

Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Annual Review 2016-2017

FROM OUR CHAIRMAN

Last year marked the **25th anniversary** of the designation of Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural (AONB). It was excellent to see so many people enjoying the year's special programme of activities. Highlights for me were the anniversary launch at the heritage day at Churchinford where we were reminded how partnerships, so vital to the success of the AONB, have developed and improved since those early days. Then there was the cutting of the magnificent birthday cake at The Candlelight Inn, Bishopwood, and the grand finale, with Rebecca Pow MP, at the carols under the stars at the Wellington Monument.

I was delighted that we were able to work with local businesses, Otter Brewery, Otter Valley Ice Cream and Corymoo Mohair socks, who each created special anniversary products to raise money for the **Blackdown Hills Countryside Fund** which supports community projects that help care for the AONB.

Our **Blackdown Hills Natural Futures** project, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, has delivered far beyond its targets, engaging community groups, young people, schools and individuals in the wildlife on their doorstep. It has spread the word of the importance of maintaining and

enhancing the rich mosaic of habitats in the AONB so there are places where plants and animals can continue to thrive.

This brings me back to the all-important AONB partnerships, particularly those with farmers and other landowners who, by entering into Countryside Stewardship, are key to maintaining the qualities that make the Blackdown Hills special. I was pleased to note that we are in the top five AONBs when it comes to the number of agreements in the Mid Tier element of Countryside Stewardship.

I'm also delighted that our £1.6 million **Making it Local** programme across the Blackdown Hills and East Devon AONBs, which provides support to the rural economy, is the top performing LEADER programme in the country.

As we embark on the next 25 years we face a time of change, both nationally as Brexit is implemented and locally as a new AONB manager takes up the reins. But I am confident that in the Blackdown Hills we have demonstrated how we can benefit from the opportunities that change brings, and that our strong partnership working will ensure the future of this very special place.

I can't finish a review such as this without recognising the stunning and enduring performance over the last nine years of

Linda Bennett who has done so much to ensure our special landscape is always at the forefront. We have been blessed over time with an abundance of talents but Linda will always stand out in my mind for the diligence and love she afforded the Blackdown Hills and for that she has my sincere thanks. As does her trusty cohort David, who has been indefatigably there in all weathers!



Cllr Paul Diviani
Chairman, Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership

LANDSCAPE

Heritage day at RAF Culmhead



- CPRE's Night Blight report into dark skies and light pollution showed the Blackdown Hills to be the fifth darkest AONB in England.
- The WW2 Scheduled Monuments at RAF Culmhead have been cleared of vegetation and brickwork stabilised. Two fighter pens and a pill box have been converted to bat hibernation sites.
- Hembury Hill Fort, Payhembury, one of the most impressive Iron Age sites in Devon, is now off the national Heritage at Risk Register, thanks to management work funded through an agri-environment scheme.
- Blackdown Hills Natural Futures project continued in its second year to encourage individuals and local communities to discover more about the AONB's wildlife. 40 sites were surveyed by the trainees; notable finds were a black mouse, first for the UK, and Boeninghausen's sedge, first for Somerset.