

## SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGY AND NATURAL HISTORY

### ECOLOGY IN SOMERSET

#### EDITORIAL

In June 2004, a symposium entitled 'Historic Peatlands with a Future?' was organised by the Natural History Committee in partnership with, and sponsored by, English Nature and Somerset County Council. The day event was held at Richard Huish College in Taunton and involved twelve speakers as well as exhibitions of posters and other displays relevant to the wetlands of Somerset.

Environmentalists are becoming increasingly concerned about what the future holds for Somerset's wetland areas, which are mainly below sea level and extremely vulnerable to both freshwater flooding from climate disruption and marine inundation with the raising of the sea level as a result of global warming. Past geological history records several marine inundations which have left their mark in the layers of alluvial clay below the peat and the remains of fossil plesiosaurs and ichthyosaurs, but the well-established freshwater wildlife we enjoy today would not survive another prolonged submersion under the sea.

Because of these wide-ranging concerns, it was decided that the topics covered in the symposium should be multi-disciplinary, covering past history, the present state of the wildlife and a forecast of the future. We covered aspects of the archaeology of the area, the history of the drainage throughout the ages, the environmental importance of the Somerset wetlands both locally and nationally and, in

particular, the important wetland plant and animal life. We focused on particular species to illustrate some of the problems associated with conservation and finally made some attempt to present ideas to solve the future problems which are certain to arise.

The next few decades are likely to be a time of great change, and conservation bodies are now struggling with big problems – trying to forecast the future and, consequently, looking towards means of amelioration and mitigation of the effects of global warming. It is not just wildlife that is at risk. The homes and livelihoods of people living on the Somerset Levels and Moors, who have already suffered more flooding than usual in recent years, could disappear under the sea, and the archaeological artefacts, protected by the fresh-waterlogged peat, be lost forever. What is the answer? More sea defences and flood prevention schemes? Managed retreat? Relocation of people and jobs? Or, do we change our lifestyles to reduce energy consumption and limit the production of greenhouse gases?

The results of the symposium are to be found in this issue of Ecology in Somerset, which, although it departs from the usual separation of Archaeology from Natural History normally found in *Proceedings*, enables the reader to follow the logic of the presentation – past to present to future.

PAT HILL-COTTINGHAM

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr Stephen Rippon** has carried out extensive research on the wetland landscapes of Somerset and more widely around the Severn Estuary, and has published *The Gwent Levels: The Evolution of a Wetland Landscape* (1996) and *The Severn Estuary: Landscape Evolution and Wetland Reclamation* (1997). He is reader in landscape archaeology at the University of Exeter.

**Richard Brunning** first worked on the Somerset wetlands as part of an archaeology degree and subsequent wetland course at Exeter University. After many years of working on wetland archaeological sites in Scotland, Wales and Ireland he became the Levels and Moors Archaeologist for Somerset County Council in 1993, a post he still holds.

**Francis Farr-Cox** has lived all his life on the coastal Levels. As well as acting as the county recorder of arachnids he has a keen interest in the history of the Levels and Moors.

**Dr Martin Drake** is a freelance entomologist specialising in conservation issues. Previously, he worked as an entomological specialist for the Nature Conservancy Council and English Nature. He has a particular interest in the fauna of grazing marshes

and has surveyed a large number of sites in many counties over the past 20 years.

**Dr Stephanie Greshon** runs her own Ecological Consultancy business based near Frome, in Somerset. Most of her work comprises Ecological Impact Assessments but she specialises in botanical survey techniques. Training new ecologists entering the profession is also an important part of her work and she has been running ecological CPD courses for Bristol University for 10 years.

**David Boyce** is an ecological consultant specialising in invertebrate ecology and conservation, with a particular interest in the British beetles.

**Dr Pat Hill-Cottingham** is a professional zoologist who manages Catcott North Reserve and is especially interested in the ecology and conservation of late-succession mollusc species. The research involved in this paper was carried out while the author was studying for a PhD with the Open University under Dr Eric Bowers.

**Dr Christopher Hancock** is Senior Conservation Officer for the Somerset Wildlife Trust and is seconded part time to the Wildlife Trusts as national Water Policy Officer.