FILEX 6 outlines the history of Exmoor and gives examples of the archaeological and other evidence available. Selected sites and places to visit are included with grid references or telephone contact numbers. An * indicates a site some way from the main road. There is an important note about visiting sites and access on the back page. For historical background to tourism see Filex 12.

EXMOOR TIMELINE

MESOLITHIC 10,000-4000BC

Following the last Ice Age, when sea levels were lower and Britian was still connected to Europe, the landscape was mainly wooded. People gradually moved northwards across Europe and spread into southern Britain. These people were ‘hunter-gatherers’, which means they moved nomadically across large territories, hunting wild animals, catching fish, and gathering shellfish and nuts, berries, roots and other food. On Exmoor the earliest remains date from the late Mesolithic (8000-4000 BC), and comprise small flint implements called microliths. These tools were used in hunting and the butchering of animals.

Evidence: Flint microliths

Places to visit: Hawkcombe Head Mesolithic hunting camp (SS 845 457); Taunton Museum (flints)

Exmoor is not a wilderness: it has been shaped by human activity over the last 8000 years. Farms, settlements and fields all bear witness to this history, but so do the moors and woods – all have been shaped by people, as they have strived to live on Exmoor and to exploit its natural resources.
NEOLITHIC 4000-2000BC
The first settled communities began to emerge – but on Exmoor little is known about them. People began to build a range of stone monuments and Exmoor is especially rich in these.
Evidence: stone rows; standing stones; stone settings; flint arrowheads and other flint tools
Places to visit: Almsworthy Common stone setting (SS 8430 4171); Long Stone (SS 705 431)

BRONZE AGE 2000-700BC
By the Bronze Age people were living in settled communities and were clearing large areas of woodland, in order to farm the land. Settlements of two or three round houses, sometimes within a small compound or enclosure were surrounded by both arable fields and managed grassland. The dead were generally cremated and their remains placed within large circular burial mounds called ‘barrows’ or ‘cairns’, and there are around 400 of these on Exmoor.
Evidence: Stone circles; hut circles and field systems; barrows and cairns; flint arrowheads and other flint tools; pottery.
Places to visit: Withypool stone circle (SS 838 343); Chetsford Water Bronze Age settlement and fields (SS 8513 4247); Chapman Barrows (SS 695 435); Wamboroughs (SS 876 343); Wood Barrow (SS 717 425); Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon (displays, prehistoric pottery and flints); Taunton Museum (displays, prehistoric pottery and flints).

IRON AGE 700BC-43AD
At the end of the Bronze Age the climate became colder and wetter. People began to live in more heavily protected settlements called ‘hillside enclosures’. It is believed that there was a great reliance on livestock, especially cattle at this time. Whilst people continued to farm the land and keep animals, they also started to smelt iron.
Evidence: hillside enclosures; hillforts
Places to visit: Timberscombe hillside enclosure (SS 9572 4139); Bat’s Castle (SS 9881 4213); Cow Castle (SS 7945 3735)

ROMAN 43-410AD
The Roman invasion probably had little direct impact on people living around Exmoor. Two small fortlets were built on the coast at Old Burrow and Martinhoe, whilst Exmoor is ringed by Roman forts on its southern side. However, recent work is showing that the Romans exploited Exmoor’s iron deposits on a large scale.
Evidence: Roman fortlets; Roman forts; iron smelting sites
Places to visit: Old Burrow Roman fortlet (SS 7880 4934); Martinhoe Roman fortlet (SS 6630 4933)

EARLY MEDIEVAL 410-1066AD
After the Romans left Britain, there was probably little disruption to life on Exmoor. We know very little about how and where people lived and the Anglo-Saxon invasions had a limited impact on the south-west of England, although several places on Exmoor have Anglo-Saxon names. The Vikings made several raids on the Exmoor coast – at Porlock and Watchet. The Royal Forest probably came into being at this time.
Evidence: inscribed stones; church dedications; place-names (such as ‘ton’, ‘cot’, ‘ham’ and ‘worthy’).
Places to visit: Culbone inscribed stone (SS 8320 4735); Caractacus inscribed stone (SS 8898 3355); Porlock church
MEDIEVAL 1066-1600AD

After the Norman Conquest of 1066 three castles were built on Exmoor. They were made of earth and timber, but one of them, Dunster, was rebuilt in stone. The Domesday Book of 1086 recorded 55 manors on Exmoor. Two priories were founded at Dunster and Barlynch. The settlement pattern of farms, hamlets and small villages was largely established by the end of the 13th century and closely resembles that of today. Dunster became a borough town and the layout of the settlement reflects its burgage plots of long, narrow properties.

A few settlements were abandoned in the medieval period and these form a valuable insight into life on Exmoor in medieval times - the best preserved is at Badgworthy, where the remains of old fields, terraces for arable farming and the traces of buildings survive.

The Royal Forest (which probably came into being much earlier) was of major importance in the economy and life of Exmoor. It belonged to the Crown and provided a food source for the Crown, but more importantly ensured a source of income for the king, because farmers paid to graze their animals on the Forest. Forest Law was administered by a special parliament and there were inspections of the forest boundaries (known as 'perambulations'); these date from the 1300's and continue today as a local recreational tradition.

During the medieval period parts of Exmoor were mined for iron and to a lesser extent, copper. At Combe Martin, silver/lead mines were highly productive, and were initially controlled by the crown.

Places to visit: Dunster; Badgworthy deserted medieval settlement (SS 7935 4445); Ley Hill deserted medieval settlement (SS 891 450); Culbone Church (SS 842 483)

POST MEDIEVAL 1600-1900AD

More recently Exmoor has been the home to a number of major estates and 'improving' families, who sought to better Exmoor’s agriculture and infrastructure. Their influence is a constant presence in the modern landscape, in the architecture, roads, field patterns and settlements. Nowhere has their impact been felt more than on the former Royal Forest which was enclosed in 1820 by John Knight and his son Frederic, who created around 16 farms and who improved hundreds of hectares of moorland. In 1897 the estate passed to the Fortescue family of South Molton. Most of the estate passed to Exmoor National Park Authority in the 1990s.

During the 1800s parts of Exmoor were mined for iron ore. On the Brendon Hills a number of mines were opened. The enterprise was supported by the building of the West Somerset Mineral Railway, several villages, churches and schools. Nearly all of these were abandoned in the early 1900s.

Places to visit: Simonsbath; Pinkery Pond (SS 724 424); Larkbarrow (SS 821 429); Burrow Farm engine house and railway trackbed (ST 009 345); Burcombe/Cornham mining remains (SS 750 383)

MODERN 1900-present

In the early 1940s parts of Exmoor were taken over by the army for military training during WWII. The public were excluded and vast areas were used for infantry and artillery training, tank warfare and chemical weapons testing. At least 4 farms were used for target practice and were destroyed.

Places to visit: North Hill tank training grounds (SS 954 475); Larkbarrow (SS 821 429)

Part of North Hill near Minehead, as photographed by the RAF between 1946 and 1948, showing extensive areas of damage caused by military training
What is the historic environment?

The evidence for Exmoor's past comprises archaeological sites and monuments, buried archaeological deposits, historic buildings, historic field patterns, objects and artefacts, historical sources, customs and traditions, and oral history. It also includes waterlogged deposits, such as coastal marshes and upland peat bogs and valley mire sites which contain information about past environments.

Together this historic environment represents the total impact of human activity on Exmoor over the last 8000 years. The historic environment is the fragile record of our past – it tells the story of people on Exmoor; it contributes to Exmoor’s special qualities and plays a significant part in the economic life of the area.

Why is Exmoor’s past so special?

The past uniquely contributes to Exmoor's special character, through the use of local building materials, and through the past management of the entire landscape.

Exmoor contains extensive areas of archaeological sites, from prehistory to medieval times, which are only paralleled on south-west England's other moorlands. These landscapes are a very rare survival both in England and the British Isles as a whole.

Exmoor's coastline, which plays a major part in its economy and tourism industry, has an especially high concentration of important historic features.

The role of Exmoor National Park Authority

Exmoor National Park Authority has an historic environment team which consists of an archaeologist, a historic buildings officer and a countryside archaeological adviser. Their role is to provide advice and guidance to the Authority on all aspects of the historic environment. They also provide specialist advice to land and property owners, as well as other bodies and agencies. They co-ordinate projects carried out by Universities, other organisations and local groups.

A variety of conservation projects are also run by Exmoor National Park Authority, either alone or in partnership with other organisations, like English Heritage (EH). Members of the historic environment team are also engaged in a number of activities such as interpretation, publications and walks and talks to promote understanding and enjoyment of Exmoor’s historic environment.

RESOURCES

Mining

Exmoor has small, scattered seams of mineral ores which have been mined sporadically for centuries. The productive silver mines at Combe Martin were worked on and off for 600 years, closing finally in the 1880s. During the second half of the 19th century mining for copper and iron ore was intensified around Heasley Mill and Simonsbath but with little long term success. Rich seams of iron ore on the Brendons were mined intensively from 1853 to 1878. The West Somerset Mineral Line was built to carry the ore to Watchet for shipping to South Wales. Settlements for the miners at Brendon Hill and Gupworthy sprang up but were deserted when the mines closed.

Evidence: Mine workings, railway buildings and trackway, Beulah Chapel ST 027 343.
Sites to visit: *Burrow Farm Engine House ST 007 345, *Wheal Eliza SS 785 381.

Coastal trade

The fishing villages of Porlock, Lynmouth and Combe Martin grew by the 18th and 19th centuries into busy ports enjoying a flourishing coastal trade with Bristol, Minehead, Ilfracombe and South Wales. By the 19th century coal, bark for the tanneries, pit-props, limestone and bricks made up the bulk of the cargoes of the numerous schooners, smacks and ketches that regularly plied the waters of the Bristol Channel at a time when road transport was slow and unreliable.

Power

Water powered wheels used to grind corn from Saxon times were later adapted for use in fulling cloth, making edge tools, sawing wood and crushing apples to make cider. In the 19th and 20th centuries some drove turbines to provide electric power.

Evidence: Waterwheels at Piles Mill, Allerford; Dunster Mill and in many villages.
Sites to visit: Dunster Working Water Mill, tel: 01643 821759. Simonsbath Sawmill, contact Exmoor National Park Authority.

Important notes about visiting archaeological sites

All sites mentioned can be found easily with the help of the relevant OS map.

Many archaeological sites on Exmoor, including some mentioned in this Filex, are on privately owned land without right of access. If there is no right of way, you must ask permission of the owner before any visit. Contact the National Park Education Officer if you are uncertain about this, telephone: 01398 326759.

It is essential that any site visit is properly planned. Obviously, there should be no disturbance of any site visited. Further information can be obtained from the Education Officer.