

BLACKDOWN HILLS RURAL PARTNERSHIP

ANNUAL REVIEW 2001 / 2002



For more information about the projects or general enquiries relating to the work of the Partnership please contact the Project Team at Halifax House, Hemyock, Cullompton, Devon EX15 3QW – Telephone / Fax 01823 680681 Or visit our website www.blackdown-hills.net



About the Blackdown Hills Rural Partnership



The Blackdown Hills were designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1991 in recognition of the special qualities of its natural and built environment. An AONB is a nationally recognised designation, managed locally.

The Blackdown Hills Rural Partnership (BHRP) brings together at a local level the different parts of the public sector, with representatives of community and voluntary groups as well as local businesses.

The BHRP has five key aims, as agreed by The Management Strategy 1997-2002 and re-affirmed in the Business Plan of 2001-2006

The Partnership approach helps sustainable growth because :-

- ◆ Local people can influence decision making.
- ◆ Different initiatives and services can be co-ordinated to support each other.
- ◆ Public services are delivered more effectively.
- ◆ Business, community and voluntary sectors can play a full and equal part.



AIMS

- ◆ To promote and protect the environmental and cultural heritage of the Blackdown Hills
- ◆ To support community activities and initiatives in the Blackdown Hills
- ◆ To communicate the special qualities of the Blackdown Hills
- ◆ To foster sustainable economic development and encourage local enterprise in the Blackdown Hills
- ◆ To ensure the continued development of the Blackdown Hills Rural Partnership

Achievements for 2001/02 – Highlights

Staffing and Financial Arrangements

From September 2001 the three part-time staff became three full-time core staff, equipped to deal with the enhanced responsibilities of AONBs resulting from the Countryside and Rights of Way (CroW) Act 2000. The core staff comprise a full-time AONB Manager, Projects Co-ordinator and Administration and Information Officer. The seven core funding partners have given a commitment to a Memorandum of Agreement, which secures funding for the next six years (2002-2008)

Working in Partnership

MEETINGS

Two Community Conferences were held during the period of this review. The Community Conference usually takes place in March, but the Foot & Mouth Disease (FMD) crisis of spring 2001, meant it was postponed to July. Both conferences were very well attended by Parish Council representatives and community groups. The earlier conference was used as a vehicle for community input to the Leader+ bid and the later one was especially buoyant, as having heard the success of Leader+. Input was sought for the Action Plan.

Two meetings of the Partnership Forum were held, where representatives from a wide range of Partner Organisations had the opportunity to meet and discuss pertinent issues.

The Management Group, who closely oversees the work of the Partnership, met six times during the year.

BLACKDOWN HILLS HEDGE ASSOCIATION

BHRP continues to enjoy close links with the Hedge Association. Support is given for the annual Hedge Event and publicity is provided for their activities. The Hedge Association inputs into the work of the Partnership in a variety of ways and undertook coppicing as a pilot project of the Woodlands Assessment. BHRP worked with the Hedge Association for the creation and installation of the Roe Deer sculpture on the A303 and laying of a laurel hedge in Otterhead Estate.



Local Products Strategy - Leader+ Funding

Robin McDowell (external consultant) together with the Blackdown Hills Rural Partnership staff submitted a bid in September 2001 for LEADER + programme funding towards a Local Products Strategy for the Blackdown Hills. In January 2002 DEFRA announced that the bid had been successful and a detailed Action Plan was then prepared. The Local Products Strategy aims to improve the long-term integrated sustainability of the area in economic, social and environmental terms. It also strives to stimulate new economic activity and product sector growth.

The four key business sectors that have been identified for support are

- Food and Drink
- Woodland and Forestry
- Arts and Craft
- Tourism and Recreation

Plans are in place to recruit the LPS Co-ordinator and Administrator together with three part-time sector co-ordinators.

Working in Partnership

BLACKDOWN HILLS BUSINESS ASSOCIATION

The Business Association was a major player in the formulation of the Leader+ bid and will continue to be actively involved with the implementation of the Local Products Strategy (LPS). The Association is co-ordinating a Blackdown Hills dedicated marquee for the 2002 Honiton Show, where the LPS strategy will be launched as well as an updated edition of the Blackdown Hills Business Directory.

BUSINESS PLAN

The Partnership Business Plan for 2001-2006 was reviewed and up-dated in January 2002.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN

As a result of the CRoW Act, the Countryside Agency has secured extra funding to ensure 'first class' governance and management of AONBs. A Development Plan was prepared to identify how the Partnership intends to deliver an expanded and improved service over the next 6 years.

COMMUNITY PLAN

Negotiations took place with the six Local Strategic Partnerships, paving the way for the review of the Blackdown Hills Management Strategy 1997- 2002 in association with the preparation of a Community plan for the 40 parishes that make up the Blackdown Hills AONB. A new post of Community Planning Officer will be created in 2002 to develop the plans. The plan process will take 18 months to 2 years to complete and it is envisaged a new AONB Management/ Community plan will be completed by spring 2004.



Working in Partnership

CREATING A CENTRE FOR THE BLACKDOWN HILLS

During the year Land Use Consultants working with the Partnership undertook a feasibility study into a Blackdown Hills Centre. The work has included defining what a Centre would contribute to the AONB, what experiences can be learnt from other AONBs and National Park Centres as well as drawing up criteria to assist with the selection of viable locations. A Centre Prospectus was produced in February 2002 setting out the Partnership's aspirations and selection criteria. Ten submissions were received and appraised. Two locations which offer us possibilities for joint ventures will be investigated further.



Information

NEWSLETTER

We continue to produce a newsletter three times per year of which approximately 4,000 copies are circulated. The newsletters are generally themed, recent editions have focussed on conservation of heathlands and hedgerows.

WEBSITE

The website is now regularly up-dated and carries a range of information about the work of the Partnership.

VILLAGE INFORMATION AGENCIES

Nine village stores located throughout the Blackdown Hills operate as Village Information Agencies carrying a selection of community and tourist information. The A frame boards are being replaced by a new style information board (partly funded by the Somerset RDA) and the folder of information is currently being up-dated.

Information

PHOTOGRAPHIC RESIDENCY

The BHRP has a photographer in residence for 12 months funded by the Countryside Agency. Pauline Rook has been given the brief of capturing the *spirit and essence* of the Blackdown Hills throughout the year. Her images will be used in a variety of our publications and the website. An exhibition of her work is planned for the end of the contract.

FIRST STOP FOR INFORMATION AND ADVICE

Numerous general enquiries relating to the work and activities of the Partnership are received by telephone, letter and email and dealt with promptly.

PUBLICITY, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

Regular press releases are issued relating to the work of the Partnership and specific events. We also use the extensive network of Parish Magazines to keep parishioners informed about our activities. During the year we received much press coverage about our successful Leader + bid, were profiled in a local newspaper, gave an interview for Radio Devon and our Vice-Chairman appeared on Local TV where he gave an overview of the work of the Partnership.

Project Staff and members of the Management Group have given presentations to local groups and parish councils.

Elected Members of East Devon District Council were given a presentation of the work of the Partnership together with a tour where they were able to see project work in action.

BLACKDOWN HILLS FOOD DIRECTORY

The directory of local food producers, shops, pubs and accommodation providers who source local produce, was created in partnership with West Country Food Links and launched last June at Hemyock Saturday Market to critical acclaim. Future updates to the directory will be funded within the Local Products Strategy Food & Drink Sector.

Projects

CREATIVE INTERPRETATION

The aim of the Creative Interpretation Strategy is to communicate the special qualities of the Blackdown Hills using a wide range of creative methods.

- **Blackdown Tales**

Owing to FMD last years programme of guided walks was delayed until the late summer / early autumn. Six walks / activities were arranged, unfortunately one was cancelled due to on-going FMD concerns but the others led by historians, ecologists and archaeologists were well supported and covered a variety of themes including built heritage, heathlands and woodlands.

- **Roe Deer Sculpture**

A leaping Roe Deer and kid was commissioned through the Blackdown Hills Hedge Association. The sculpture represents an important and distinctive species of Blackdowns wildlife and signifies the gateway to the Blackdown Hills AONB along the A303 from the East. The deer was sculpted from locally sourced willow. Other traditional skills were used in the laying of the hedges along the road, use of hurdles to stabilise the bank, and turfing to reduce erosion.

Support was also given with a

- A puppet workshop for young people in Dunkswell
- The Membury Community Christmas drama production
- Village productions of the Christmas Carol by the Common Players
- The beginning of a photographic library of people, landscapes and events of the Blackdown Hills



Projects

HEATHLANDS

In partnership with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the BHRP has completed the 2nd year of the Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage Programme. This 6 year programme is supported by Heritage Lottery Funding, Parish Councils, Environment Agency, and BHRP .

Management has been carried out by local farmers, contractors, organised volunteer groups and local residents on a variety of dry heaths and springline mires.

The Partnership is undertaking monitoring and results indicate that the biodiversity of the managed heathlands is increasing and species have been recorded after an absence of many years.

OTTERHEAD

A feasibility study of the Otterhead Estate was undertaken by Land Use Consultants. It concluded that although the site is not of national importance primarily due to the loss of the house, it is of county-wide and sub regional importance due to its historical archaeology, biodiversity and recreational value. DEFRA have shown interest in funding a Historic Restoration Plan. A programme of work days for the public has commenced, led by members of the Steering Group to include: coppice training, path clearance and conservation, surveying the house site and propagation of historic rhododendron species.

FARMSTEAD SURVEY

BHRP in association with Devon County Council has commissioned a survey of the Blackdowns historic farmsteads to record Blackdowns farming history at the turn of the Millennium. Twenty farms were surveyed as a pilot project in summer 2000, another 180 farms will now be surveyed to complete the study.

FMD affected the original planned timetable for the survey, which should have been completed in summer 2001, but work is now underway again and an autumn 2002 completion is anticipated.

RIDGEROUTE

Val Holmes, a local ecological consultant, has

undertaken a feasibility study for a new off-road recreational route along the Ridge of the Blackdown Hills. The study has been carried out in response to the need for a safe route for walkers, cyclists and riders. The proposed route links Castle Neroche to Culmstock Beacon via Wellington Monument. The project is supported by local landowners, businesses, Local Authorities and interest groups.

A Business Plan will be prepared to identify potential funding and provide an action plan for implementation.

YOUTH

Somerset Rural Youth Project carried out some excellent work with young people of the Blackdown Hills which was curtailed by the outbreak of FMD. In September, Devon Youth Association (DYA) undertook to continue the project and have worked with youth clubs and other service providers to enable greater access to youth provision.

A Review of the Youth Business and Delivery Plan 1998 was held in February. It was agreed that the Partnership should commission a dedicated community development worker to continue and expand the youth programme, support existing youth workers, carry out research, develop pilot projects, encourage good practice and identify methods to fill gaps in existing provision.

WOODLANDS

Somerset Farming and Wildlife Advisory Service (FWAG) have undertaken an assessment of the small woodlands of the Blackdown Hills. The objective for the assessment was to explore the existing and potential outlets for produce from small woodlands and to stimulate management of woodlands to benefit the rural economy and woodland biodiversity.

FWAG are drafting the final report, the recommendations of which will be taken forward by the Woodlands and Forestry sector of the Local Products Strategy.

