

Uncovering Exmoor's Prehistoric Past



Figure A Withypool stone circle (right of centre) in an island of survival amongst areas of medieval ridge and furrow cultivation on Withypool Hill. The circle was discovered in 1898 and is approximately 118 feet in diameter. Originally consisting of around 100 stones, the 37 that survive are most clearly visible against the blackened earth following 'swaling' or burning of the moorland heather.

The landscape of southern Exmoor contains a wealth of prehistoric remains, surviving best within the former Royal Forest and around its margins. Here, the land has hardly been cultivated since the Bronze Age – except where 19th-century reclamation and improvement have taken place – and we are able to discern the complex remains of early prehistoric communities. South of the Royal Forest, the commons were ploughed in the medieval period and still contain vast tracts of ridge and furrow, which has obliterated all but the most enduring prehistoric features or chance survivals between these later areas of cultivation. Further away still the network of farms and fields, which has its origins in the early medieval period, has almost entirely effaced the prehistoric pattern. Only the most obdurate burial mounds have not been levelled. However, traces of the earlier landscapes from time to time do emerge, and will continue to do so as archaeological techniques improve. Taken together the landscape of southern Exmoor conveys a story of continual settlement



Figure B Collecting peat cores from a valley mire system on Molland Common.

expansion and contraction around the moors as climatic, economic and social circumstances permitted.

Evidence for past environments is contained within many buried archaeological deposits, but upland peat bogs and valley mires are especially rich locations. They contain a stratified record of flora and fauna which is highly detailed and crucially, datable, through Carbon 14 dating methods. In a sense they are a chronological document, or archive, of environmental change. The ratio of Carbon 14, a radioactive isotope, to carbon in living organisms diminishes after death at a measurable rate providing a guide to the date of death. Researching this archive requires a particular combination of fieldwork and laboratory skills. On

Halscombe Allotment the remains of an ancient oak tree were discovered during archaeological fieldwork and were subsequently dated to c.5400 BC by Carbon 14 dating. The oak tree came from a valley mire and was found at the foot of a face of peat five feet three inches deep. Subsequent sampling and analysis of this peat deposit revealed a build up of peat from the late Mesolithic period onwards. At that time the area was densely wooded, but subsequently the tree cover gradually declined until, around 2000 BC, there was a rapid removal of woodland and the establishment of grassland management systems for livestock. The peat at Halscombe Allotment eloquently tells the story of a changing environment and human endeavour.



Figure C A typical Exmoor valley mire at Colley Water. These areas of waterlogged deep peat preserve a wealth of archaeological deposits crucial for understanding prehistoric life on Exmoor.