

Conservation in Action

The National Park designation is intended to conserve and enhance Exmoor's 'natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage' and the work of the National Park Authority ranges across the spectrum of conservation.

Damage to Simonsbath sawmill during the major flood event on Exmoor in 1952 (which also led to terrible loss of life and devastation at Lynmouth) saw the end of waterpower at the mill. A large, single cylinder diesel engine was installed and has powered the mill to the present day.

Exmoor National Park Authority bought the sawmill from the Fortescue estate in the 1990s to safeguard the character of the building and its site in the middle of Exmoor, to restore it as a building, and to restore its operation as part of a renewable energy strategy. The mill was purchased with a major grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project consisted of three main elements: reinstatement of the water supply, restoration of the sawmill building itself and overhaul of the sawmilling machinery.

The water supply to the mill, comprising leats, sluices, weir and a water turbine, had not worked since 1952. The leats had to be re-excavated and repaired and the sluice gates serviced. The stone weir, which was built across the river Barle was in reasonable condition but needed some repairs. However, a new fish pass had to be built in order to allow breeding salmon to reach their spawning grounds, which lay upstream of the mill. The restoration of the mill building itself was carried out to the highest building conservation standards.

The restoration of the sawmill was more than a desire to 'preserve' an old structure. It had always been seen as part of the National Park Authority's approach to sustainable countryside management and promotion of the use of renewable energy. To this end, the operating machinery was overhauled. This work involved the repair of the original sawbench, including bringing a working 19th-century sawbench with a 24-inch diameter rotating blade, up to the health and safety requirements of the 21st century. Alongside it stands a new band saw.



Figure A *Simonsbath sawmill is a 19th-century water-powered mill built for the Knights to serve the Exmoor Forest Estate. It was subsequently used by the Fortescue Estate for processing timber and the production of estate furniture, from floorboards to field gates. It also supplied electricity to parts of Simonsbath village.*



Figure B Draft tube repair. The water turbine within the mill building was also in need of major repair, including a replacement draft tube.



Figure C Interior of Simonsbath sawmill in operation. It was opened on 10 June 2003 by HRH The Countess of Wessex. It is a working building once more, used regularly for the processing of timber from Exmoor's woodlands to create gates, fencing and signposts for use around the National Park.