Bitten by the Heritage Bug

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"To many people it looks like just another Somerset hilltop. Thousands drive by on the A303 every day without giving it a second glance. But for me Cadbury Castle rising above the village of South Cadbury is some place special. For it was here over 40 years ago that a teenager got his first taste of an archaeological dig and was well and truly bitten by the heritage bug. That teenager was me.

"The year was 1969. That summer America was landing the first men on the moon and the Beatles were blasting away about "All You Need is Love". But the real firsthand excitement for me was digging through the soft Somerset soil and uncovering fragments of prehistoric pottery and remains of Iron Age houses - remains that had lain hidden from view for over 2000 years.

"It was that experience of discovering our common heritage that sparked off my career as an archaeologist - a career that has led me this year to becoming the new chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund's South West regional committee.

"My excitement on that first dig was heightened by the fact that we were searching for evidence of King Arthur's Camelot - and legend had it that Cadbury was it. But it was something deeper that struck me as I gazed out on summer evenings across the Somerset countryside. I realised for the first time the richness of the landscape that was all around me. For all the importance of Cadbury Castle as an ancient monument in its own right, it became clear to me that you could only make sense of its history by placing it in its wider landscape setting.

"This appreciation of the importance of landscape is nothing new. A newer concept, however, is that as we face up to the challenging demands of modern society, we need to work on a truly landscape scale to manage our use of natural resources.

"That is one reason why seven years ago the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) set up its Landscape Partnerships programme. Each year it is setting aside around £10m to support local projects to manage key landscapes and broaden understanding of their rich heritage.

"Already HLF has supported a number of landscape projects in Somerset. These include partnerships for the Exmoor Moorland and for Neroche Forest. Now the Avalon Marshes Landscape Partnership Project is set to cover an area of some 150 square kilometres in the Somerset Levels. The project is being led by Natural England, and the HLF trustees have recently indicated that they are setting aside £1.8m to support it, subject to a detailed project plan being agreed.

"Visiting Natural England's national nature reserve at Shapwick Heath last week, I saw for myself what a very special landscape this area of Somerset is. And there are three particular reasons why I welcome the Avalon Marshes project.

"Firstly, the landscape around us is 'time deep' in the full sense of these words. Its antiquity embraces the natural as well as the historic heritage. Plants and wildlife are just as much part of our landscape as hillforts and castles. And with 2010 being celebrated as International Year of Biodiversity, there could be no better time to promote the importance of wildlife and its links with history. The Somerset Levels is just the place to do this. At Shapwick Heath you can stand on the route of a prehistoric trackway, built (as we know from tree-ring dating) in the spring of 3806 BC, and hear the sound of rare bitterns booming away nearby.

"Secondly, this is peat country. Peat as we now know is a critical natural resource for storing carbon and thus managing the effects of harmful emissions. The 20th century saw many of England's peatlands being degraded through commercial extraction and other modern processes. A recent study by Natural England has concluded that only 1% of these peatlands survive in an undamaged state. Returning peatland to a healthy state will be one of the main outcomes of the Avalon Marshes landscape project – and one which future generations will surely thank us for.

"My last reason for welcoming the Avalon Marshes project is knowing that one thing will be key to its success - the involvement of local communities. When I am asked to sum up in a few words what the HLF is all about, I say it is simply about 'joining in'.

"In the South West alone the HLF during the last 15 years has given over £400m to more than 3,000 different projects, offering local people and community groups across the region the chance to discover and look after their common heritage.

"And talking of joining in – if you have the chance, head for the Avalon Marshes Centre at Westhay sometime between noon on Saturday 29th May and noon the following day. For over that 24 hours period local conservation organizations are joining together to run the unique 'Avalon 24' weekend, giving everyone the chance to experience the wonders of nature and landscape close up.

"Avalon 24 demonstrates the value of partnership working, bringing together as it does organizations such as the RSPB, Natural England, the Hawk and Owl Trust and the Somerset Wildlife Trust. Round the clock guided walks start at two hourly intervals. So if you fancy moths at midnight, the dawn chorus at 4am or butterflies at 2.30 in the afternoon, Avalon Marshes is the place to be that weekend. To find out more contact avalon24@live.co.uk or call 01458 860 736."

Simon Timms

Notes to editors

HLF's Landscape Partnerships are helping bring together members of the community as well as local, regional, and national organisations to deliver schemes which benefit some of the UK's most outstanding landscapes and rural communities. Grants range from £250,000 up to £2m.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported 33,900 projects, allocating £4.4billion across the UK.

Further information

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