide space for nature, but also the possibility of connecting us to it, either through our own intent to deliberately seek it out, or more usually by stumbling across it.

These words were written towards the end of March on the first truly warm day of spring. Those visiting the heaths on this day would have been rewarded with fleeting glimpses of the brilliant yellow of the brimstone butterfly's erratic flight. Just as we are emerging out of a pandemic lockdown, so too the butterflies are

beginning to take to the wing. The brimstone is amongst the first to fly as winter recedes. In Devon, 75 species of butterfly have been recorded, or are reputed to have been recorded historically. Of these, 50 have been seen on the Pebblebed Heaths, although typically 26 are recorded annually. A similar richness has been recorded for the site for other groups: 605 species of plant; 148 species of bird; 27 species of dragonflies; 38 species of mammal; 10 species of reptiles and amphibians. The lists for moths, bees, wasps, beetles and flies are into the thousands, and grow annually as new records are made. What makes this biodiversity possible is the space for nature provided by the site's mosaic of habitats. These include the valley mires with their deep peat, home to the sundew and bog cotton; the wet heath whose presence is betrayed by the pink nodding bells of cross-leaved heath; the dry heaths of western gorse and bell heather that almost impossibly thrive on a soil only centimetres thick.

Woodbury Castle lies near the centre point of the heaths. Its original Iron Age inhabitants chose wisely, for the site has far-reaching views. On a fine day you can trace the Jurassic Coast to Portland in the east and across the Exe valley to Dartmoor's tors in the west. Likewise, the Pebblebed Heaths dominate the views across much of East Devon, its elevated ridgeline extensive and familiar to those who regularly travel the M5 past Exeter.

Nature needs space to thrive, just as society depends utterly on nature and its services. This newly declared National Nature Reserve provides such space at a landscape-scale for the benefit of wildlife and society alike. It has great value for the species it protects; but perhaps of equal significance is that its existence acts as a daily reminder to those who live in East Devon that our lives are richer when we allow nature more than the bare minimum area to exist. Nature will come back when given half the chance and this and all National Nature Reserves everywhere act to fan the flame of the idea that it is possible for society to make a green recovery.



A portrait of John Varley OBETD, a middle-aged man with grey hair, wearing a blue and white striped shirt under a brown tweed jacket. He is standing outdoors with trees in the background.

AN INSPIRING DECLARATION OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE

By John Varley OBETD

In 2000, newly appointed to the role of Estates Director at Clinton Devon Estates, I was intrigued by an empty desk in the corner of the office which, I was told, belonged to former Royal Marine Sergeant Major 'Bungy' Williams who "manages the commons and pops in on a Friday morning".

It didn't take long for me to recognise that the Pebblebed Heaths were something pretty special; 1,160 hectares of rare lowland heathland stretching between Exeter and the Jurassic Coast, one of the finest geological and ecological sites in Britain, and much loved by local people for its amenity value providing open space, tranquillity, and a connection with nature.

Over the previous decades, the Heaths were awarded a number of British and European designations including Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA), in addition to being a large part of the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) since 1963.

It was clear that Bungy Williams who was awarded an MBE for services to the environment in 2004 – and fellow Heaths Warden (now Operations Manager) Paul Swain were doing an excellent job when I joined Clinton Devon. However, we needed a robust, long-term plan to ensure a sustainable future for these seven connected heaths and one moor; both for the abundance of species they support and the hundreds of thousands of visitors who use the Heaths every year for walking, running, cycling and horse-riding. Reconciling the needs of wildlife with public recreation and access, and how to fund these activities for the long-term is an exciting challenge in terms of sustainable conservation management and one which I relished. My imagination was caught, and although appointed for my commercial background, I appreciated that I now had a new priority.

In 2004 we revoked the 1930 ground-breaking original deed made by Lord Clinton, which had brought the whole area under the 1925 Law of Property Act, giving the public rights of "Air and Exercise". The revocation allowed the land to come under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) 2000. This modern legislation provided clarity for those using and managing the land of everyone's rights and responsibilities.

By 2006, we established the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust to ensure transparency in the governance of the site. The Trust, as a charity, provided a strong focus ensuring the resilience of the heaths' ecosystems, the opportunity for wildlife to flourish and adapt in the face of climate change and to support recreation, health and learning for generations to come.

Since then, guided by our board of trustees, the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust, in partnership with Clinton Devon Estates, has made great progress in the sustainable conservation management of the Heaths, notably gaining planning consent from Natural England in 2012 to put up fencing to allow a safe grazing environment for visiting herds of Devon Reds and Dartmoor ponies. Under a Higher Level Stewardship Scheme, providing increased public funding for the site, animals are complementing machinery, more naturally managing scrub, bracken, gorse and heather to maintain the unique landscape in the same way commoners would have grazed their livestock in years gone by.

The added benefit of grazing, and hooves working the ground, is the creation of a mosaic of micro-habitats. My colleague Dr Sam Bridgewater, our Head of Wildlife and Conservation, and ecologist Lesley Kerry, have catalogued more than 3,000 different species of animals and plants living on the Heaths in an extensive report called; Space for Nature: A Wildlife Prospectus, published

in 2016. This opened our eyes to the habitats being supported by these important lowland heaths, and the abundance of species, significantly more than the four iconic ones we originally focused our attention on; the Dartford Warbler, the southern damselfly, the nightjar and the silver-studded blue butterfly.

Today, working with Dr Bridgewater in caring for the Heaths, and helping people understand more about their importance to people and nature, are Operations Manager Paul Swain and Ranger Ed Lagdon, Countryside Learning Officer Kate Ponting and Heaths Site Manager Kim Strawbridge.

The importance of the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths cannot be overstated; not only the value of what's contained within the 1,160 hectares, but, the vital link they provide in a network of joined spaces; wildlife corridors across and beyond the Estate, that are key to rebuilding England's natural infrastructure, as identified by Sir John Lawton's panel in their report "Making Space for Nature", published in 2010, which I had the privilege of being a part of.

Ten years later the Heaths have demonstrated, beyond doubt during the Covid-19 lockdown, their value to public health as local residents flocked there for daily recreation and exercise. Indeed, Dr Carolyn Petersen's report in partnership with the University of Exeter only two years earlier, calculated that the health and wellbeing value of fresh air and exercise on the Pebblebed Heaths amounted to £450,000 a year. That is probably a modest estimation in light of our new appreciation of the great outdoors.

It is fitting that the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths have now been declared a National Nature Reserve by Natural England; one of the oldest and most respected designations which is ideal for the future, as it inspires a huge sense of satisfaction and pride among local people that this is indeed a very special place.

"THE PEBBLEBED HEATHS ARE THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN OF EAST DEVON; 1,160 HECTARES OF RARE LOWLAND HEATHLAND STRETCHING BETWEEN EXETER AND THE JURASSIC COAST..."



THE SKILLED VOLUNTEERS

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Throughout the year more than 200 people give up their free time to volunteer on the heaths, in a collective effort to help maintain and manage this stunning landscape. Their contribution should not be underestimated.

As well as working with its own volunteers, the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust also works alongside other groups, including the Devon Wildlife Trust and the RSPB.

The Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) has supported long-term volunteering opportunities for many years, with these roles appealing to people who are looking to gain experience and learn new skills. In some cases, this has helped them gain employment in practical nature conservation roles with Natural England, the National Trust and the Forestry Commission.

Roger and Liz Hamling have been volunteering for DWT for 17 years and have been involved in numerous projects, including conservation work at the Bystock Pool's nature reserve, as well as supporting 'Heath Week' since the early days.

Roger explains: "We are enthusiasts for wildlife, which is why we get involved. We have been lucky enough to travel to different parts of the world, but we have come to realise that the diversity of wildlife that we have on our doorstep could challenge anywhere else!"

Last year, Roger and Liz were awarded the Devon Wildlife Trust Fellowship, which recognises all the work that they have carried out over the past 17 years. They are just as passionate though about educating the public and encouraging more people to volunteer.

Liz adds: "We want to make sure that people appreciate the countryside and understand how important it is. It is so key that we educate the public so that they know how to enjoy these spaces responsibly. At the end of the day, it's the future of these habitats and this landscape that is at stake."

Sarah volunteers for the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust and for the DWT and has been leading on the bat ecology work at Bystock and East Budleigh Common for over eight years.



Sarah



Richard Halstead



Roger and Liz Hamling



Olga Nannicini

She explains: “Back when I started, three species of bat had been identified at Bystock nature reserve, but now we have identified at least 13! When you consider there are only 16 different species in Devon, this is definitely something to be proud of.”

“I first got into volunteering through my love for wildlife photography. I wanted to know more about what I was looking at, how to look after it and how to share this with other people – I love to be able to spread the joy of nature with others.”

Sarah also helps to arrange bat walks across the Pebblebed Heaths during the summer months. She adds: “There’s nothing better than taking people out to monitor nocturnal wildlife. There have been numerous magical moments where we have spotted nightjars and glow worms out on the heaths - these are experiences you don’t forget.”

There are also structured volunteer placements available through the RSPB. Richard Halstead has been volunteering for RSPB Aylesbeare for 15 years, seeing it as an opportunity to give something back to the organisation.

Richard explains: “Each Wednesday I would work from 8:30am to 5pm, it feels like work and that you’re really making a difference. Volunteers are encouraged to learn new skills such as the use of the chainsaw and brush cutting tractor, as well as getting involved with survey work.”

Before the pandemic, Richard had planned to step back from volunteer duties and do some travelling. However, when circumstances changed, he was given the opportunity to take a lead on a project close to his doorstep.

He explains: “In co-operation with the Estate, we have been conducting surveys of the silver studded blue butterfly on Withycombe Raleigh Common, aiming to improve the habitat for the species. So, during the pandemic I was given the opportunity to take a lead and write a winter programme, to ensure that work could continue. Working on this project, I’ve been able to use all the skills I have absorbed over the years in a really positive way. I’ve been given the space to develop and the freedom to work.”

Following a call for volunteers in the local newspaper, which asked for help with the removal of Himalayan balsam, Olga Nannicini got in touch and started volunteering for the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust in July 2020.

Olga explains: “I was itching to get back outside volunteering, as other conservation work had battened down the hatches due to the pandemic. Conservation is incredibly important to me anyway and I’ve always felt it important to give nature a hand, but the fact that we were still able to do this safely and distanced during the pandemic, meant that it was almost like therapy – it was incredibly energising during these horrible times.”

“I urge anyone thinking about volunteering to simply give it a go – it’s great exercise, we’re a really friendly and inclusive crowd and I’ve had the pleasure of working in the most beautiful scenery I have ever come across. After my first session of balsam bashing - I knew I wanted to stick with this gang!”



Southern damselfly – Neil Bygrave



Nightjar – Chris Root.

“ONLY 16 PER CENT OF THE HABITATS PRESENT IN THE YEAR 1800 NOW SURVIVE, OFTEN IN SMALL ISOLATED PATCHES VULNERABLE TO OUR CHANGING CLIMATE.”



HOME TO ELUSIVE WILDLIFE



By Peter Burgess
Devon Wildlife Trust



Silver studded blue butterfly – Chris Root

Lowland heathlands are wildlife gems – these unique cultural habitats have evolved over millennia. However, since the agricultural and industrial revolutions they were regarded by society as wastelands of little value, places to be tamed, where economic opportunity lay in wait for the more industrious.

Many were ploughed and improved for farming, quarried, lost to monoculture forestry plantation, housing, industry and even refuse tips. Only 16 per cent of the habitats present in the year 1800 now survive, often in small isolated patches vulnerable to our changing climate.

But there are exceptions – the East Devon Pebblebeds have stood the test of time and now have been recognised as one of the very best in the country through the National Nature Reserve declaration.

I was first drawn to the Pebblebeds in search of some of our country's most elusive wildlife. Heathlands are home to such a diverse array of special species, but invertebrates must top the charts! The gurgling springs which feed ponds and pools year-round are home to our rarest dragonfly, the southern damselfly. But to see one you also get down and personal with our most abundant freshwater wildlife – whether they are amphibians or the host of other dragonflies which home-in on these hotspots.

A visit in warm spring sunshine will reveal other creatures which make our heathlands their home. Lowland heaths are especially important for UK reptiles and amphibians – adders and common lizard are frequent sights in the Pebblebeds – with grass snakes at home in the mires. Summer sun heralds silver studded blue butterflies and a host of other insects forming the foundation of crucial foodwebs, vital in sustaining many other animals.

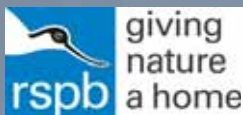
And wait a while till dusk and you'll be rewarded with the eery churring of nightjar, and watch your step for glowworms which nestle in the verges of paths. There's no better way of spending a summer's evening!

And now these heathlands have been recognised for their stunning array of wildlife but also the exceptional management that is provided by the East Devon Pebblebed Heath Conservation Trust, RSPB and Devon Wildlife Trust – with our nature reserves at Bystock Pools and Venn Ottery. This designation ensures these sites are recognised and protected on the national stage and will help attract new sources of funding.

We also hope the declaration will have a strong influence across the wider landscape – ensuring the varied surrounding land uses help support the future health of the NNR, and the heathlands extend their reach into restored wildflower meadows, wetlands and woodlands.

RESILIENT NNR REMAINS A HOTSPOT FOR WILDLIFE

By Fiona Daggett
RSPB Reserve Volunteer



It all began in the notoriously hot summer of 1976 with the arrival of a breeding pair of Montagu's harriers on Aylesbeare Common. The birds were closely watched over by the RSPB, which led to the charity taking a lease with Clinton Devon Estates to manage this most northerly piece of the Pebblebed Heaths, which we continue to do to this day.

At that time, there were birds which, sadly, you are now very unlikely to find today. Those Montagu's harriers were always going to be a rarity on the heaths, but other species that people might have once taken for granted have declined, like many across the UK. There were once curlews, turtle doves, grasshopper warblers, marsh tit, willow tit. There used to be 50 pairs of yellowhammer on Aylesbeare but these have declined in the last 15 years.

In the 1980s, a visitor might have seen three cuckoos at a time on Aylesbeare. Now there are perhaps three across the whole of the Pebblebed reserve. Cuckoos have suffered due to habitat change in both their summer and winter quarters and along their migration routes. Heathland has meadow and tree pipits, parent hosts to cuckoo eggs, but the pipits' own decline only adds to the cuckoo's burden.

When the RSPB took over Aylesbeare, Dartford warbler numbers in southern England were woeful after a slew of cold winters, particularly in the 1960s. However, good breeding habitat was still available and with a run of milder winters, they can recover. Despite taking a further hit after 2010's severe winter, across the Pebblebed Heaths, over 200 Dartford warbler territories were recorded in 2021.

The large expanse of the Pebblebed Heaths is so important as so much lowland heathland habitat has been lost in southern England, due to reclamation for farmland, afforestation, and urbanisation. Without the sensitive management of this site by the management partners it is unclear how the Dartford warbler could survive. Expanding the area of heathland further through recreation at former landfill sites and quarries, together with ensuring that the existing heathland is in the best possible condition to create good breeding habitat, adds to the value of the site.

Nightjars, our special heathland visitor during the summer months, today number 100 pairs over the entire Pebblebed reserve. In recent years, GPS tagging has shown UK birds overwinter south of the Central African Tropical Rainforest, apparently taking quite different routes each way. Birds on such long migrations as this rely on several key stopover points. So many species are to be made vulnerable by habitat destruction or the local effects of climate change, should the abundance of food at these sites not be available when they arrive. And then there are the added dangers of hunting along the migration route. It is clear how important our work is across the National Nature Reserve to provide them a place to breed.

*Montagu's harrier – RSPB*

With the land being open access, unlike many other nature reserves, there is an additional challenge on the Pebblebed Heaths to manage the site for people as well as nature conservation, with pressures from visitors on foot, horseback, or wheels and with or without dogs. Aylesbeare is fortunate that it doesn't get the same level of visitors as some of the other areas of the nature reserve, with fires being less frequent. An accidental fire on a large scale can, in a day, transform mature heathland habitat into one of an early age structure. Although it can recover it can take years, if not decades to do so. Aylesbeare, along with Hawkerland are cut off slightly from the rest of the Pebblebeds by a slip of fields. Ideally the National Nature Reserve wouldn't be fragmented in this way, but it's testament to the management partnership that the entire site remains a stronghold for nature.

There may be a general decline in bird numbers here, as everywhere, but the resilience of the Pebblebed Heaths means we are still a hotspot for wildlife. No corner of the reserve is neglected, ensuring that the inclinations of the heathland vegetation are by turns taken in hand or nurtured. The habitat is made dynamic, with not a little help from humans and grazing animals. Where we are seeing declines and losing species, it is clear they are adapting to so many outside factors, but we keep up our management as we always have. Giving up is a dirty word.

But what of the future? The distribution of lesser spotted woodpeckers has pushed northwards, without the abundance of deadwood afforded by Dutch elm disease in the 1970s. Will ash dieback herald a return? With climate change, who knows what unforgiving winters will give way to? The Dartford warbler may be one of the winners. We know more change will come. But we will remain a haven, a buffer; where birds and wildlife may find the protection and space to breed uninterrupted.

So, as you walk through the yellowed swathes of coconut-scented gorse in spring, if you spy a courting male Dartford warbler, think of the winter that's passed and let them get on with the important business of keeping on.

Yellowhammer – RSPB*Dartford Warbler – Nick de Cent*



OUR AMAZING OUTDOOR CLASSROOM

By Kate Ponting

Countryside Learning Officer, Clinton Devon Estates



Each year the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust works with more than 300 pupils from local primary schools and over 150 youngsters from uniformed youth groups such as Brownies, Cubs and Guides.

We also have strong relationships with secondary schools and colleges. A-level biology and environmental science students cover important study components and fieldwork on the heaths each summer and countryside management and arboriculture students from the local land-based college also gain valuable practical experience throughout the year.

Who wouldn't want a day out of school with the promise of a heathland safari? In 2019 we invested in a trailer to transport people at events and volunteers safely, but this acquisition has also been a godsend for educational visits and has changed the way we can work

with groups, whatever the weather. Up to 40 people can be transferred, albeit at a sedate speed, between different sites whilst enjoying amazing views. When stationary the trailer comes into its own as a portable classroom and on wet days means there is space to eat lunch and stay warm and dry!

With our youngest visitors we introduce a world of spiky plants and strange creatures, and always find time to run through the puddles! We reinforce Countryside Code messages and focus on experiences that are as hands-on and practical as possible; holding a 250-million-year-old pebble, netting a dragonfly larva or climbing into a tractor.

Older pupils become familiar with the ecology and needs of our rarer wildlife, and how to classify plants. They unpack a botanist's bag for clues before stepping

across a bog in search of a sundew. They also explore what conservation means, recognising that management might mean cutting down trees and is frequently necessary to provide optimum habitat for heathland species. They learn the three main tools conservation teams use to help heathland habitats; scrub clearance, conservation grazing and controlled burning. Our rangers brilliantly recreate a controlled burn as a role-play with no real fire but parts for everyone as the fire service, the rangers with beaters, the vegetation and even a naughty wildfire character.

With generous support from the Otter Valley Association many local schools are supported with transport costs enabling them to enjoy the free and worthwhile educational experiences. Many come back every year.

Scout and Guide groups have an advantage, as they can stay out later, meaning night walks are possible with the chance to see bats emerging or hear Nightjars churring. These groups also love to get involved and give something back with practical conservation tasks and litter picks.

Education is more than working with young people. Learning continues for life. Through the Friends of the Commons, we provide events and training opportunities to increase understanding and skills. We have developed volunteer networks to support archaeological and species monitoring and a practical conservation programme.

Clinton Devon Estates staff regularly deliver illustrated talks to local groups including Women's Institute, Rotarians, history and gardening clubs on a wide range of topics. However, 90 per cent of requests are for speakers who can cover topics with a wildlife or conservation focus and in most years we would expect to talk to well over 600 people, which certainly keeps the three members of the team who deliver talks rather busy! It is rewarding to deliver presentations to these groups and answer questions from interested audiences.

Covid had an impact in the number of visits but recent interest from both youth groups and schools suggests they are looking forward to getting youngsters away from screens to make nature connections and learn about this important local area. For future years there is still exciting scope for developing educational activities around specific topics or sites such as the Iron Age scheduled monument, Woodbury Castle, or to explore educational collaboration with the NNR partners. We will also be developing talks and presentations that reflect the heaths' new status too.

The lifelong learning opportunities are varied and offer many experiences unique to our site. It is our aspiration that local people of all ages gain an appreciation and personal connection with the pebblebeds and that this fosters a lifelong interest and a deeper understanding which we are only too happy to support.



POSITIVE ACTION FOR NATURE, HEALTH AND WELLBEING



By Kim Strawbridge
East Devon Pebblebed Heaths Site Manager



For those of us who have a connection to nature and the countryside, its power to provide real benefits to our wellbeing is part of what drives us to do what we do, sometimes without even realising it.

In the last decade, the links between access to nature and health and wellbeing have started to climb the agenda, and previously unlikely partnerships between health organisations and those that care for our special places have sprung up. This was no real surprise to those of us working in conservation. The secret is out!

There is a vast body of evidence that backs this up and 'green prescribing' looks to become more commonplace. While the Pebblebed Heaths are internationally important for the habitats and wildlife they support, they are also highly valued by local communities as a place for air and exercise. In days gone by 'the commons' were a lifeline, providing fibre, food and fuel for the commoners. These days the focus for public goods has moved towards recreation. Never has this been more vital than in the past year, as we have dealt with the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the days before #SocialDistancing and #WFH were trending on social media, it was calculated that the Pebblebed Heaths were associated with a health and wellbeing value of at least £0.4m annually. This related to physical activity linked to their recreational use and was based on data that estimated over 400,000 visits annually. At the time we knew that was a conservative figure, particularly as it focused on the physical health of only very regular visitors, with no way at that point to include mental health benefits.

Since the easing of the first lockdown in spring 2020, the heaths have attracted more visitors than any other time in living memory. One location saw an increase in footfall of over 65% immediately after easing, with popularity sustained at that level ever since. We knew how important the Heaths were to local communities, as pre Covid-19, 75% of visitors lived within 8km of the heaths. With the focus during much of the past year being on staying local, coupled with restrictions on usual pastimes, it is no surprise that people made the most of the heaths on their doorstep.

Of course, this additional attention posed a challenge for us and conservation colleagues up and down the country, as we looked to balance the needs of people and wildlife. The unprecedented visitor pressure has meant not only more people, visiting more regularly, but new people exploring the heaths, doing different things in different places. Many of these new visitors needed additional support to keep themselves, other visitors, and the heaths and its wildlife safe. Add to this picture the furlough of staff in our

wider partnership team, new Covid-secure working practices and curtailment of our usual engagement events and you would be quick to assume a tale of despair. Yes, there were times that were overwhelming but there has also been an overarching sense of pride, hope and opportunity for the future within the management team.

We would never have engaged with these new audiences on the heaths without the massive shift in behaviour driven by the pandemic. The fallout from the past year has perversely done more for getting people out in nature than a well-funded PR campaign.

Like many conservation organisations who manage sites with public access, we recognise that we need to put people at the heart of what we do. Making sure that our special places stay relevant to society and that they work harder than ever for people, wildlife and the wider environment. Our task now is to support those who wish to continue spending time on the heaths, exercising their right to enjoy the reserve, but empowering them with the understanding that their actions have a direct impact on its ability to thrive.

During 2020, the term 'green recovery' was widely adopted. This referred to environmental, regulatory and economic reforms to recover after the pandemic. The UK government proposed a green and resilient recovery, to 'build back better and build back greener'. There is no reason why the same thinking cannot be applied to health. Now is the time to grasp the opportunity of a green recovery not only for our physical health, but arguably more crucially our mental health.

Following a year that will be remembered for its tragedy, by continuing the mantra of respect, protect and enjoy when visiting special places like the Pebblebed Heaths, we can celebrate this triumph of the commons. Enabling people to strengthen their health and wellbeing by visiting the Pebblebed Heaths, alongside encouraging positive action for nature by building connections to the natural world around them, will be a fundamental part of what this fantastic NNR is all about.

SINCE THE EASING OF THE FIRST LOCKDOWN, THE HEATHS HAVE ATTRACTED MORE VISITORS THAN ANY OTHER TIME IN LIVING MEMORY. ONE LOCATION SAW OVER 65% INCREASED FOOTFALL IMMEDIATELY AFTER EASING



SITES VITAL FOR HUMANS AS WELL AS WILDLIFE

The Exe Estuary, Dawlish Warren and the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths are all internationally important conservation areas which are likely to experience increasing numbers of visitors as our local population grows.

Studies have shown that leisure use of the three sites is already having a significant effect on wildlife.

The South East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership was set up by Exeter City, Teignbridge and East Devon District Councils, with a remit to ensure that the impact of this population growth is countered by a series of measures, funded by housebuilders and other developers.

These measures are designed to contribute towards the protection of the sites for wildlife, flora, fauna, residents and visitors alike to preserve important habitats, to care for the species they support and to provide safe areas for all users to enjoy.



Enjoying the heaths responsibly with Devon Loves Dogs

The work of this partnership, also known as South East Devon Wildlife, is driven by the South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy which identifies 60 different measures which will take place over a period of 80 years. The Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Management Plan identifies a further 20 initiatives, focused on the Heaths.

The two main approaches are classed as 'on site' and 'off-site'.

On-site measures focus on what can be done on the protected sites themselves. Some of these, such as the Delivery Manager, the Habitat Mitigation Officers or HMOs, and Devon Loves Dogs -

www.devonlovesdogs.co.uk - work across all our sites.

Others, such as the Pebblebed Heaths visitor access improvements, Exe patrol boat, path works, codes of conduct, interpretation and signage, are site specific.

Off-site measures are all about providing large, attractive and convenient semi-natural areas which can act as an alternative to the nature reserves to relieve visitor impacts on the protected sites.

From day one, back in 2016 when work began in earnest, there has been close partnership working with Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust, Devon Wildlife Trust and RSPB on site. This has helped to establish day-to-day public engagement by the Habitat Mitigation Officers and Devon Loves Dogs, as well as other initiatives such as codes of conduct, a programme of guided 'waggy walks', dog bins, path repair works and recently, the visitor access improvement report and public consultation.

Striving to protect the most sensitive areas of the heaths for the future and at the same time improving visitor experiences, phase one of improvement works on the Heaths is now in development.

Amelia Davies, Habitat Mitigation Officer for South East Devon Wildlife said: "We are very excited to be working in partnership and would like to congratulate everyone on being rightly recognised as one of the most important areas for species and habitats in the UK.

"Our work as mitigation officers is to engage and educate the public visiting the nature reserves. We split our time between the Pebblebed Heaths, Exe Estuary and Dawlish Warren. In the winter we spend more time on the estuary talking to visitors about the overwintering birds - we get in excess of 20,000!

"During the summer our focus shifts to the heaths and the ground-nesting birds which choose to breed there. We patrol the whole of the heaths making people aware of the importance and sensitivity of the habitat.

"Some more sensitive species such as nightjars breed just metres from the path, so we pass this knowledge on to visitors to help them understand the importance of sticking to paths and not disturbing these protected species or damaging their nests and chicks.

"The bird-breeding season is a busy time for us and we feel really privileged to have the opportunity to inspire others to love nature as much as we do. Understanding the importance of these sites and how they are vital for humans as well as wildlife will help keep them special for generations to come."

For more on the work of the partnership, please see **www.southeastdevonwildlife.org.uk**



OUR 'NATURAL HEALTH SERVICE' IS CRITICAL TO OUR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING



By Chris Woodruff, East Devon AONB
Chair, NNR Advisory Board

The East Devon AONB team was established in 2002 – morphed from an existing East Devon Heritage Coast/Countryside service. I travelled down from the Forest of Bowland AONB where I was assistant AONB Manager, to join Pete Youngman to establish the new team and Partnership and put in place the first statutory management plan for the AONB in 2004; its first plan since designation back in 1963.

One of the early tasks in setting up the AONB Partnership was to agree and meet with those partners who wished to help shape and guide the direction of this new partnership. Clinton Devon Estates was a founding member and between 2011-15, chaired the AONB Partnership through John Wilding MBE. The Partnership has grown and evolved in membership over the years and in 2014 we welcomed Devon Wildlife Trust on board.

Situated on rising ground to the eastern flank of the East Devon AONB, the Pebblebed Heaths is the single largest block of lowland heath west of the New Forest and a hugely significant area within the AONB. The heaths exist largely on account of the nature of their underlying geology - the Bunter Pebblebeds, which spread across this part of the area and give rise to one of the richest and most important wildlife and cultural habitats in the AONB. A plethora of designations span the site, Special Conservation Area (habitat), Special Protection Area (birds), Site of Special Scientific Interest, Scheduled Ancient Monument and now of course, National Nature Reserve, so is not surprisingly a key area for our engagement.

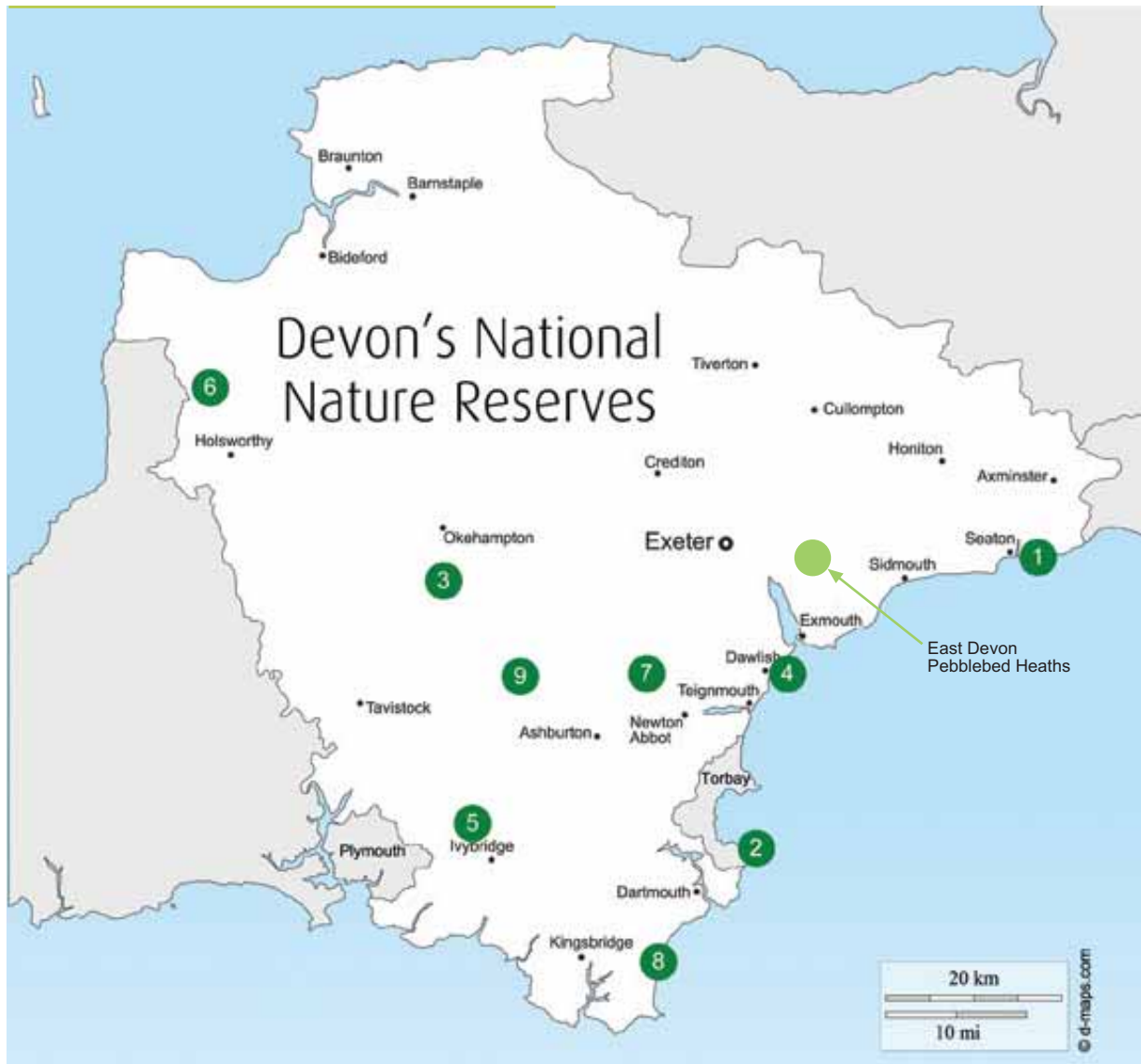
Over the last 18 years the AONB Partnership has worked closely with many of the key partners responsible for managing the Pebblebed Heaths in their efforts to conserve and enhance this special and outstanding environment. We have funded access and habitat enhancements at Devon Wildlife Trust's Bystock Pools and through a regional programme with Western Power Distribution, undergrounded around 1 km of powerlines on the RSPB Aylesbeare site.

We have supported and enjoyed our part in the annual Heath Week events for many years and worked with historic environment teams exploring the past through archaeological investigation work on Mutters Moor. We have supported projects with local communities that enjoy the heathlands and their wildlife and engaged in much of the consultation around the site and its future management, including the community liaison group for Blackhill Quarry and its associated sites. The East Devon Way long-distance footpath passes through the heart of the heaths in its 40-mile routing from Exmouth to Lyme and being able to adjust, improve and interpret the route to overcome access challenges has been significantly eased through our close working relationship with the partners involved, in particular Clinton Devon Estates.

Securing National Nature Reserve (NNR) status for the Pebblebeds is a major accolade for all partners involved with the site and offers huge opportunities for the future management of the area at a time of great change. It recognises the national importance of the site but more importantly, the considerable strides made in its management by all partners over the last 20 years. A NNR Masterplan for the Pebblebeds will help to build on the successful management of the whole site to date and frame the future working arrangements to meet the challenges and opportunities ahead.

It is an exciting time for this most recent of NNRs and a true honour for me to be elected Chair of the new Advisory Board for the NNR. We have a great team on the new Board that brings with it a wealth of experience and knowledge from a variety of backgrounds. I hope I can play my part with them in furthering the aims of the Pebblebed Heaths NNR in support of its wildlife and local communities. Right now, more than ever, our environment is critical to our physical and mental health and well-being; it's our natural health service, but it needs our care in return.

DEVON IS HOME TO ENGLAND'S OLDEST AND NEWEST NNRS



Devon is a large county, but even so, the range of its National Nature Reserves is remarkable.

From a coastal landslip system to a rare example of high-altitude oak woodland a quarter of a mile above sea level, the county is home to some of the nation's finest sites.

- 1 At the heart of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site, **Axmouth to Lyme Regis Undercliffs** is among the largest coastal landslip systems in western Europe. Famous around the world for its fossils, it features rocks from the Triassic, Cretaceous and Jurassic eras, with some up to 210 million years old.

Stretching for seven miles, it is also part of the Sidmouth to West Bay Special Area of Conservation. The micro-climate created by the cliffs provides a welcome environment for reptiles and amphibians including the grass snake, common lizard and great-crested newt.

- 2 **Berry Head NNR** is made up of the Berry Head promontory and Sharkham Point which sit on either side of St Mary's Bay on the south side of Torbay.

The main habitat is of coastal, lowland grassland where more than 200 species of bird have been recorded. During the breeding season, a peak of 1,400 guillemots can be found.

Quarry caves are home to one of the country's most endangered species, the greater horseshoe bat. Twenty-eight species of butterflies including the rare small blue have also been recorded.

- 3 Black-a-Tor Copse** sits 380 metres above sea level and is one of the nation's best examples of high-altitude oak woodland, remarkable for the variety of lichens and mosses which make the trees and surrounding rocks their home.

Among the more common species found there, such as beard lichen, are rarer examples including *Bryoria smithii*, which is classed as critically endangered and, according to Natural Devon, is probably extinct everywhere else in the UK.

Ring ouzel and redstart are among 20 species of birds known to breed in and around the copse.

- 4 Dawlish Warren** is divided into two areas, the Inner Warren, cared for by the Devon Wildlife Trust, and the Outer Warren, looked after by Teignbridge District Council.

Together they form an internationally important wildlife reserve, with a wide variety of coastal habitat including mobile and fixed dunes, grassland, scrub, ponds, reed bed, saltmarsh and mudflats.

Around 180 different species of birds have been recorded here – and it is thought around 2,000 species of invertebrate make their homes in the warren including the Jersey tiger-moth, sand wasps and dragonflies. The wide range of habitats has attracted almost 600 different types of flowering plant, including the tiny petalwort, one of Britain's rarest species.

The Inner Warren forms part of a massive sand spit which reaches out across the mouth of the River Exe and is a magnet for birdwatchers.

- 5 Dendles Wood** near Ivybridge is an area of upland oak and beech woodland in a narrow gorge of the River Yealm.

The beech trees are believed to pre-date a large-scale planting of such trees in Devon in the 16th century and are assumed to be native, at the edge of their natural range in England. The oak creates damp conditions which support a wide range of lichens and mosses. Rare examples include *Graphina ruiziana* and *Cetrelia cetrarioides*.

Redstart, woodwarblers and pied flycatchers are among the birds recorded here, alongside seven species of bat including the rare barbastelle which breeds at the site. Also found here is the blue ground beetle which was once thought to be extinct in the UK until it was rediscovered in 1985.

- 6 Dunsdon Farm** is 63 hectares of mainly lowland Culm grassland managed by the Devon Wildlife Trust. Named Devon's Coronation Meadow in 2012 in recognition of its special value, the purple moor-grass and rush pasture is rich in wildflower, insect and bird life.

Species found here include the early purple orchid, the grey heron and the privet hawk-moth. The early purple orchid is, as its name suggests, one of the country's earliest flowering orchids and appears from April to June. It grows up to 40cm in height, with the flowers arranged in a dense cluster on the spike. Once the flowers have been fertilised it gives off a strong and unpleasant smell!

There is also a large population of the rare marsh fritillary butterfly.

- 7 East Dartmoor Woods and Heaths NNR** is made up of three linked areas: Yarner Wood, Trendlebere Down and the Bovey Valley Woodlands. The varied habitat here comprises woodland, open heathland, bogs, former meadows and streams.

Species found here include the great-spotted woodpecker as well as the rare blue ground beetle and barbastelle bat, grayling butterflies, tree pipits, Dartford warblers, and bog-loving plants such as bog asphodel and the carnivorous round-leaved sundew. Yarner Wood has the distinction of being England's first NNR after it was bought by Nature Conservancy in 1952.

- 8 Slapton Ley NNR** includes the largest natural freshwater lake in south-west England. A narrow shingle bar separates the lake from the sea, and the lake is surrounded by reedbeds, marshes and woodland habitats.

Species to look out for here include Cetti's warbler, which first arrived in the UK in the 1960s. Because of the relatively mild climate of South Devon, the reserve supports around 40 breeding pairs. Cirl buntings and great crested grebes can also be found here.

Fourteen of the UK's 18 known species of bats have been recorded at Slapton Ley, including *soprano pipistrelles*, and it has the second largest maternity roost of lesser horseshoe bats in Devon.

This NNR is also the last known home to the strapwort plant in the UK. Since 1962 it has been found at a decreasing number of sites, but a programme of re-introduction is helping to halt the decline.

- 9 Wistman's Wood**, a high-altitude woodland copse on Dartmoor is surrounded by granite tors and moorland, and the site of one of the largest Bronze Age settlements on the moor.

Some of the trees are around 400 years old, and the woodland area has doubled in the last century. The reserve is important for its mosses and lichens found on its trees and boulders, and many woodland birds can be found here. They include redstart, spotted flycatcher, wheatear, stonechat and whinchat.



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Countryside Matters is produced by KOR Communications