

## Using the Exmoor Society Archives to promote Exmoor's special qualities

Unspoilt moorland; dramatic coastline; Exmoor ponies; romantic Lorna Doone association; ancient woodland and archaeological treasures: Exmoor offers such a variety of scenery, attractions and experiences to meet most people's interests. It's not surprising that within the Exmoor Society's archive is found a wealth of material: letters; slides; pamphlets; correspondence, all show why Exmoor is so special and altogether they contain valuable evidence of the ongoing changes in Exmoor's landscape. The archive demonstrates the complex interrelationship between people and the environment within this long-established, traditional rural community.

Dr Helen Blackman, a professional outreach archivist was employed by the Society to undertake a project "Unlocking Exmoor's Heritage" from 2014-16. Since then she has catalogued and conserved key documents and papers relating to people such as Victor Bonham-Carter and Malcolm MacEwen who influenced the National Park movement from the 1950s through to the 1980s. She has put on notable events such as the Exmoor Language Garden as well as giving many talks to local groups and writing pamphlets and education guides for teachers and students of different ages. Extensive use has been made of volunteers to undertake much of the cataloguing and so engage many people with different skills and experiences. Further information on the project and the archive can be found on the Society's website.

Chairman Rachel Thomas said that as a result of all this activity the Society is thrilled to announce that it has started a new 2-year venture, delving further into the archive, by employing Dr Blackman to lead several new projects. These will include acting as a hub for local history and archive groups; launching Exmoor Studies, a series of shorter books inspired by the *Exmoor Review* the annual journal of the Society first published in 1959; a conference on Exmoor as an English outback and a book-length history of the National Park. Finally a new project just launched called Then & Now has attracted much interest.

Dr Blackman said "Of all the things I've done since becoming the Exmoor Society's archivist, wading in the River Barle to try to find out exactly where a photograph had been taken some 40 years ago was probably one of the oddest. Archive training does not usually involve risk assessment in water – in fact archives and water do not mix well. But there I was, slipping around in a pair of borrowed wellies, peering intently at a bridge parapet to try to work out if I'd got the angle right (I hadn't)."

"The principle is simple", Dr Blackman explained – "go to the same spot an old photo was taken and retake it. In practice, it can be quite tricky. The photographs are usually labelled, but sometimes for example the label just says "A boggy place on Dry Hill" and this isn't terribly easy to locate especially since the scene may have changed substantially over the decades. Thus you find something you think is the same spot but it looks different, and you can't tell whether that difference is because you're in fact standing somewhere else, or in the same place that has changed. The past, as they say, is another country."

The Society has found that attempting to rediscover the same place hones your observation skills and enables a deeper understanding of landscape quality. There are over 1500 slides depicting locations across the moor so the task is enormous and the Society is seeking people to help retake them. The Then & Now photographs will enable the Exmoor Society to influence future landscape change by providing evidence of how the moor has evolved.

The Society's Resource Centre is open to the public 10-4 Monday to Friday. To use the archives please make an appointment. And if you fancy doing some detective work and seeing how Exmoor has changed,

please contact the archivist on [exmoorsocietyarchivist@gmail.com](mailto:exmoorsocietyarchivist@gmail.com) or 01398 323335 for details of the project.

Photos:

Image 1: This well-known Exmoor building, shown here in 1985, is still a restaurant, but where is it?

Image 2: The Longstone, 1972, an important archaeological feature

Image 3: A linhay at Huish Barton, 1977

Image 4: coastal path near Countisbury, 1980