

Quantock Hills

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Highway Heritage Project



LOCAL HERITAGE INITIATIVE



The Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in Somerset is nationally recognised for its natural landscape quality; however there are elements of the man-made landscape that are also worthy of protection. The old black and white cast iron road signs still found throughout the area are relics of the early days of motoring and are distinctive to Somerset.

Many of these signs (dating back to the early part of the last century) had reached a sorry state and were in need of repair or restoration. Tim Russell the Senior Ranger for the Quantock Hills AONB Service recorded the condition of over 150 signs throughout the area. A significant number were at high profile junctions or crossroads in the hills and an Action Point of the Quantock Hills Management Plan was to find ways of restoring and protecting them.

It was felt important to restore the most high profile signs and 30 were chosen as Phase One of this Highway Heritage Initiative.



Birches Corner



PROCESS



The Local Heritage Initiative (LHI)* grant scheme provided a way to get these signs repaired and restored. Working with local communities Tim was able to research the old junction or crossroad names (using local knowledge and 1903 OS maps) and put a bid together to have name collars added to existing posts or even to completely remould 'new' signposts. Funding was also found from local conservation and amenity group Friends of Quantock and SCC's Heritage Group. Moulds were taken of original arms, posts, spacers and finials and new pieces were forged at Cerdic Foundries in Chard in a traditional way.



Cerdic Foundries



Steve Meech (Cerdic Foundry) and Bev Norman (SCC Highways) discussing sign moulding techniques.

In a practically unchanged method timber patterns are made and quick setting sand castings are taken. Molten metal, in this case ductile Spheroidal Graphite (SG) iron is poured into the mould cavity and when allowed to cool and harden, becomes part of a metal road sign (a finger arm, finial, name collar, spacer or post). These bare metal pieces are then cleaned up and painted with smooth Hammerite, a particularly durable paint. Signs are then hung up to dry and loaded for delivery to the Quantocks.



*(The Local Heritage Initiative is a national grant scheme that helps local groups to investigate, explain and care for their local landscape, landmarks, traditions and culture. The grant is provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) but the scheme is a partnership, administered by the Countryside agency with additional funding from Nationwide Building Society).



Rusted Finial

In most cases the core of these old posts was rusted away and so the whole signpost had to be stripped down and a new core put in place before reconstruction could take place. Staff from Somerset County Council's highways department helped with this major work and volunteers assisted with the painting of restored signs and name collars. Posts were painted in a dark grey (Raven Grey), making them distinctive to the Quantock area.



Andy Luke and Dave Priddle from SCC's Highway department.



Chris Tilley, volunteer from Bishops Lydeard



post in raven grey



HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS



One of the most high profile signposts is located near Dead Woman's Ditch ancient earthwork; this is the only signpost to be found on the very top of the Quantocks on open common land. Dead Woman's Ditch has been known by its present name since at least 1782. Ironically John Walford, a charcoal burner, murdered his wife Jenny nearby in 1789 and hid her body in the ditch. He was caught and hanged nearby and his body put in an iron cage for a year at Walford's Gibbet, a little further on down the Old Coach Road.



Dead Woman's Ditch



Bincombe Green, Over Stowey Parish

About a mile east of Dead Woman's Ditch is Bincombe Cross (the road junction at Bincombe Green). Sarah Walford (widow of William who was John Walford's brother) committed suicide nearby and her body was interred at Bincombe Cross. In those days it was common for a suicide – after first having a stake driven through the heart! – to be buried at a cross roads and not in consecrated ground. (From the Taunton Courier 24th October 1821).

OUTCOME



A total of 30 signs have now been completely restored and had their unique historic junction names added on the triangular collars. These signs are spread throughout the AONB and every Parish has at least one restored signpost. These run from West Quantoxhead in the north west of the AONB to West Monkton in the south east.



The Avenue, Broomfield Parish



Red Post, near Flaxpool

The project has attracted much local publicity and interest from further afield.

Similar highway heritage projects are being developed in other Protected Landscapes from Bodmin Moor to the Lincolnshire Wolds. As a result of this project Somerset County Council Highways department now have a policy of restoring the signs throughout the county using cast metal 'traditional' arms instead of inferior materials.

Project Supervisor Tim Russell from the Quantock Hills AONB Service, is grateful for all support given to this project by Quantock Parish Councils, local people and staff from the AONB Service and Somerset Highways. Somerset County Council's Heritage Group also provided help with the project application and technical advice .

SOME OF THE SIGNS RESTORED UNDER THE INITIATIVE



The Pines being restored and the completed sign

*Before & after:
Kingston Cross, Broomfield*



*Before & after:
Noah's Hill, West Monkton*

*Before & after:
Red Post, Flaxpool*



*Before & after: The Cross, Nether Stowey village centre
Highway staff and Parish Chairman*

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*Photographs by Tim Russell,
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