

PRESS RELEASE:

Heading: Re-riding the postal old routes

As part of their new archive project, staff and volunteers at the Exmoor Society are investigating the old postal routes across Exmoor. Never the easiest place to navigate, up until 1970 post was routinely delivered on foot, by motorbike and from horseback, with walking routes of 15 miles and more. The posties were Exmoor's main method of communication in more ways than one – as well as the post, they took with them village news, and (unofficial) deliveries of newspapers, bread, tobacco, even medicines. For farms with no road access, the postie was sometimes the only visitor in days.

Trustees of the Society are particularly interested in the old postal routes and ways of delivering mail between around 1930 and 1970. Using maps and significant material from the Society's Dulverton Resource Centre, the Society is piecing together the history of the postal service on Exmoor. This was a time of great change, as the telephone superseded the need to communicate by mail or telegram. No longer was the post the main method of communication as roads improved and the motor car became more common. As less post was delivered and it became quicker to get from farm to farm by car or van, walking rounds were limited to towns, and ponies and motor bikes were no longer needed.

So what was it like to walk or ride one of these routes? It's easy enough to sit at a desk and plot them out on a map, but that doesn't give a sense of the experience of the posties, tramping across Exmoor in all weathers, over what could be steep and difficult terrain. The Society was fortunate to be able to employ an intern during the summer, who walked some of the old routes and got an idea of how tough some of them could be. Now, the Society's archivist Dr Helen Blackman would like to go one further and see what the ridden routes were like.

To help with this, Helen has been in touch with the Exmoor Pony Centre near Dulverton and with the aid of a volunteer and two ridden ponies from the Centre, she will be retracing the steps (and hoofprints) of one of the last ridden rounds on Exmoor. The round started in Withypool and went out to many of the local farms, including Lanacre, Blackland and Hillway. It was ridden by local man John Blackmore, for as Exmoor writer Hope Bourne recounted in the late 1960s "Horsemen's country this has always been, and still is" and horses were "the simplest way of getting round the parish, from farm to farm, before the days of tarmac".

Dr Blackman said “investigating the old postal routes has been more than an academic exercise, it is very much a social history. We cannot really understand the difficulties of communication on Exmoor, which persist to this day, without experiencing them. And as a horse rider I’m fascinated by the role horses and ponies have played in bringing news and information across the moor. This is also a wonderful opportunity to work with the Exmoor Pony Centre and highlight how hardy and useful the Exmoor ponies are”.

Helen and the Pony Centre volunteer are planning to undertake the ride on Monday 6 November, leaving Withypool village at 10am. Following the old postal route it will be around 12 miles.

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Images: William Blackmore, mounted Postman (image by kind permission of Barbara Adams)



Withypool Bridge 1958 by Roger Miles



Press Contact:

Exmoor Society Offices – 01398 323335

Note to Editors:

The Exmoor Society exists to promote and organise action for the conservation and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage of Exmoor national park. It was established in 1958 and successfully fought proposals to afforest The Chains, the central moorland area of Exmoor. It has continued to campaign against adverse changes and encourage people's understanding of the park's special qualities. It acts as an independent watchdog and champion for Exmoor's status as a national park.

[Please note, date and time may be subject to change, depending on circumstances]

The Exmoor Pony Centre, owned by the Moorland Mousie Trust, was opened to the public in the year 2006. Located in the heart of the Exmoor National Park it is the hub of all activities with the Exmoor Ponies and provides a permanent and specialised base for the foals when they arrive straight off the moor. It is home to some 20 of our permanent residents, including a ridden team. At the Centre, visitors to Exmoor who might otherwise not be lucky enough to see an Exmoor pony, have the opportunity to come into close contact with them. The Centre is run by a small team of dedicated staff and volunteers. Funding for the development of the Centre was provided by DEFRA's Rural Enterprise Scheme and the Exmoor National Park Authority Sustainable Development Fund.