

PRESS RELEASE:

Heading: The Exmoor Society Resource Centre Open To All

Dramatic coastline; unspoilt heather and grass moorland; Exmoor ponies and red deer; Romantic poets; ancient woodland; Tarr Steps and archaeological treasures: Exmoor offers such a variety of scenery, attractions and experiences to meet most people's interests. It is not surprising, then, that within The Exmoor Society's Resource Centre in Dulverton is found a wealth of material – letters; slides; pamphlets; correspondence; books, maps and reports all showing why Exmoor is so special. Altogether, these provide valuable evidence of the complex relationship between this remote rural landscape and its people.

The Centre is the only one dedicated solely to Exmoor as a National Park. Members of the public are welcome to use its facilities for free, including a substantial library of Exmoor-related books and reports; an archive containing original historical material and a workroom for the public with free Wi-Fi. There is a meeting room upstairs available for hire during the working week and a shop selling a small selection of new and second-hand books; cards, notelets and prints. The shop also offers a display area for local artists and craftspeople to show their work. The Resource Centre complements the Society's campaign work to protect Exmoor and its annual programme of walks, talks and events and provides space to browse, study and discover more about this special place.

Since its founding in 1958, The Exmoor Society has been collecting archive material. This has never been fully catalogued and had become a jumble of mismatched items. Lost treasures were at risk of never being rediscovered, important slide collections were tucked away at the back of shelves, unpublished manuscripts lurked in forgotten boxes and a hugely important map showing changes in Exmoor's moorland lay unforgotten against a wall with no-one recognising its significance. Consequently, the Exmoor Society employed an archivist in 2014 to catalogue and conserve all the material.

During the 1960s, rural surveyor Geoffrey Sinclair had carried out substantial work for The Exmoor Society, mapping out land use and changes in the moorland. His 1965 Land Use Map of Exmoor was expected to be in the archive but no-one knew quite where, or exactly what it looked like. Eventually, over a year after moving into new premises, the lost map was rediscovered hiding in plain sight in a hallway, mounted on plywood and measuring some 3ft by 7ft. The Society is now seeking funding to have it digitised and fully restored and put on show in the Resource Centre.

The Exmoor Society's work, amongst other things, is in protecting, monitoring and conserving the iconic heather and grass moorland. It has recently commissioned a report by Rural Focus Ltd that highlights the continuing loss of moorland. The reasons are mainly through the growth of scrub, but also through grazing, disagreements on management, overall stocking rates and winter grazing, and the contentious issue of swaling (burning heather). The Sinclair map, at a scale of 1:2500, is particularly relevant today because it provides baseline evidence of the state

of the moorland vegetation in the 1960s – heather; wet sphagnum; gorse; deer sedge, bracken, bilberry, cotton grass and Molinia, to name a few. This can be compared with moorland vegetation as it stands in 2017. The Society's photographic Then and Now project provides corroborative evidence of changes in the moorland cover. Post-Brexit, as new agri-environmental schemes are drawn up, this combined evidence can be used in helping inform decisions about the restoration of moorland habitats, species and landscapes. It could help hill farmers to survive and thrive by being paid to provide a range of goods and services.

The library offers one of the best collections of books about Exmoor contained in one place. There are books chartering the development of the national park concept such as Malcolm MacEwen's National Parks: Conservation or Cosmetics and the recently published The Fight for Beauty by Fiona Reynolds. For those interested in historic events there is information on the Lynmouth flood; the second World War as it affected Exmoor; smugglers and even a book on Somerset privvies. There are texts on archaeology by Grinsell, Eardley-Wilmot and Wilson-North. For wildlife enthusiasts there is information on red deer; Exmoor ponies; birds and butterflies. The fiction section includes over 20 different editions of Blackmore's classic Lorna Doone as well as some of his lesser-known works. There is a collection of Henry Williamson novels and Whyte-Melville's swashbuckling Katerfelto.

The annual Exmoor Review is digitised from 1959 to the present and contains a plethora of articles on many aspects of Exmoor – its wildlife, landscape and history, as well as people's memories and associations with the place, often retained over many decades from visits as children and continued thereafter. Micro-studies were published during the 1970s and 80s by Exmoor Society former chairman Victor Bonham-Carter's Exmoor Press (now Halsgrove Publishing). There are 29 titles covering every imaginable subject relevant to Exmoor.

Since moving to its current premises in 2014, The Exmoor Society has welcomed a variety of people, from those who live on the moor, to visitors from overseas. As one researcher commented in the Visitors' Book: "a wonderfully productive day spent at what is a necessary resource for Exmoor [...] I look forward to returning". The prominent position on the High Street, Dulverton is now attracting more people and new members and is open 10-4 Monday to Friday. Further details can be found on the website: www.exmoorsociety.com

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