‘Beneath the Wide Wide Heaven’

Can the Quantock writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth be interpreted as examples of Dark Green Religion and, if so, how might this add to current debates in Green Romanticism?

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Abstract

This dissertation explores whether the poetry composed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, during a twelve-month period spanning 1797-98, when the writers lived and collaborated in the Quantock Hills in Somerset, England, can be understood as an early example of Dark Green Religion, Bron Taylor's concept which explored a wide range of practices which consider 'nature to be sacred, imbued by intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care'.[1]

Since the 1991 publication of Jonathan Bate's 'Romantic Ecology', over three decades of scholarship explored the links between Romanticism and environmentalism, but few scholars of what came to be termed Green Romanticism interpreted this relationship through a framework of religion. In parallel with these trends, however, a growing body of scholarship sought to explore the links between spiritual beliefs and attitudes to the environment. Amongst these, Taylor's voice became one of the most prominent. Taylor himself acknowledged the Romantic origins of Dark Green Religion. However, whilst emphasising the thinking of Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) he made little acknowledgement of the English Romantic tradition.[2] Given that Wordsworth and Coleridge are, according to McKusick, amongst the writers who have received the greatest attention from Green Romanticism, this research has sought to understand the extent to which those two poets' personal cosmologies, and the writings their beliefs inspired, might also be understood within a framework of Dark Green Religion and, if so, how this might add to current debates in Green Romanticism.[3]

[1] Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2010), p. ix.
[2] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.54.
[3] James C. McKusick, 'Ecocritical Approaches To Lyrical Ballads', *The Cambridge Companion to Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Sally Bushell (Cambridge: University Press, 2020), pp. 211-229, p. 211.

Introduction, Rationale and Outline

Introduction

This dissertation explores the relationship between the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 – 1834) and William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850), composed during their period of collaboration in the Quantock Hills at the end of the eighteenth century, and contemporary spiritual and religious approaches to addressing climate crisis and environmental emergency. Specifically, it aims to understand whether the poets' spiritual beliefs, as expressed in their writings from this period, can be understood as early examples of Dark Green Religion, Bron Taylor's concept which explored a wide range of practices that consider 'nature to be sacred, imbued by intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care'; and, if so, how this might add to current debates within the field of Green Romanticism.[4]

The Quantock Hills are situated in the county of Somerset in South West England, stretching for 24km north-west from their foothills in the Vale of Taunton towards the coast of the Bristol Channel (Maps 1 and 2). The hills are a protected landscape, the first designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the United Kingdom, now reclassified as a National Landscape, valued for its diversity of landscape-type, including extensive heathland summits, woodland coombes, and Jurassic coastline, as well as its rich history and archaeology. Two figures in particular dominate the history of the hills: the Romantic poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth.

Coleridge was born in the rural village of Ottery St Mary, Devon, the son of the local vicar. On his father's death he was sent to the charitable school Christs Hospital in London, later attending Jesus College, Cambridge. As Tom Mayberry observed, however, despite his acknowledged intellectual and philosophical brilliance, Coleridge's financial and emotional worries ensured that he would never achieve his university degree.[5] Wordsworth was born in Cumberland in North West England. Like Coleridge, he lost his parents at an early age, one of the results of which was an enforced separation from his beloved sister, Dorothy.

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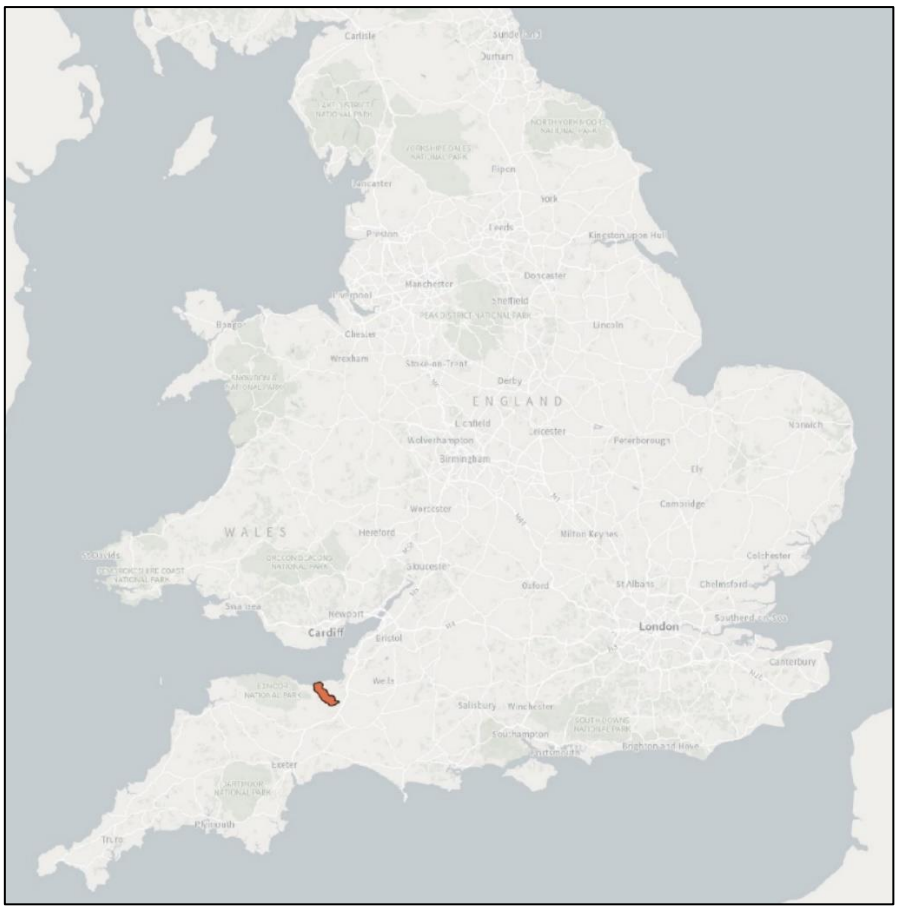
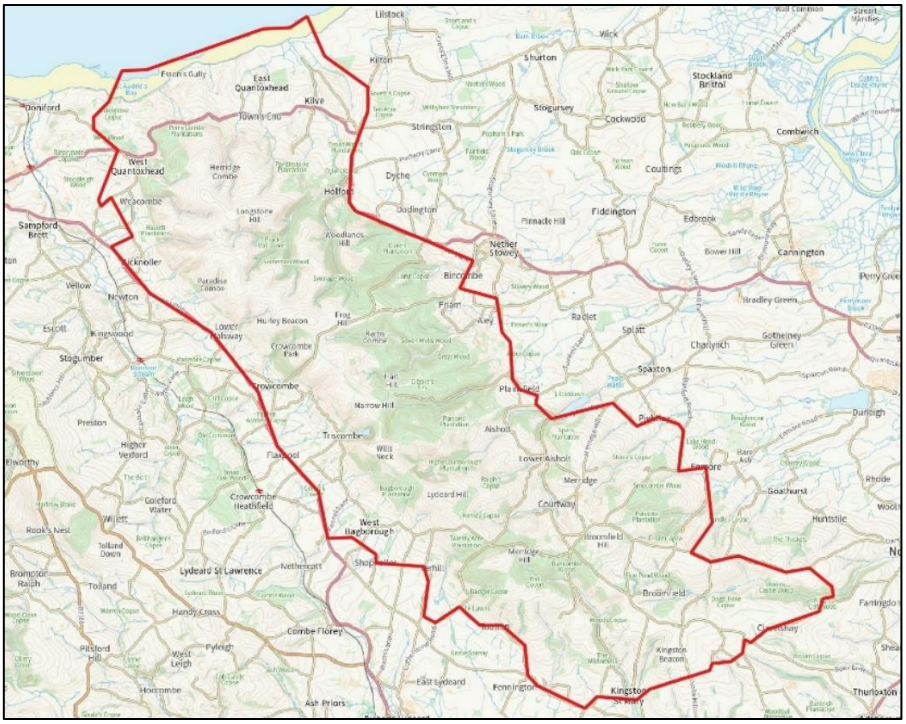
[4] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion,* p.ix.

[5] Tom Mayberry, *Coleridge And Wordsworth: The Crucible Of Friendship* (Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 2000), p. 16-17.



Map 1. Location of the Quantock Hills National Landscape, South West England. Image: QGIS



Map 2. Detail of boundary of The Quantock Hills National Landscape. Image: QGIS.

Wordsworth too, attended Cambridge, but by his later own admission, he was a dreamer, ill-suited to academic life.[6] The two poets met in Bristol in 1795, by which point Coleridge had established himself, according to Mayberry, as a leader of the city's 'vigorous and combative intellectual life', delivering non-conformist political lectures, whilst Wordsworth, though similarly radical, was virtually unknown.[7] The young men's mutual admiration was instant and soon blossomed into friendship. They corresponded throughout 1796 and in the summer of 1797, Wordsworth along with Dorothy, with whom he had now been reunited, arrived in Somerset to join Coleridge and his young family, who had been living in the village of Nether Stowey, on the eastern foothills of the Quantocks, since the start of that year. There followed a twelve-month period of intense collaboration as the two poets immersed themselves in the Quantock landscape. The fruits of this collaboration comprise some of the best-known poems composed in the English language, including the collection 'Lyrical Ballads', the publication of which is now widely regarded as representing the birth of English Romanticism and turning point in English Literature.[8]

Rationale

The impetus for my research occurred in the autumn of 2020, when I enrolled on the MA programme in Ecology & Spirituality at University of Wales Trinity St David (UWTSD), one of the stated aims of which is to explore 'the relationship between spirituality, religion, philosophy on the one hand, and ecology on the other'.[9] At the same time, I took up a new professional role as Historic Heritage Officer on the Quantock Hills. As I settled into both my new job and my studies, I became increasingly aware of the parallels between the ideas and experiences expressed in the poets' work from their Quantock period, and the material being presented to me at UWTSD. For example, Taylor described Dark Green Religion as 'flowing from a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature, while perceiving the earth and its living systems to be sacred and interconnected'.[10] This seemed to resonate

[6] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts 1798, 1799,1805, 1850* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp.102–139.
[7] Mayberry, *Coleridge And Wordsworth*, p.41-42.
[8] Sally Bushell, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Sally Bushell (Cambridge: University Press, 2020), pp. 1-11.
[9] University Of Wales Trinity St David, *Ecology and Spirituality MA* (2024) <https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/ma-ecology-spirituality/> [accessed 24 January 2024].
[10] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 13

with works such as Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Marriner' in which the protagonist is supernaturally punished for a crime against the natural world; and Wordsworth's 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' in which the author confesses to being a 'worshipper of Nature'.[11] Taylor himself acknowledged the Romantic origins of Dark Green Religion. However, whilst emphasising the thinking of Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) as both a proponent of transcendentalism and 'the most important innovator of American environmental thought', Taylor made little acknowledgement of the English Romantic tradition.[12]

Conversely, following the 1991 publication of Jonathan Bate's 'Romantic Ecology', a wealth of scholarship explored the links between Romanticism and the modern environmental movement, a trend which came to be known as Green Romanticism.[13] As Kevin Hutchings observed, this academic trend examined the degree to which 'Romantic writers and thinkers participated in and responded to the history of ecological science, environmental ethics, and environmentalist activism'.[14] Some scholars, such as Ralph Pite, questioned Romanticism's ecological credentials, challenging Bate's contention that Wordsworth in particular had much to offer to debates around the greenhouse effect the loss of rain forest, and the pollution of the sea.[15] James C. McKusick, however, argued that the poetry of Wordworth and Coleridge foreshadowed modern ecological conceptions of the Earth as a home for an 'interdependent biological and human community'.[16] Such understanding, however, was rarely interpreted through a framework of spirituality or religion. Indeed, Lisa Ottum and Seth T. Reno identified successive waves of Green Romanticism emphasising the materiality of the Romantics' relationship with nature.[17]

Green Romanticism also paid relatively little attention to the role of the Quantock landscape in the poets' creative process. For example, while McKusick acknowledged 'The Ancient Marriner' as a 'parable of ecological transgression', he gave no consideration to the

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[11] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 113.
[12] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.54.
[13] Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth And The Environmental Tradition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
[14] Kevin Hutchings, 'Ecocriticism in British Romantic Studies', *Literature Compass*, 4 (2007), pp. 172-202, p. 172.
[15] Ralph Pite, 'How Green Were The Romantics?', *Studies In Romanticism*; 35 (1996), p.357-373, p.360; Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, p. 9.
[16] McKusick, 'Ecocritical Approaches To Lyrical Ballads', p. 212.
[17] Lisa Ottum and Seth T. Reno, 'Recovering Ecology's Affects', *Wordsworth And The Green Romantics: Affect And Ecology In The Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Lisa Ottum And Seth T. Reno (Durham: University Of New Hampshire, 2016), pp. 1-27, p. 3.

landscape in which the poem was composed.[18] As Adam Nicholson argued, however, the Quantock period was the time at which Wordsworth and Coleridge were at their most open and experimental, the hills 'a refuge-cum-laboratory' for the young poets to explore their place in the world.[19] Given that Wordsworth and Coleridge are, according to McKusick, the writers who have received the greatest attention from scholars of Green Romanticism, my own research has sought to understand the extent to which the two poets' personal cosmologies, and the writings their beliefs inspired during the Quantock period, might also be understood within a framework of Dark Green Religion and, if so, how this might add to current debates in Green Romanticism.[20]

Outline

Chapter One reviews the existing academic literature relevant to a historical understanding of Wordsworth and Coleridge's time in the Quantocks, and to the relationship between the natural world and their spiritual beliefs. This is followed by an explanation of the phenomenological methodology I adopted in order to gain an understanding of the impact of the Quantock landscape on the poetry they produced during their time there. Chapter Two presents a record of my fieldwork with reference to the poets' Quantock writings and, in Chapter Three, the themes emerging from the fieldwork are discussed, each of which relate to the poets' relationship with the Quantock landscape and their spiritual beliefs. Chapter Four brings these arguments together in a concluding section.

[18] McKusick, 'Ecocritical Approaches to Lyrical Ballads', p. 213.
[19] Adam Nicolson, *The Making of Poetry: Coleridge, The Wordsworths And Their Year Of Marvels* (Glasgow: William Collins, 2019), p. 2.
[20] McKusick, 'Ecocritical Approaches to Lyrical Ballads', p. 211.

Chapter One: Literature Review & Methodology

Literature Review

The Poets in the Quantocks

The lives and works of Coleridge and Wordsworth have been the subject of a wealth of scholarship over the course of the last two hundred years. However, very little of that scholarship has focussed specifically on the trio's time in the Quantocks. Tom Mayberry's 'Crucible of Friendship' provides the most detailed account of this period which, in his view, was 'for both men… a brief golden age of friendship and creativity, a time of marvels which could never be recaptured.'[21] More recently, Nicolson spent three months in the Quantocks, during which he established the importance of the poets' time there in moulding the future direction of English literature.[22] For the most part, however, it has been local amateur historians who have drawn attention to the importance of the Quantock period. Writing in 1896, local reverend William Greswell produced a short piece on Wordsworth's Quantock poetry, his minute local knowledge, allowing him to postulate on precise locations for the settings of poems.[23] Local school teacher and author Berta Lawrence produced 'Coleridge and Wordsworth in Somerset' in 1970, which is both an exploration of the poets lives in the county, and a useful guidebook to the locations they frequented and the walking routes that they used.[24]

Ecology and Spirituality

Amongst the relatively few works to focus specifically on the religious beliefs of the poets during their time in the Quantocks is Joseph Downey's 1946 study of Wordsworth's religious philosophy during the period 1797 -1805.[25] Downey emphasised the fluidity of Wordsworth's spiritual outlook at that time, a key aspect being 'the nature of the relationship Wordsworth claimed between man, nature and God'.[26] Downey concluded that

[21] Mayberry, *Coleridge And Wordsworth*, p. xi.
[22] Nicolson, *The Making Of Poetry.*
[23] William Greswell, *Wordsworth's Quantock Poems* (Nether Stowey: Friends of Coleridge, 2006).
[24] Berta Lawrence*, Coleridge And Wordsworth In Somerset* (Exeter: David & Charles, 1970).
[25] Joseph F. Downey*, Wordsworth's Religious Philosophy For The Years 1797-1805: A Study Of The Prelude, 1805*, Chicago: Loyola University Chicago, 1946).
[26] Downey*, Wordsworth's Religious Philosophy,* p. 3-4.

Wordsworth's early work implied pantheism, the belief that God and the universe are one.[27] Christopher S. Noble recognised a similar pantheistic tendency in Coleridge's early work as the poet pushed the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy.[28] However, as noted in the introduction above, throughout the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, attempts to understand the relationship between the natural world and Romanticism focussed on psychological rather than metaphysical interpretations. In a study focusing on Coleridge's pre-Quantock years, Herbert Piper identified the sources of Coleridge's Unitarianism, one of the central tenets of which was the denial of the divinity of Jesus, as being rooted in the politics of Revolutionary France, and theories of the universe intended to emphasise the material world at the expense of the metaphysical.[29] In the same vein, Reno, whilst noting the parallels between Wordsworth's 'sustained meditation on love of nature' and the meditative practices of Tibetan Monks, framed his argument in terms of developments in neuroscience.[30] Such an interpretation demonstrates how rational understandings of the poets' relationship with the natural world extend to more recent scholarship in ecocriticism and Green Romanticism.

In parallel with these trends, however, a growing body of scholarship sought to explore the links between attitudes to the environment and spiritual beliefs. Leslie Sponsel surveyed a variety of practices and belief systems by which people relate their personal spirituality to the natural environment, which he categorised broadly as examples of Spiritual Ecology.[31] As Sponsel defined it, Spiritual Ecology represented a quiet revolution which had the potential to 'circumvent a global ecological catastrophe'.[32] Another proponent of Spiritual Ecology, Llewelyn Vaughan-Lee, wrote of his conviction that the environmental emergency is a direct result of the fact that modern humans have forgotten

[27] Downey, *Wordsworth's Religious Philosophy*, p. 4.
[28] Noble, Christopher S., 'A Transcendent And Pragmatic Vision: Samuel Taylor Coleridge At The Borders Of Christian Orthodoxy', *Christianity And Literature*, 48.1 (1998), pp. 29-43, p.31
[29] Herbert Piper, 'The Pantheistic Sources Of Coleridge's Early Poetry', *Journal of the History of Ideas,* 20.1 (1959), pp. 47- 59, p. 47.
[30] Seth T. Reno, 'Rethinking the Romantics' Love of Nature', Wordsworth and the Green Romantics: Affect and Ecology in the Nineteenth Century, ed, by Lisa Ottum and Seth T. Reno (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2016), pp. 28-58, p. 29.
[31] Leslie E. Sponsel, *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012).
[32] Sponsel, *Spiritual Ecology*, p.xiii.

the inherent sacredness of nature.[33] Closely related to such thinking was Taylor's Dark Green Religion.

Like Arne Naess' concept of Deep Ecology, Dark Green Religion was eco-centric rather than anthropocentric, requiring a shift in consciousness which placed the environment, rather than the individual, at the centre of one's worldview. Naess, however, saw no need for this process of self-realization to be a spiritual or religious one.[34] In contrast, within the framework of Dark Green Religion, Taylor, included a range of activities and practices, including environmental activism and surfing, which would not usually be termed religious. Common to all, however, was an understanding of the inherent sacredness of the natural world.

Spirituality and Religion

In discussing the nature of religious or spiritual experience, William James' 'Varieties of Religious Experience' is a key text, in which James, pre-empting Taylor and Sponsel by over 100 years, brings together a wide range of accounts of 'ineffable' experiences which he interprets as being religious.[35]

Whether such experiences are defined as spiritual or religious is largely subjective. Taylor argued that the only substantial difference between the two was the belief in divine beings, and deliberately wrote of Dark Green Religion, rather than Dark Green Spirituality, in part to 'rattle assumptions as to what counts as religion in order to awaken new perceptions and insights'.[36] Terry Lynn Gall and others similarly acknowledged that conceptions of religion and spirituality are dynamic and shifting, dependent on many factors including heritage, culture, generation, and nationality.[37] Whilst acknowledging a good deal of crossover between the two concepts, the same study suggested that spirituality was perceived as referring to ideas around an individual's essence or existential nature, whereas

[33] Llewelyn Vaughan-Lee, *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry Of The Earth* (Point Reyes: The Golden Sufi Center, 2016), p. v.
[34] Arne Naess, *There Is No Point Of No Return* (London: Penguin, 2021), pp. 21-51.
[35] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1960).
[36] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 4.
[37] Terry Lynn Gall, Manal Guirguis-Younger and Judith Malette, Gall, 'Spirituality And Religiousness: A Diversity Of Definitions', *Journal Of Spirituality In Mental Health*. 13 (2011), pp. 158-181, p.180.

religion was associated more with organised structures, including 'adherence to religious beliefs, doctrine and dogma, and participation in religious practices'.[38]

In attempting to describe the beliefs of Wordsworth and Coleridge. I have followed this broad differentiation, using the term religion or religious when referring to the poets' practices or beliefs as they relate to organised religious structures, and spirituality, when referring to less tangible, personal beliefs and experiences.

Walking

Such experiences were greatly stimulated by the poets' frequent immersive walks in the Quantock landscape, and the role of walking in developing their personal cosmologies has been noted by a number of writers. Robin Jarvis, for example, concluded that Coleridge found 'in movement through space, a release from the defining social contexts of his life to date and a realm of physical difference onto which his quest for self-realization could be mapped.'[39] Conversely, environmental historian Marianna Dudley, wrote of the long-term impact the poets' walks have had on the Quantock Hills themselves, and on attitudes to the natural world more broadly.[40]

Ann C. Colley emphasised the physicality of Coleridge's experience of nature, arguing that his practice of 'jotting down an entry in his notebooks while walking' resulted in entries which 'live in the organic present and replicate not only the movement of his body but also a landscape in endless motion'.[41] Of course, this physicality of human relationship to landscape is not unique to the poets. Tim Ingold identified different forms of moving through a landscape. Most pertinent to the walks of Coleridge and Wordsworth, Ingold defined 'wayfaring' as a form of movement in which, as opposed to travelling directly to a destination, one is actively engaged with the land through which one travels.[42] Ingold also recognised the similarities between the mental and physical marks inscribed on a landscape through walking, and those made on the page when writing. Similarly, Ferris Jabr wrote that

[38] Gall and others, 'Spirituality and Religiousness', pp. 165-170.
[39] Robin Jarvis, *Romantic Writing And Pedestrian Travel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 65.
[40] Marianna Dudley, 'Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost: Walking In The Quantock Hills', *Local Places, Global Processes Book Subtitle: Histories Of Environmental Change In Britain And Beyond,* Ed. by Peter Coates, David Moon and Paul Warde (Marston: Oxbow Books, 2016), pp.64 -77, p.64.
[41] Ann C. Colley, 'Coleridge Walks: Boots and the Measure of the Landscape', *Romanticism* 27.1 (2021), pp. 28–45, p. 43.
[42] Tim Ingold, *Lines* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 78.

‘writing forces the brain to review its own landscape, plot a course through that mental terrain, and transcribe the resulting trail of thoughts by guiding the hands’.[43]

This link between physical and mental landscapes was also explored by Guston Bachelard whose theory of a ‘Poetics of Space’ argued that the internal and external worlds can merge when an individual experiences solitude within awe inspiring landscapes.[44] Similarly, John Wylie wrote of the ‘spectrality of walking’, observing that, in the process of walking the South West Coast Path, he found himself becoming ‘more ghostly’ as the boundary between himself and landscape disappeared.[45] In this, Wylie was influenced by Jacques Derrida who argued that the notion of a ghost or spectre does not represent an absence but a ‘non-present presence’.[46] This relationship between physical movement through natural landscapes, creativity and spirituality would prove to be a key factor in my own fieldwork.

Methodology

The importance of walking in developing the poets’ personal cosmologies is hard to overstate. As Coleridge’s biographer and editor John Beer wrote, Coleridge and Wordsworth would frequently walk the Quantock landscape ‘looking for points where [nature] might be said to display a correspondence with human feeling’.[47] In attempting to understand the poets’ personal cosmologies, I adopted a similar approach, undertaking a series of walks across the hills, using a phenomenological approach adapted from Christopher Tilley’s work on interpreting historic, cultural landscapes. Tilley’s approach emphasised the way in which neutral locations become transformed into places embedded with meaning, which he termed ‘locales’, as people engage with them, creating memories, experiences and stories.[48] Tilley further argued that an understanding of locale cannot be achieved remotely. Instead, ‘the experience of place is of fundamental significance’. He advocated that multiple visits

[43] Ferris Jabr, ‘Why Walking Helps Us Think’, *The New Yorker*, 3 September 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/walking-helps-us-think> [accessed 18 November 2023].
[44] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space Beacon Press* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p.203.
[45] John Wylie, ‘A Single Day's Walking: Narrating Self and Landscape on the South West Coast Path’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30. 2 (2005), pp. 234-247, pp. 245-246.
[46] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 4.
[47] John Beer, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poems* (London, Orion: 1999), p.xi.
[48] Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology Of Landscape: Places, Paths And Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994) p. 34.

should be made to the location being studied, in order that it might be understood in minute detail.[49] The multi-sensory experience was of particular importance for Tilley, who employed the term 'synaesthesia' to describe a way of allowing the multiple physical senses, and the feelings they generate, to be simultaneously at play.[50]

Along with their poems, I studied Wordsworth and Coleridge's notebooks and letters relating to the Quantock period, attempting to identify those locales which were of particular importance to the poets, places which seemed to inspire or reflect their spiritualities. One of the best guides to determining specific locales was the journal kept by Dorothy Wordsworth, which provides a near-daily record of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's activities, and a detailed description of parts of the Quantock landscape as they were in the first half of 1798.[51] Using this information, I devised a series of four walks which I undertook over the spring, summer and early autumn of 2023. The routes I took were semi-planned, each with certain target locales in mind, but not always a specific route. In this way I hoped to mirror the spirit of the walks the poets took through the Quantock landscape.

During the walks, I made extensive notes to record my experiences and observations. Following Tilley's method, I paid attention to note not just visual stimuli, but also the sensations of sound, touch and smell. Given that my primary goal was to understand how walking the Quantock landscape may have influenced the poets' spiritual beliefs, I also made efforts to record any emotional or spiritual responses of my own, with attempts made to account for any external stimuli which may have influenced these experiences. Initially, I used pen and notebook to make these records before quickly realising that taking audio notes on a voice app allowed me to capture a much fuller and instant record. These notes were written up quickly after each walk and compared and contrasted with the observations that Coleridge and Wordsworth recorded in their various writings. The results of this fieldwork are presented below, followed by a discussion of various themes which emerged from the process.

The phenomenological approach to interpreting historic cultural landscapes is not without difficulties. Matthew H. Johnson questioned the lack of self-reflection he observed

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[49] Tilley, *Phenomenology*, p,74.
[50] Christopher Tilley, *The Materiality Of Stone: Explorations In Landscape Phenomenology* (Oxford: Berg, 2004) p. 16.
[51] Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

in much phenomenological practice, and directly challenged Tilley's assumptions of a 'unity of bodily experience'.[52] Observing phenomenology's origins in the Romantic tradition, Johnson also pointed out that many phenomenological accounts tend to reinforce assumptions which are overwhelmingly western, white and male, and which, therefore, are often irrelevant to the landscape being studied:

> The solitary (male) protagonist, the disembodied nature of some accounts and their distance from everyday life, the underlying empiricism where direct bodily experience confers a form of authority, the critique of modernity as somehow placeless and inauthentic, the poetic and artistic resonances— these can all be argued to be artifacts of a Romantic and neo-Romantic tradition stretching back to William Wordsworth.[53]

However, though such criticisms of the wider phenomenological method may be valid, here Johnson inadvertently highlighted just how appropriate such a method might be for studying the Quantock Hills of Coleridge and Wordsworth as a cultural landscape.

A similarly experiential approach was advocated by Dudley, inspired by her own visit to the Quantock Hills**.** Encouraging the apparently simple act of walking as a methodology for historians, she observed that while notions of beauty may be subjective, 'Coleridge and Wordsworth expressed something universal in their creative discourse of poetry and walking'.[54] Such an approach is even more valid when attempting to understand a historic cultural landscape which the poets' own walks helped to create.

I then analysed the findings from my fieldwork through a framework of Dark Green Religion. Taylor identified four main types of Dark Green Religion, two of which are forms of Animism, either Spiritual or Naturalistic; and two of which Taylor termed Gaian Earth Religions, either Gaian Spirituality or Gaian Naturalism (Table 1).[55] Within this framework, Animism refers to the perception that non-human life forms or other natural entities possess

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[52] Matthew H. Johnson, 'Phenomenological Approaches In Landscape Archaeology', *Annual Review Of Anthropology*, 41 (2012), pp. 269-284, p. 277.
[53] Johnson, 'Phenomenological Approaches In Landscape Archaeology', p. 277.
[54] Dudley, 'Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost', p.74.
[55] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, pp. 13-41.

a personhood, soul, spirit, or consciousness.[56] Taylor differentiates between animistic beliefs which understand such qualities as possessing a supernatural or spiritual intelligence, and those which are more sceptical, and interpret such qualities as a form of natural energy or life force, albeit one which may be little understood scientifically. Drawing from James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis, Taylor defines Gaian Earth Religions as understanding the biosphere or the universe to be a single superorganism which is in some way alive. Gaian Spirituality understands this superorganism to be a conscious expression of the divine. In contrast, proponents of Gaian Naturalism, seek a scientific understanding of the holistic superorganism.[57] The dashed lines in Table 1, indicates that the boundaries between the four forms of Dark Green Religion are not fixed, but fluid and permeable.[58]

	Animism	**Gaian Earth Religion**
Supernaturalism	Spiritual Animism	Gaian Spirituality
Naturalism	Naturalistic Animism	Gaian Naturalism

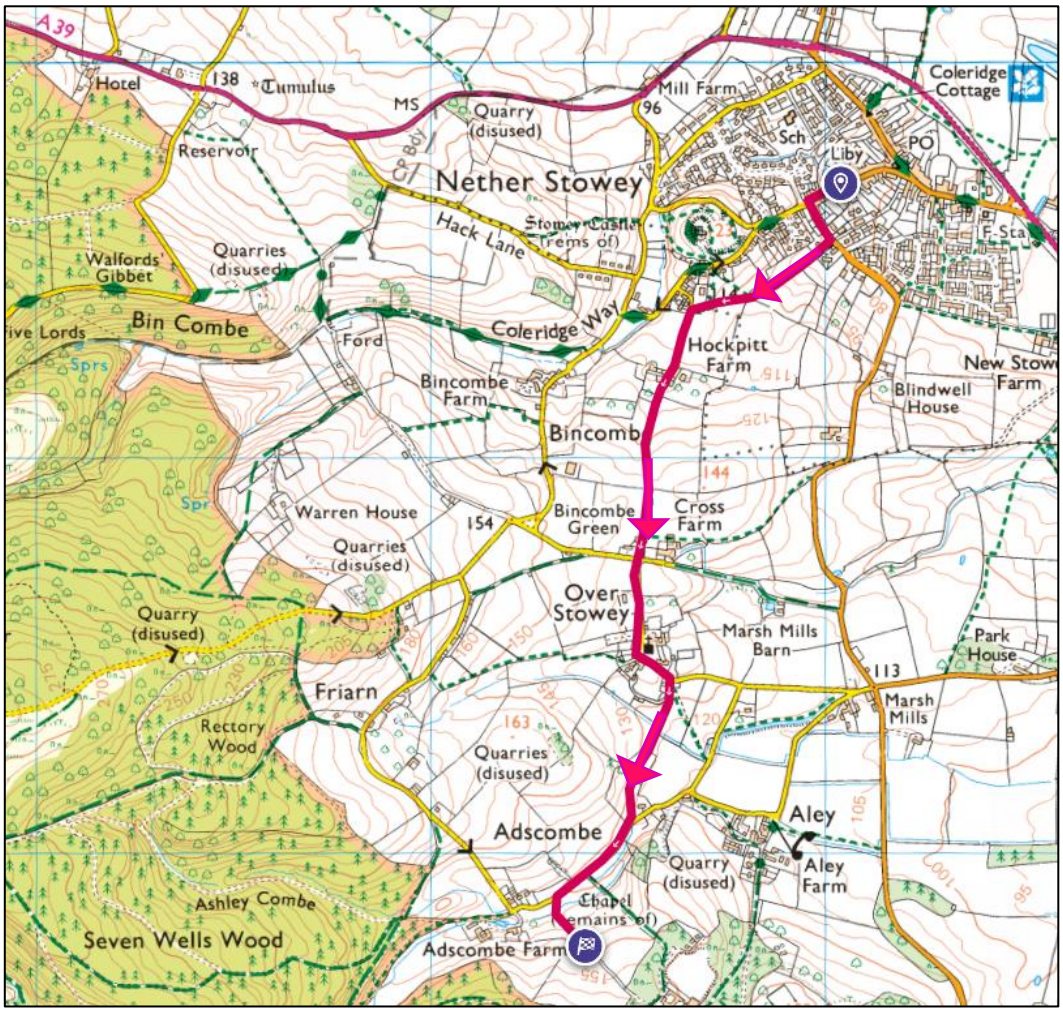
Table 1. Types of Dark Green Religion as identified by Bron Taylor. Table from Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.15

By comparing my experiences during my fieldwork, with those of Wordsworth and Coleridge, as recorded in their poetry, and analysing them through this framework, I aimed to assess whether the poets' Quantock writings could indeed be reasonably considered as examples of Dark Green Religion.

[56] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.15.
[57] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 16
[58] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p.15

Chapter Two: Fieldwork

Walk One: Nether Stowey to Adscome, 4 May 2023



Map 3. Route of walk taken from Nether Stowey to Adscombe Chapel. Image: Ordnance Survey, 2023.

On a late spring morning, I set out from Nether Stowey towards the hamlet of Adscombe, and specifically the ruins of the chapel which is believed to have inspired Coleridge's poem, 'The Foster Mother's Tale'. The initial stretch of my route negotiated the rear gardens of modern infill housing but very quickly opened onto fields and I continued walking due south via a combination of public footpaths and narrow lanes. Recent rain followed by days of warm sunshine had resulted in a spurt of growth where only a few weeks earlier the landscape had seemed dormant. Surrounding trees were coming into leaf and nettles on the road verges reached well over waist height. There was a humidity in the

air that had not been present for many months and, despite the cloud cover, I had the sense that summer was approaching with a rush.

Nature as Teacher

The landscape had woken, and it aroused in me sense of nostalgia, the musty smell of cow parsley, the sound of the breeze moving through growing crops; the lack of need to wear a jacket; the simple emergence of daisies and buttercups – all this took me back to nature walks in primary school where I grew up in Yorkshire, the associated sense of freedom which came from being out of the classroom, and of a relative closeness to nature which has been lost in my adult life.

Similar sensations and emotions are evident in a pair of Wordsworth's poems from the 1798 edition of Lyrical Ballads. In 'Expostulation and Reply', Wordsworth recalled his own youth in the north of England, specifically an occasion when, chastised by a friend for daydreaming rather than attending to his studies, Wordsworth responded:

> … I deem that there are Powers
> Which of themselves our minds impress;
> That we can feed this mind of ours
> In a wise passiveness,
>
> Think you, mid all this mighty sum
> Of things for ever speaking,
> That nothing of itself will come,
> But we must still be seeking?[59]

Rather than actively seeking out knowledge in the writings of others, Wordsworth encouraged a more intuitive form of learning, available directly from engagement with the natural world. The theme was emphasised in 'The Tables Turned', in which Wordsworth implored the reader to 'quit your books' and let Nature's 'spontaneous wisdom' be the teacher:

[59] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 99-100.

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.[60]

In contrast to this 'sweet lore' offered by nature, the 'meddling intellect' of the human mind 'Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things'.

Although less didactic than Wordsworth, Coleridge too, frequently referred to a different lore which could be learnt from nature. It is implicit in 'The Nightingale' in which, rather than 'building up the rhyme', the poet is encouraged to stretch his limbs beside a brook in a 'mossy forest dell'. It is explicit in 'Frost at Midnight', when he imagines nature as the 'far other lore' his infant son will grow to be versed in,

so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher![61]

Here, that other lore of nature is portrayed as the language of God. Whereas Christopher Noble saw Coleridge's early poetry as pantheistic, equating God with his creation, here is evidence of Coleridge's tendency towards panentheism at this stage in his life, the belief that the divine is present within all things, whilst simultaneously transcending them.[62]

Untameable Nature

I passed through the small village of Over Stowey, beyond which the landscape began to change. As the footpath skirted the northern edge of the narrow valley or combe from which the hamlet of Adscombe takes its name, arable fields gave way to pasture and an array of earthworks, evidence of past rural industries including quarrying and mining.

[60] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 101-102.
[61] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin 2004), p. 232.
[62] Noble, 'A Transcendent And Pragmatic Vision', p. 31.

Entering the Quantock combes often feels like entering a hidden world. In my time working on the hills, I have led numerous walks for visitors and locals alike, who frequently use words such as 'enchanted' or 'magical' to describe their experiences of the combes. Adscombe is no different. There is an uncanny atmosphere to the place, it feels removed from modern life, as if suspended in time. Whenever I have visited, I have rarely seen another person, yet there is evidence of a great deal of human activity, both past and present.

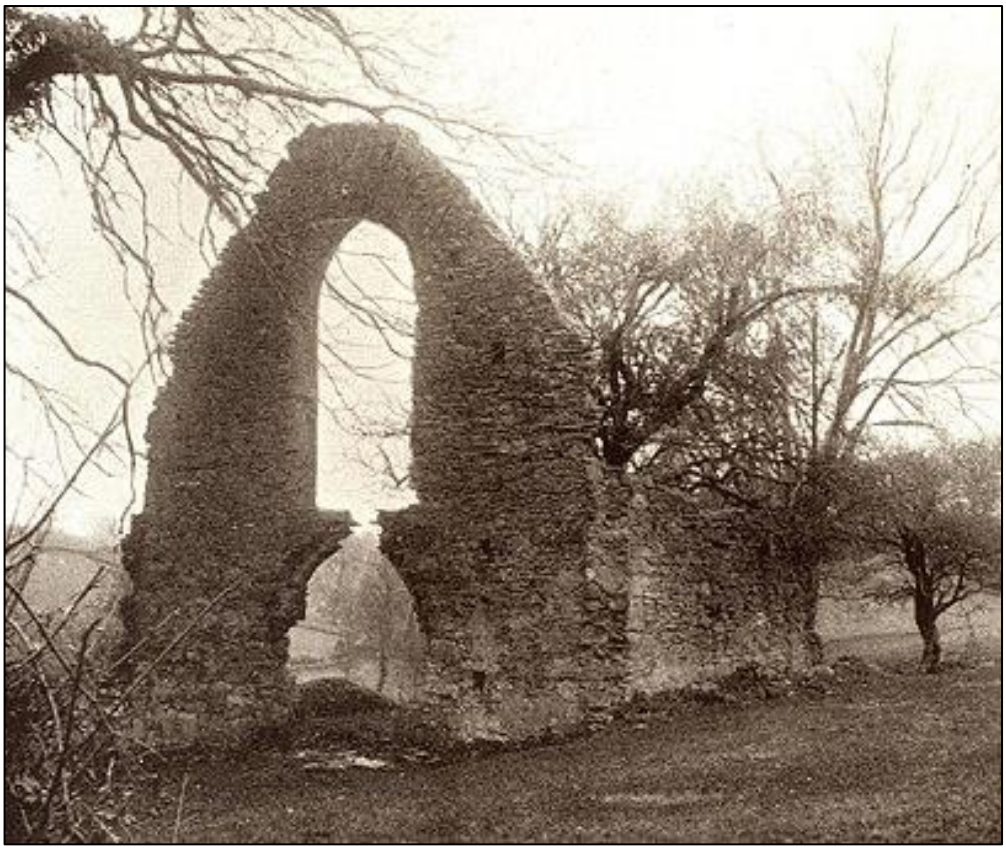


Figure 1. Adscombe Chapel, 1903. Image: William Greswell, *The Land of Quantock: A Descriptive and Historical Account* (Taunton, Barnicott and Pearce, 1903), p.147.

Perhaps the most striking example of this are the ruins of Adscombe Chapel, which sit around 130m up the southern slope of the combe (see Map 1.) A journal article from 1891 described,

> The remains of a chapel 42ft by 20ft internally with rubble walls some 2ft thick. The west wall alone is intact, the others being almost level with the

> ground. There is a gable containing a pointed-arched window, with dressed stone surviving on the interior only. Beneath is the rubble setting of a pointed-arched.[63]

A photograph taken in 1903 shows the gable end wall still extant (Figure 1). By the time of my visit, however, the walls had almost entirely collapsed, and most of the resulting stone had been removed.

Adscombe is generally accepted as the inspiration for the events described in Coleridge's 'The Foster Mother's Tale'. The poem relates the discovery, by a woodcutter named Leoni, of a child 'wrapt in mosses' beneath a tree. Leoni takes the child home and raises him as his own. The child grew to be,

> A pretty boy, but most unteachable—
> And never learnt a prayer, nor told a bead,
> But knew the names of birds, and mocked their notes,
> And whistled, as he were a bird himself:
> And all the autumn 'twas his only play
> To get the seeds of wild flowers, and to plant them
> With earth and water, on the stumps of trees.[64]

Through the teaching of a friar, the boy becomes 'a very learned youth'. However, he rebels against the social and religious conventions of the society in which he has been raised, as if unable or unwilling to leave behind his innate connection to the natural world.

> He had unlawful thoughts of many things:
> And though he prayed, he never loved to pray
> With holy men, nor in a holy place—

Personifying the wildness of nature, the child cannot accept the limitations of his adopted world. As he attempts to expresses this, Coleridge portrays the earth heaving, causing the

[63] W. B. Broadmead, 'Our Lady Of Adscombe', *Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset,* 2 (1891), p. 239.
[64] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads,* pp.26-29

walls of the chapel to collapse around him. Within the narrative of the poem, there is no doubt that the collapse of the chapel is a judgement on the boy's 'heretical and lawless talk'. It is tempting to read this as illustrative of Coleridge's own internal battles between his orthodox Christian upbringing and further evidence of his leanings towards a panentheistic cosmology during this period.

Figure 2. Overgrown remains of Adscombe Chapel, May 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

Today, nature has almost completely taken over the site of the chapel; the battle between nature and civilisation to which Coleridge alluded, still ongoing. When I visited, none of the stonework which was recorded by an archaeological survey of the site in 2002 was visible through the overgrowth of brambles, ivy and nettles (Figure 2).[65] Not only was the original chapel reclaimed by vegetation, but subsequent attempts to 'save' it, to tame nature and make the ruins accessible as a historic site for visitors, also appear to have been futile. A public interpretation panel was decayed to the point of being barely legible, and the ruins themselves were surrounded by barbed wire (Figure 3). There was an eeriness about the abandoned nature of the site and, climbing awkwardly over the barbed wire, I had a

[65] Hazel Riley, *Adscombe Chapel, Over Stowey, Somerset* (English Heritage Report, 2002).

very real sense of crossing a boundary that was more than physical, that despite my having permission to do so, I was entering an area where I was not entirely welcome.

Figure 3. Adscombe Chapel site with decayed interpretation panel, May 2023.
Photo: Dan Broadbent.

The wider landscape bore further evidence of the uneasy relationship between human and natural at Adscombe. A wider series of earthworks surrounded the ruins, representing building platforms and garden terraces, believed to be the site of the medieval manor house of Over Stowey and Friarn.[66] These buildings have long since been demolished, and whatever fragmentary remains may still exist are now buried beneath pasture.

Beyond the immediate environs of the chapel field, the Adscombe landscape was a patchwork of small, enclosed fields, amongst which modern barns were present along with historic farm buildings. I felt a palpable sense of the human and the natural rubbing up against each other. A further example of this was at the foot of the chapel field where the

[66] Riley, *Adscombe Chapel*.

seemingly natural stream has, in truth, been diverted through a series of weirs and sluices for at least 180 years, and where there is now a water recycling centre (Figures 4 and 5).

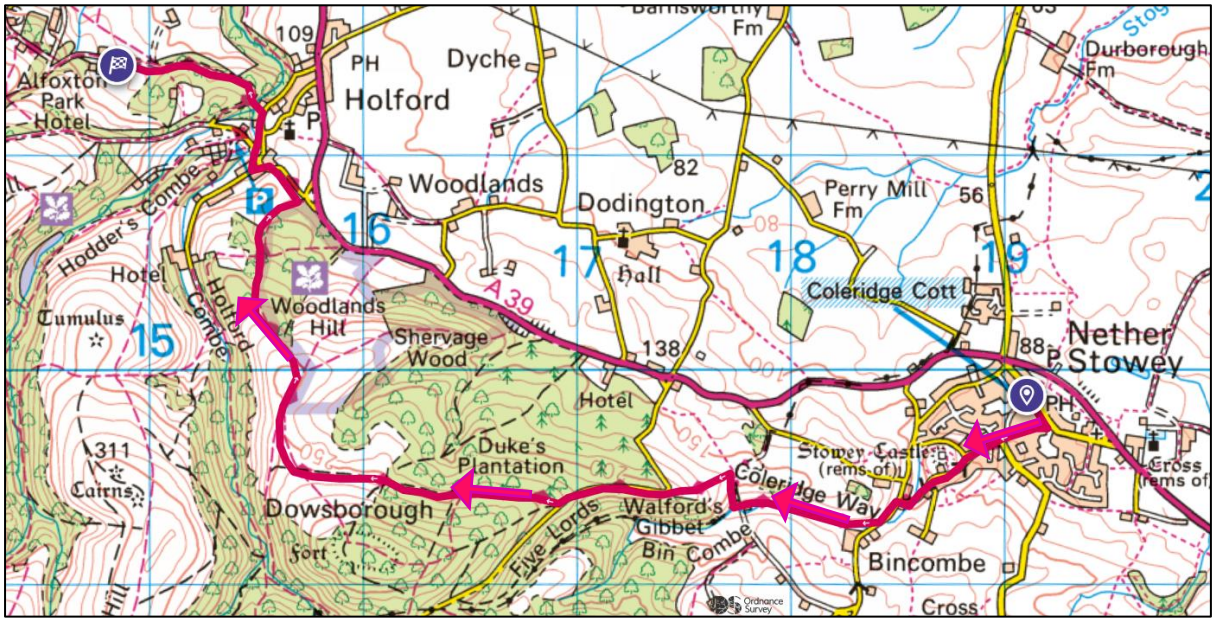
At Adscombe, there was a sense of the human and natural being in an uneasy balance and this also seems to have been the case during Coleridge's time in the area. It was here that he chose to set his exploration of the wildness of nature overcoming attempts to civilise it. This difficult balance seems to be at odds with much of the more reverent nature poetry of both Coleridge and Wordsworth. At Adscombe, nature is not benign, nor is it a teacher. Rather, the relationship with nature is a battle, more reminiscent of Coleridge's great supernatural works of the period, such as 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', with its vivid depictions of the horrors to which the protagonist and his crew are subjected, in judgment for the crime against nature of shooting an albatross which had guided them out of dangerous Antarctic ice and into warmer waters.[67] The boy in 'The Foster Mother's Tale', is the personification of actions which are still tangible in this landscape more than 200 years later.

Figure 4. Stream flowing east along the foot of the chapel field, Adscombe, May 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent

[67] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 1-25.

Figure 5. Water Recycling Centre below the chapel field, Adscombe, May 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

Walk Two: Nether Stowey to Holford, 5th June 2023



Map 4. Route of walk from Coleridge Cottage to Alfoxton. Image: Ordnance Survey, 2023

This walk linked Coleridge's home, in Lime Street, Nether Stowey, with the mansion at Alfoxton, near Holford, which Wordsworth rented for the period of their stay in the Quantocks. It is, therefore, a journey with which the poets were deeply familiar.

I departed from Coleridge's cottage, now run as a visitor attraction by the National Trust (Figure 6). When Coleridge first moved here it was so dilapidated that his friend Thomas Poole strongly advised him against taking the property. However, the poet was adamant, determined that he must escape city life in Bristol where his anti-government and anti-slavery campaigning had increasingly come to the attention of the authorities.[68] Coleridge had come to associate the countryside, and Nether Stowey in particular, as the perfect place for a fresh start. In particular, he was determined that his young son, Hartley, should experience an upbringing surrounded by nature, in contrast to his own childhood at a London boarding school.

[68] Mayberry, *Coleridge And Wordsworth*, p. 59.

Figure 6. Coleridge Cottage. Image: National Trust, 2023

From the cottage, I walked east along Lime Street. In 1797, The cottage stood alone, an outlier of the village, surrounded by fields. Nineteenth century infill housing now joins the cottage to the historic core of the village, while modern housing has also grown up to the north of the property as the village continues to expand. Leaving the village, I joined the Coleridge Way, a waymarked trail, through the woods that ascend towards the open heath on the ridge of the hills.

Although it was easy to imagine the poets walking through these same woods, this area has changed greatly since their time here. Much of the area known as Dukes Plantation was only recently planted at the end of the eighteenth century, and the easternmost areas of plantation were still arable fields when the Tithe Map for the area was surveyed around 1840. Similarly, the well-established woodland an either side of the old coach road was still being actively coppiced in the late eighteenth century, much of this work being linked to charcoal burning for which extensive evidence remains in the form of charcoal burning platforms terraced into the sides of the combes. The coach road itself was tarmacked but, walking uphill, the remnants of eighteenth century hedgebanks remained, dating from the enclosure of previously common land and the later development of the tree plantations (Figure 7). These hedgebanks now create avenues of standing beech trees which have become emblematic of the Quantocks. In the poets' time, however, these would have been relatively newly planted. They were also never intended as avenues of standard trees,

instead, they were originally planted as hedgerows on top of earthern and stone banks. It appears that these hedgebanks were being well maintained up until the outbreak of the First World War, when the local men who had been responsible for their upkeep went to fight. Figure 8 shows similar hedgebanks in 1915.

Figure 7. Beech hedgebank, Holford, June 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent

Figure 8. Quantock hedgebanks at Triscombe Stone, 1915. Image: Quantock Hills National Landscape

That Blessed Mood

Despite the great changes in the landscape over the last 200 years, it is in this area of my walk that I experienced a kind of reverie. Leaving the coach road and keeping to the Coleridge Way, my pace began to slow. Whereas on the road there had been a desire to put the yards in and put modernity behind me, on the rougher track, heading into the woods towards Dowsborough Hill, my walking became more intentional; I found myself walking very slowly and deliberately. There was a clear blue sky, light dappling through the new leaf growth of a wider variety of tree cover: horse chestnut, ash, birch, maple, rowan, hawthorn, hazel, along with the beech and oak which predominate across much of the hills (Figure 9). For the most fleeting of moments, I experienced something like a sense of union with my surroundings. I felt compelled to stop and stand, listening with eyes closed and when opening my eyes, I found myself almost mimicking the poses of the trees around me, my body twisted but rooted to the spot, as if I had become part of the landscape, the division between myself and my surroundings momentarily broken down.

I also became aware of a wealth of sound, not least of which was a preponderance of birdsong. I am very conscious that I cannot identify birdsong, but in that moment it was abundant and varied, and it seemed not to matter at all that I could not assign a name to which particular species the songs belonged. I also became aware of the wind blowing through the trees, only gently, but a constant presence. This awareness created the astonishing sensation of my own breathing being somehow symbiotic with the gusting of the breeze.

These sensations seemed similar to those expressed by Wordsworth in 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', in which he described:

> … that blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world,
> Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,—
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame

And even the motion of our human blood

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep

In body, and become a living soul:

While with an eye made quiet by the power

Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things.[69]

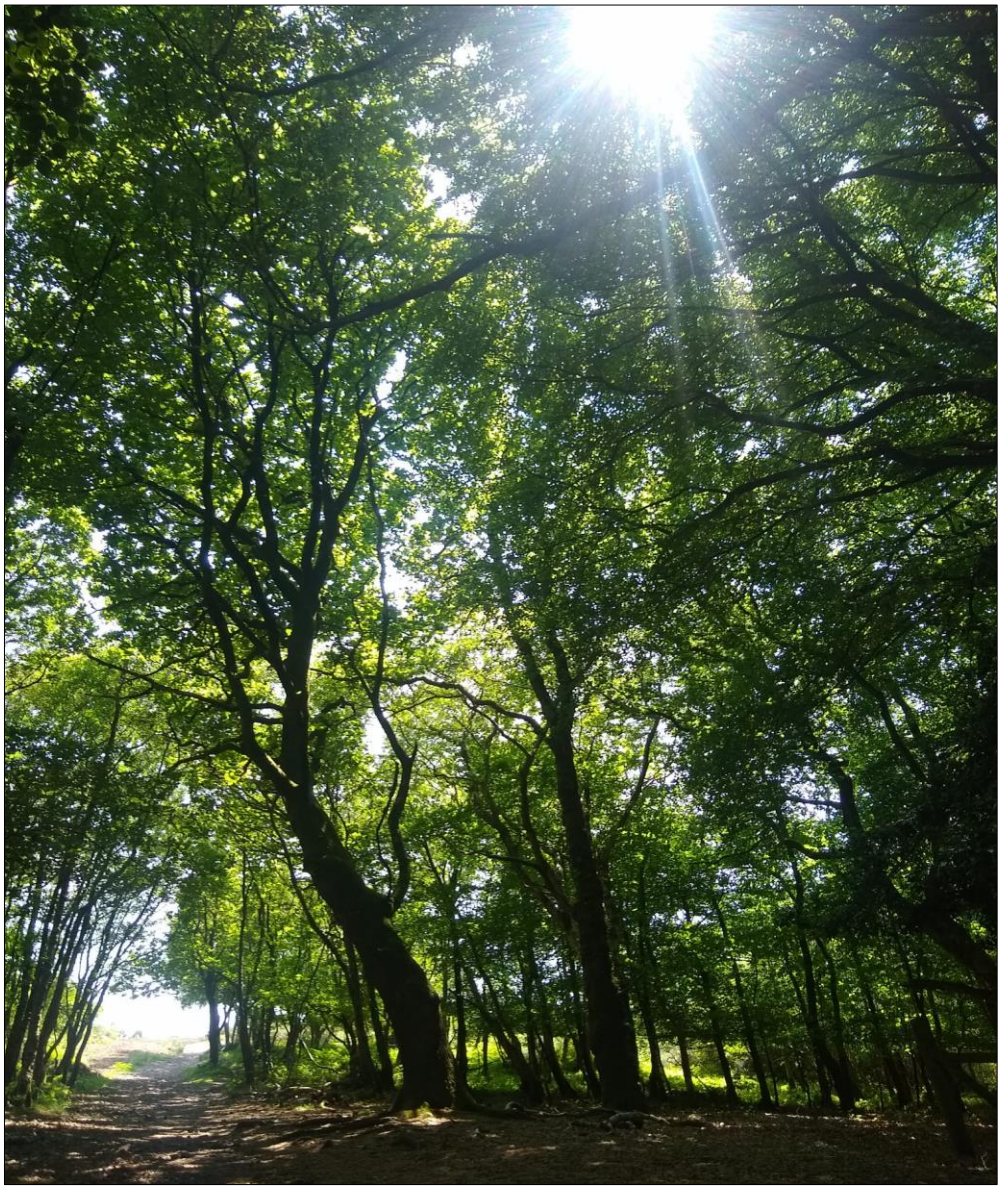


Figure 9. Mixed Woodlands below Woodlands Hill, June 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

[69] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp.109-114.

This sense of unity between the individual and the natural landscape in which they are placed, closely mirrors Taylor's concept of Gaian Spirituality which interprets the natural world as a single entity and conscious expression of the divine.

The Coast and Hinkley Point

I gathered myself and continued along the path, emerging from the trees onto open heathland, dominated by gorse and bracken. I was immediately conscious of how very green the landscape was, with midsummer only a few weeks away. The yellow gorse flowers and the purples of the heather which dominate the landscape for much of the year were largely gone, replaced by differing shades of green as spring passed over to full summer (Figure 10). Here too, I had my first glimpse of the sea to the north. The light was hazy, but I was able to make out the South Wales coast across the Bristol Channel, and the islands of Flat Holm and Steep Holm emerging from the mist.

Figure 10: The open heath around Woodlands Hill, June 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent

Dominating this sea-view was the construction of Hinkley Point C Nuclear Power Station (Figure 11). There are, in fact, three Nuclear Power Stations on this stretch of the North Somerset Coast. Hinkley Point A stopped producing electricity in 2000 but is not expected to complete its decommissioning and final site clearance process until 2091.[70] The neighbouring Hinkley Point B began its decommission phase in 2022.[71] The construction of Hinkley Point C is currently due to be completed in 2028 at an estimated cost of around £32billion and utilising the largest crane in the world.[72]

The Quantocks have a complicated relationship with Hinkley Point. It is hard to overstate the economic importance of Hinkley to the area. A huge number of people are employed in various aspects of the decommissioning of Hinkley B, still more in the construction of Hinkley C. The knock-on effects are evident in successful diversification of farms in the surrounding area, providing farm shops and cafes, for example, and in an increased affluence observed in surrounding villages and particularly the nearby market town of Bridgwater which has seen substantial investment as part of the Hinkley C project. Grants from EDF, the French energy company which operates Hinkley, have also contributed to numerous nature and heritage conservation projects in the surrounding landscape.[73]

It seems highly likely that, were Wordsworth and Coleridge working in the Quantocks today, it would be the voices of the Hinkley workers, many of them economic migrants, living in temporary accommodation close to the site, that the poets would be seeking to capture in their poetry. These, surely, are a modern equivalent of the charcoal burners, millers, tanners and other working people to whom they sought to give voice in 'Lyrical Ballads'. That the poets did not seek to question the environmental impact of these practices is a reminder that their relationship with the natural world at the end of the eighteenth century was not framed by environmental crisis.

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[70] Nuclear Decommissioning Agency/Department of Energy & Climate Change, *The 2010 UK Radioactive Waste Inventory: Main Report* (February 2011).

[71] Reuters*, Second Reactor At UK's Hinkley Point B Switched Off For Decommissioning* (1 August 2022) <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/second-reactor-uks-hinkley-point-b-switched-off-decommissioning-2022-08-01/> [accessed 21 June 2023].

[72] BBC News, *Hinkley Point: World's Largest Crane Begins Work In Somerset (*11 September 2019) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-49673561 [accessed 21 June 2023].

[73] EDF*, Community Fund* https://www.edfenergy.com/energy/nuclear-new-build-projects/hinkley-point-c/local-community/being-part-of-the-community/community-fund [accessed 21 June 2023].

Figure 11: Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station dominates the view across the Bristol Channel from Woodlands Hill, June 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

However, there are many people in the area who have expressed concern about the environmental impact both of the vast construction project at Hinkley Point, and the subsequent operation of the facility. The protest group Stop Hinkley opposes any expansion of the Hinkley Point site, expressing concern about the temporary storage of nuclear waste on site, potentially for decades whilst a permanent solution is sought.[74] In October 2011, in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, more than 200 protesters blockaded the Hinkley site in protest at EDF Energy's plans for the construction of two new reactors at Hinkley C, and to call on the government to suspend plans for seven new nuclear plants across the UK.[75]

[74] Stop Hinkley, *Response To BE Takeover By EDF* (24 September 2008). < http://stophinkley.org/PressReleases/pr080924.htm > [accessed 1 May 2022].
[75] The Guardian, *Hinkley Point Power Station Blockaded By Anti-Nuclear Protesters* (3 October 2011) <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/oct/03/hinkley-point-protest-nuclear-power> [accessed 27 June 2023].

Figure 12: Stone Cairn on Woodlands Hill, looking towards Dowsborough Hillfort, June 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

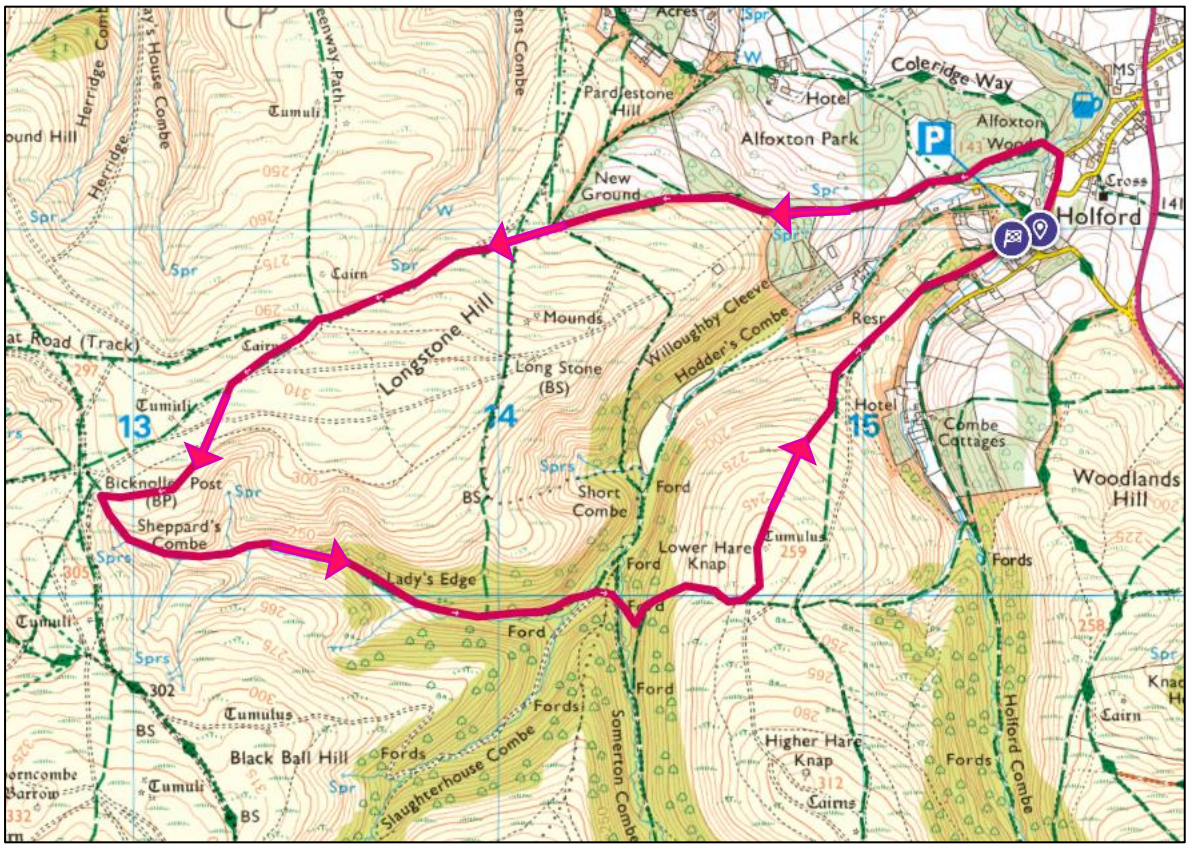
I moved on, continuing north towards Holford, initially climbing slightly to a stone cairn marking the highest point of the path. This is the summit of Woodlands Hill, which seems likely to be the spot which Dorothy Wordsworth described visiting on February 26 1798, from where she,

> gazed on the landscape till it melted into more than natural loveliness. The sea very uniform, of a pale greyish blue, only one distant bay, bright and blue as a sky; had there been a vessel sailing up it, a perfect image of delight.[76]

That landscape still exists, but it is overshadowed by the site of Hinkley, which serves as a potent reminder of the difficulty in attempting to balance humanity's demands for energy with the needs of the environment. Only a few hundred metres from my momentary reverie, any sense of union with nature now seemed remote and naïve. The shadow of Hinkley, however, was a stark reminder of the interconnectedness of all things and that humanity's relationship with the environment cannot continue to be one sided.

[76] Wordsworth D., *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, p. 147.

Walk Three: Circular Walk from Holford Glen, via Longstone Hill, Sheppard's Combe and Hare Knap, July 2023.



Map 5. Route of circular walk from Holford, visiting, Holford Glen, Longstone Hill, the Great Track, Shepherds Combe, and the Hare Knaps. Image: Ordnance Survey, 2023.

Holford Glen

I began this walk at Holford Glen, a steep-sided gorge in the heart of Holford village at which two streams meet, flowing from their sources in the hills (Map 5). The glen has been identified as the site of a waterfall which Tom Mayberry described as representing 'nature's animating presence' at the heart the poets' Quantock lives'.[77] Coleridge described the glen in 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison':

[77] Mayberry, *The Crucible Of Friendship*, p. iv.

The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,
And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
Flings arching like a bridge;—that branchless ash,
Unsunn'd and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
Fann'd by the water-fall![78]

Although there remained a wildness at its heart, the glen was now overlooked on all sides: the northern edge surrounded by deer proof fencing, limiting access to a proscribed route (Figure 13) whilst, on the southern side, rear gardens of cottages impinged on the glen, again restricting access. A public right of way led to a foot bridge constructed in the late nineteenth century and from which the visitor can look down on the streams (Figure 14). In recent months, the Quantock Hills National Landscape Service had undertaken pruning of the area to open up the view of the glen from the bridge, in part on the suggestion of the Friends of Coleridge Society. However, the view that this revealed would have been entirely unknown to the poets. As I looked down from the bridge, I found myself imagining the writers in the gorge below, but it was far harder to imagine the scene from their point of view (Figure 15). The bridge and the reinstated view have taken away from any sense of wildness they may have enjoyed.

The most obvious change, however, was the waterfall itself, which I found to be little more than a brook gently descending into the gorge. The reasons for this change were evident a few hundred metres upstream, in the remains of a Silk Mill and Dye House (Figure 16). Amongst the ruins are evidence of waterwheel pits and leats which diverted the course of the streams through the glen. According to Hazel Riley, these ruins are likely to date to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century.[79] Given the frequent use that the poets made of the glen without ever mentioning these substantial industrial workings, it seems likely they were constructed after they left the Quantocks.

[78] Coleridge, *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin 2004), p. 138.
[79] Hazel Riley, *The Historic Landscape Of The Quantock Hills* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2006), p. 146

Figure 13. Deer proof fencing around Holford Glen, July 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent

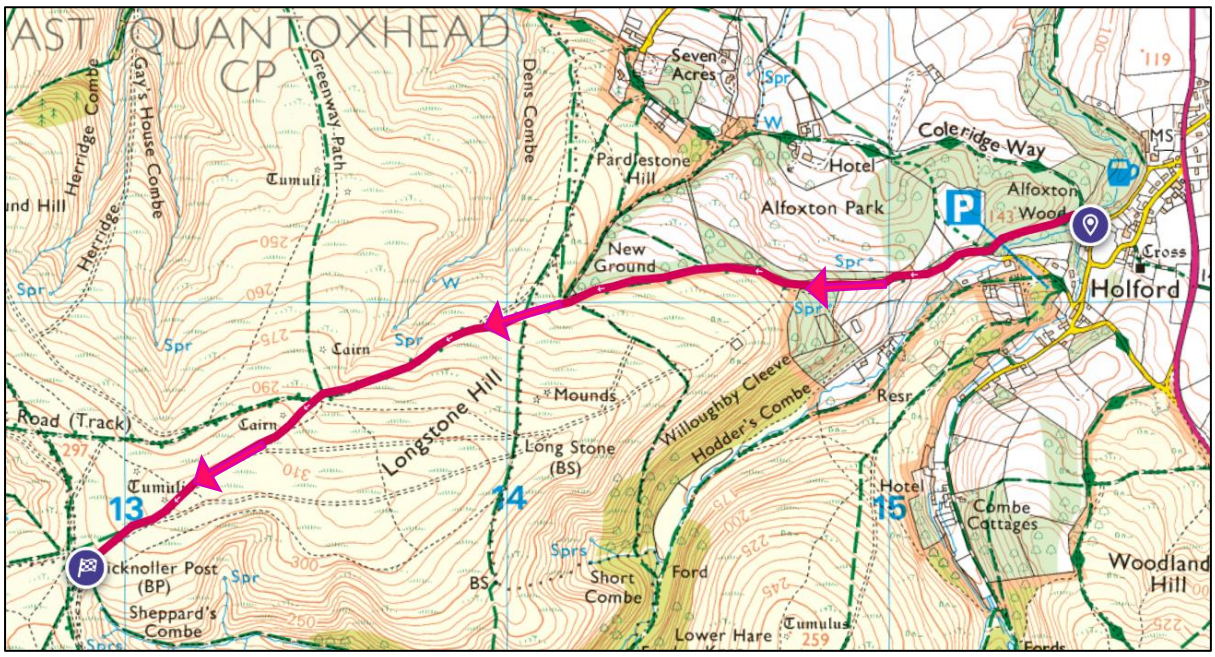
Figure 14. Foot bridge over Holford Glen, July 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

Figure 15. View from bridge over Holford Glen, July 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

Figure 16. Ruins of Silk Mill, Holford Glen, July 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

Longstone Hill

'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison', was one of the first of Coleridge's poems to capture his profound connection to the Quantock landscape. Somewhat ironically, it was composed whilst he was recuperating from an accident and unable to walk. Instead, whilst bemoaning his confinement within the 'prison' of his garden, he envisaged the route his friends might have taken whilst walking the hills. From the glen, he imagined them striking out again, until they emerged from the coombe and out onto the high moors. I followed them in my mind's eye, taking the old road which runs south of Alfoxton Park towards Longstone Hill (Map 6).



Map 6. Holford Glen to Longstone Hill. Image: Ordnance Survey, 2023.

Along this track there was much evidence of human impact on the landscape. There were several iterations of hedgebanks running parallel with the track, suggesting various adjustments in boundary lines over the centuries. The track itself had been heavily metaled in places where it might otherwise have become boggy and, as I climbed higher, the track was visibly cut into the slope of the hill, a reminder that even the act of walking, which seems so benign, involves making a mark on the landscape, manipulating and asserting one's authority over nature (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Footpath cut into the approach to Longstone Hill, July 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent

At an area known as New Ground, I left the wood and joined The Great Track, one of the most ancient of trackways across the Quantocks and the main route onto the open moor from Alfoxton (Map 6). As sun was breaking through the cloud, I emerged onto Longstone Hill, one of the most magnificent of the Quantocks' 'airy ridges' that Wordsworth would later recall. On the day of this walk, with the Quantock heath swathed in purple heather (Figure 18), it was easy to imagine it much as Coleridge described in 'This Lime Tree Bower…':

> Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
> Live in the distant yellow light, ye distant groves!
> And kindle, thou blue ocean![80]

[80] Coleridge, *Complete Poems,* p. 139.

There was an illusion of remoteness on the top of the hills. Despite being close to the relatively large villages of Holford and Nether Stowey, for as far as I could see I had the entire ridge to myself. To the north, the slope of the hill gave way to pockets of conifer plantation amidst gently descending pasture which stopped abruptly at the coast. The view was then dominated by the seascape stretching across to Wales (Figure 19). Turning to the south-west, the Brendon Hills were patchworked with arable and pasture fields, beyond which lay the more rugged landscape of Exmoor National Park. To the south-east, the expanse of heathland, dominated by gorse, bracken and heather, extended as far as the horizon, with the wooded summit of Dowsborough Hill just visible due East. Struggling for words to convey this scene, the only one which came to me was 'heavenly'. Similar thoughts occurred to Coleridge as he described his friends witnessing this same scene, finding themselves,

> Beneath the wide wide Heaven – and view again
> The many- steepled tract magnificent
> Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea…[81]

Here, Coleridge turned to religious imagery to emphasise the sense of wonder that the view from the summit instilled in him. However, there was no suggestion that the landscape itself was sacred. Rather, the hills stretched out beneath heaven, perhaps close enough to be touched by the divine.

During my own visit, sound was again a factor in creating this sense of the sacred. Although not a particularly windy day, there was an almost constant breeze blowing off the coast, loud and persistent enough to drown out other sounds, indeed almost drowning out thought, which had the effect of helping to fix me both in my present landscape and the present moment. Considering how hard I had found the walk up from Holford, I felt entirely rejuvenated and revitalized.

[81] Coleridge, *Complete Poems,* p. 139.

Figure 18. Purple heather on Longstone Hill, looking South July 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

Figure 19. Looking north across the Bristol Channel from Longstone Hill, July 2023.
Photo: Dan Broadbent.

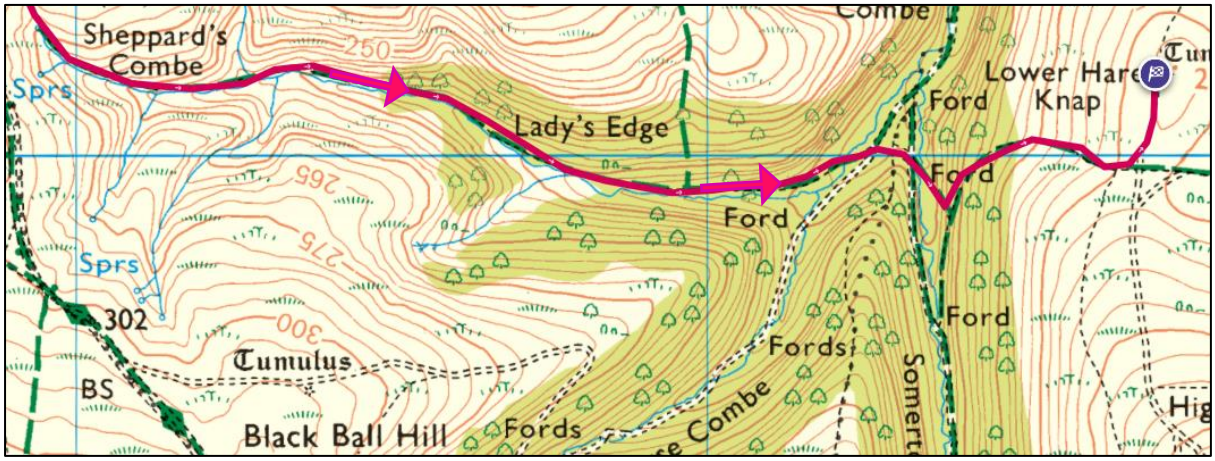
Leaving The Great Track, I followed a meandering animal track towards the summit of the hill, where I was presented with a panoramic view and found myself at the same height as a bank of cumulous cloud to the south (Figure 20). Like Coleridge, I felt physically closer to heaven. Yet despite this, there were further reminders of humankind's ongoing colonization of this landscape. Several prehistoric burial mounds were visible close to the summit, as were the patchwork of farmed fields in the distance. Hinkley Point was once again visible on the north Quantock coast and occasionally, when the wind dropped, traffic from the A39 was audible, as was the distant sound of tree-felling from one of Forestry England's plantations within the National Landscape.

Figure 20. Cumulus cloud on the horizon, Longstone Hill, July 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

Sheppard's Combe

On the Southern edge of Longstone Hill, I followed the course of a stream from its spring towards a series of fords deep in the heart of the combes (Map 7). At the higher point of Sheppard's Combe the stream was hidden behind dense bracken, but it could be heard, eagerly babbling. Coleridge was inspired by the streams that flow through the Quantock combes to plan an epic poem following the course of an imagined brook, from source to sea, as analogy for life of man. Just as I, too, was beginning to find myself beguiled by the wonder of this natural landscape, however, I came to two sections of path which had been shored up

along the course of the stream, a reminder of the illusory nature of these hills as wild, and that human interaction with this landscape is largely based upon attempts to control it.



Map 7. Shepherds Combe to Lower Hare Knapp. Image: Ordnance Survey, 2023.

The hills today are a managed landscape, as they have been for thousands of years. Much of the modern management is aimed at preservation and conservation of the natural environment, as well as encouraging biodiversity through programs of habitat renewal. This, however, raises the question of what is natural and what is artificial in the landscape. Another increasingly important factor in the management of the hills is the recognition of the health benefits of increased access to nature. Preempting this awareness by nearly 230 years, Coleridge wrote of his friend, Charles Lamb, having,

> … hungered after Nature, many a year,
> the great City pent, winning thy way
> With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain…[82]

Here Coleridge emphasised nature as an antidote to the evil and pain caused by extended time in the 'great City' and such an understanding is relevant to considerations of Dark Green Religion. The disconnect between nature and an urbanised humankind was noted by James Lovelock, pioneer of the Gaia Hypothesis. Taylor subsequently quoted Lovelock's worldview in relation to his own framework of Dark Green Religion:

[82] Coleridge, *The Complete Poems,* p. 139.

> Over half the Earth's population live in cities, and they hardly ever see, feel or hear the natural world… We need most of all to renew that love and empathy for nature that we lost when we began our love affair with city life.[83]

Taylor interpreted this worldview as evidence of Lovelock's Gaian Naturalism, the form of Dark Green Religion whose proponents, though sceptical of the supernatural, 'express awe and wonder when facing the complexity and mysteries of life and the universe'.[84] Therefore, Coleridge's longing for his friend Lamb to be restored in nature was both in keeping with current trends on wellbeing, and may reasonably be interpreted as a form of Dark Green Religion. However, improving accessibility to landscapes like the Quantock Hills involves making further marks of humanity upon them, in terms of footpaths, carparks, diversions of waterways, and intervention in which certain species are encouraged to thrive.

As my route continued, I found myself heading back into woodland, the bracken giving way to a carpet of whortleberries beneath more established tree cover. At the same time, the stream, having grown stronger, became visible once more. Multi-stemmed trees, the remains of ancient coppicing, reached in all directions, light dappling through to play on the waters of the stream. It was easy to imagine this combe as an enchanted, fantasy landscape, a setting of fairy tales (Figure 21).

If, as Coleridge undoubtedly was, one is predisposed to such flights of the imagination, the wooded combes would be an abundant source of inspiration and Coleridge's poems of the Quantock period contain much of the fantastic and supernatural. The poem 'Christabel', for example, the first part of which was composed in Nether Stowey, is rich in mystical imagery. It begins with the eponymous heroine, a virtuous young woman, leaving her father's castle under the cover of night, and straying into the surrounding woodland to pray by a huge oak tree. As she prays, she encounters the mysterious Geraldine, who claims to have been abducted by men on horseback and left by the oak. Christabel, in sympathy for the stranger's plight, brings her back to her father's castle.

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[83] James Lovelock, The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p.148; Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 37.
[84] Taylor, *Dark Green Religion,* p. 16.

Figure 21. Entering the woods in Sheppard's Combe, July 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

It is intriguing that the virtuous Christabel seeks the woodland in which to pray. She is clearly Christian, as evidenced by the invocation of 'Jesu, Maria, shield her well!', when she first encounters Geraldine. [85] Why then, take to nature to pray, rather than the castle's chapel? There is an implicit sexuality to the poem, as Geraldine is invited to share Christabel's bed. The poem can be read as the story of a virtuous young woman wrestling with her own sexual awakening. Perhaps she feels such emotions cannot be articulated within the framework of dogmatic religion, and therefore seeks out 'that far other lore' which Coleridge expressed in poems such as 'Frost at Midnight'.[86] Spirituality sought in nature once again seemed to offer Coleridge something that orthodox religion could not, something more primal, which spoke to the lived experience of ordinary people. As the poem develops, however, Christabel found herself bewitched by Geraldine. Here, as in his description of the wild child of 'The Foster Mother's Tale', Coleridge expressed his own sense of awe in the power of nature as something which could not be brought under the control of

[85] Coleridge, *Complete Poems*, pp. 187-205
[86] Coleridge, *Complete Poems* p.232

religious dogma. Both the fostered child and the character of Geraldine are personifications of a nature that has agency and intelligence and can, therefore, be read as evidence of the form of Dark Green Religion Taylor termed Spiritual Animism.

Hare Knap

I left the woods via the eastern edge of Somerton Combe, a steep climb up towards the lower of two neighbouring hills known as the Hare Knaps (Map 5). It is likely that these slopes were where Coleridge composed Fears in Solitude in April 1798. Academic analysis of this poem has tended to focus on its political nature, and its patriotic defense of Britain at a time when threat of invasion from France was very real. However, the poem is also a celebration of the natural world and provides one of Coleridge's most detailed descriptions of the Quantock landscape. The poem opens with a description of 'a quiet spirit-healing nook':

> A green and silent spot amid the hills,
> A small and silent dell!—O'er stiller place
> No singing sky-lark ever pois'd himself![87]

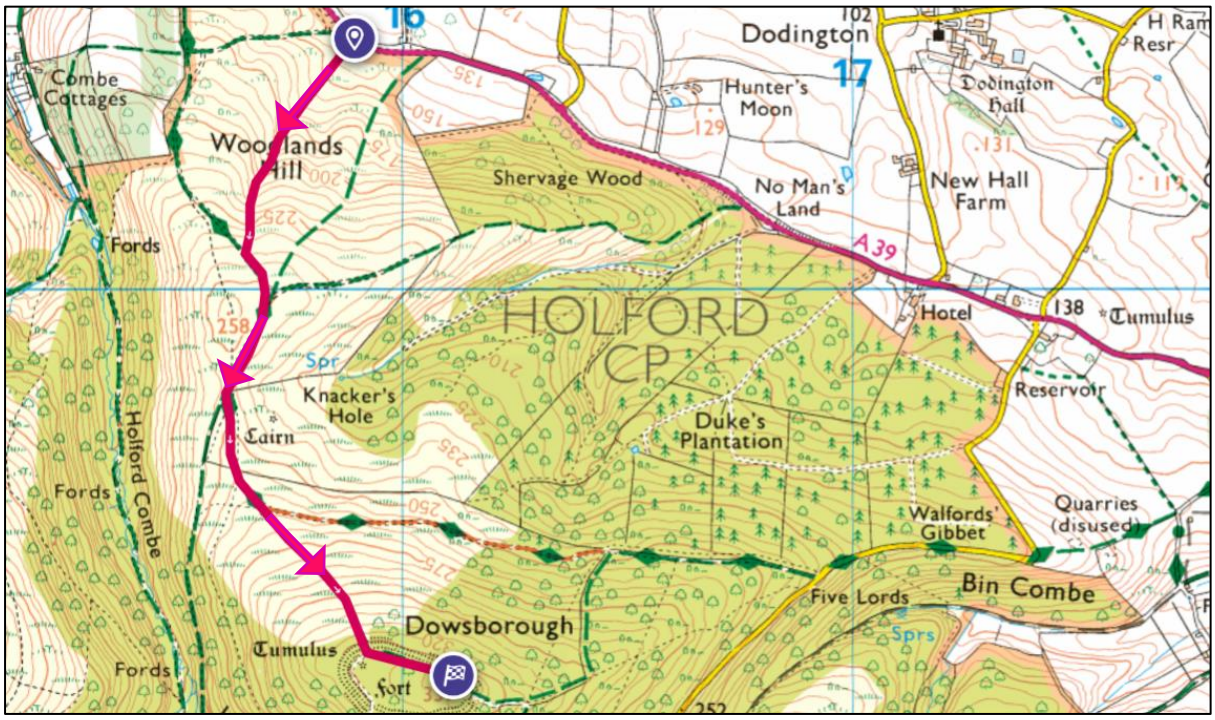
This poem, like 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison', demonstrated that the high Quantocks were, for Coleridge both evidence of, and means of communion with, the divine. Here he found

> …many feelings, many thoughts,
> Made up a meditative joy, and found
> Religious meanings in the forms of Nature!

This walk, however, also highlighted the tensions between human and nature in the Quantock landscape where, for millennia, humans have managed and maintained this landscape and, to no small degree, created the 'natural beauty' of the hills.

[87] Coleridge, *Complete Poems,* pp. 239-244

Walk Four: Night Walk visiting Shervage Wood, Woodlands Hill, and Dowsborough Hillfort, 23 August 2023



Map 8. Route from Woodlands Hill Car park, via Woodlands Hill, to Dowsborough Hillfort. Image: Ordnance Survey, 2023.

Apprehension and anticipation

It is clear, both from Coleridge and Wordsworth's poetry and from Dorothy's journal entries, that the poets frequently walked at night. Therefore, I set out to explore part of the Quantocks which was frequently covered in the writers' evening walks by making an 'out-and-back' walk through Shervage Wood, to Dowsborough Hillfort, via Woodlands Hill (Map 8). It is not always clear why the poets chose to head onto the hills in the hours of darkness, but privacy may be one reason, their love of walking for the purpose of recreation alone being, as Mayberry observed, considered deeply suspect by the local people.[88] Alternatively, the trio may have been seeking particular experiences available only at night. For example, each of the writers make numerous references to astronomical bodies. However, it is unclear if they deliberately ventured out to observe the night sky or whether these observations were a by-product of walks which had another motivation.

[88] Tom Mayberry, *Coleridge And Wordsworth*, p. 88.

Figure 22. Dragon carving and information board at Woodlands Hill car park, August 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent

The part of the hills covered by this walk is particularly rich in folklore, as I was reminded by the carving of a dragon at the car park at the foot of Woodlands Hill, and an information panel detailing the story of the Gurt Worm, a well-known local folk tale of a dragon which made its home in the woods on the slopes of Dowsborough Hill (Figure 22).

Given Coleridge's propensity for the supernatural, the lure of the inexplicable may also been a motivation for setting out in the hours of darkness.

Leaving the carpark, I followed a turfed path which ran uphill along the edge of Shervage Wood. It was a deceptively steep climb, with thick bracken to my left and the woods, dominated by birch, on my right. It was a landscape similar in many ways to Sheppard's Combe but my sensations here were very different. Whereas I had been delighted and energised by that walk on gloriously sunny morning, now, with the light beginning to fade, I felt far more apprehensive and my imagination began running rampant. The tree line seemed more than just a physical boundary: there was still dim daylight on the path and I felt relatively safe, but this only emphasised the sense of foreboding I experienced just by looking into the woods which were already shrouded in darkness. The sense that creatures may be hiding in the woods was confirmed when a deer suddenly bounded out of the trees, before quickly retreating as I attempted to get a closer look.

Traffic noise from the busy A39 road dominated the soundscape as I climbed the hill, but when it occasionally dropped, there was near complete silence and an accompanying sense of stillness. Not far from the summit, however, sirens alerted me to a number of police vehicles and ambulances passing through the village of Holford below. Shortly afterwards I heard the sound of a helicopter, which I initially took to be an air ambulance, associated with the lights and sirens. However, once the source of this sound emerged, it turned out to be two very low flying military helicopters, presumably on a training exercise out over the Bristol channel. I tracked their course as they flew further out, the noise dissipating almost as quickly as it had arrived, until calm returned once more, leaving the very gentlest of breezes as the only sound. This was a reminder that not only the appearance but also the sounds of the hills today are very different from the late eighteenth century.

Woodlands Hill

As I neared the summit, the view north across to Wales had the appearance of a watercolour painting in muted blue and violet tones (Figure 23). The outline of the far shore was visible only in silhouette, the landmarks that had been so distinct from Longstone Hill were here invisible, creating, perhaps, an illusion of how this view appeared in the poets' time. The last time I was on Woodlands Hill (Walk Two), I noted the various shades of green with little other visible colour. On this evening visit, however, the slopes of Dowsborough in

the distance were tinted purple, and Longstone Hill to the west was similarly banked in heather. In the dimming light, even the dirt path on which I was walking appeared to be tinted pink.

Figure 23. Looking north across the Bristol Channel from Woodlands hill, August 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

As I emerged onto the top of the hill, my trepidation began to leave me, replaced by the sensation, perhaps illusory, that more than ever I had the hills entirely to myself. I could not help but notice the interaction of sky and land, even more dramatic than during daylight (Figure 24). As the light faded, the detail of the landscape began to be lost, replaced by subtle tones of colour which mirrored those of the sky in its final minutes of sunlight. The sense of otherness which I had experienced at Longstone Hill was only amplified in this fading light. Once again Coleridge's suggestion of the hills bringing us closer to heaven was easy to recognise, perhaps closer than ever at this time of day. I was witnessing a more subtle beauty than I had recognised at Longstone. However, my sensations here were less

concerned with the visual than with a feeling which I have again struggled to put into words. One word that did come to mind was 'soul' – as if an indefinable essence of myself was communicating directly with the divine. It was certainly an experience that could be described as 'ineffable', one of the four 'marks' of an authentically religious or 'mystical' experience as defined by William James (1842-1910). James described 'ineffability' as a negative state of mind in that the experience is impossible to be adequately described in words.[89] I am less certain that my experience possessed the second of James' marks: the 'noetic' quality of some form of knowledge being imparted. However, it was certainly 'transient', James' third mark of religious experience, and created in me a sense of 'passivity' as if I 'were grasped and held by a superior power', James' fourth identifying mark.[90]

Figure 24: The evening sky above Longstone Hill, viewed from Woodlands Hill, August 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

[89] James, *The Varieties*, p.380.
[90] James, *The Varieties*, p.381.

Wordsworth captured his own experience of night sky over the Quantocks in 'A Night Piece'. In the poem, the sky is initially covered in cloud, a veil through which the moon can be only 'indistinctly seen'. However, in a moment, the clouds part to reveal the moon, stars and 'the glory of the heavens'.

> … still they roll along
> Immeasurably distant; and the vault,
> Built round by those white clouds, enormous clouds,
> Still deepens its unfathomable depth.
> At length the Vision closes; and the mind,
> Not undisturbed by the delight it feels,
> Which slowly settles into peaceful calm,
> Is left to muse upon the solemn scene.[91]

Here too are the elements of passivity, as the writer is held captivated by the unfolding scene; transience, as 'the Vision closes'; and perhaps ineffability, as the writer muses upon the solemn scene. A noetic quality too is hinted at in the 'not undisturbed' mind. For my own part I, too, was captive to the experience, and I struggled to pull myself away. Eventually, however, I recovered myself enough to begin another slow climb up to the remains of an iron age hillfort at the summit of Dowsborough Hill.

Dowsborough Hillfort

As I climbed, the wind picked up. I also became very conscious of my own footsteps on the dirt path, which seemed to increase in volume as I ascended. My trepidation began to return, as if the sound of my approach might disturb whatever might be lurking within the woods on the summit of the hill. Dowsborough is steeped in folklore, including several ghosts and sightings of the Wild Hunt, along with the Gurt Worm itself which, according to some versions of that story, carved out the massive ditch and bank earthworks which encircle the summit of the hill, to form a monstrous dragon's nest. My knowledge of these stories, coupled with the foreboding darkness of the tree line made it very easy to

[91] William Wordsworth, *Poems* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, And Brown, 1815), pp. 301-302.

experience Dowsdorough as liminal place, existing not just on the division between open heathland and woodland, but also a border between the present and the past; as a boundary to a world of myth; and more tangibly as a boundary between light and dark. Outside the hillfort, in the twilight, there was still light enough to see. Inside, its earthworks, however, it was almost completely dark (Figure 25). Liminality can be identified in a number of Coleridge's works. For example, in the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', the protagonist can be read as a liminal being, forced to witness the death of his crew mates though he himself 'could not die'.[92] Similarly, in 'The Foster Mother's Tale', the wild child exists in an ambiguous state between untameable nature and humankind's pretentions of civilisation.[93]

My mind began playing tricks on me: at one point I was certain that I could discern the outline of a small creature, perhaps a rabbit or fox, moving in the shadows a few metres in front of me. However, when I shone the light from my phone at spot, I found only a moss-covered rock. I had neither desire nor intention to venture too deeply into the full

Figure 25: Entering the tree cover of Dowsborough Hillfort, August 2023.
Photo: Dan Broadbent.

[92] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 1-25.
[93] Coleridge, *Complete Poems*, pp. 140-142.

darkness of the hillfort's interior and so left the woodland and began to retrace the route back to my car. Darkness was now quickly beginning to fall, the sky bruising to deep blue, crossed with purple-grey clouds. Looking out again across to Wales, the lights of cities were now visible. Hinkley Point, too, was now lit up, dramatically changing the prospect from Dowsborough, and reducing my sense of remoteness. (Figure 26). However, the lights did not offend me, instead offering a reassuring landmark as I made my way downhill in the darkness. The landscape to my left was far darker, and I tried to imagine walking the hills as the poets did, in darkness and without the lights of Hinkley as a guide.

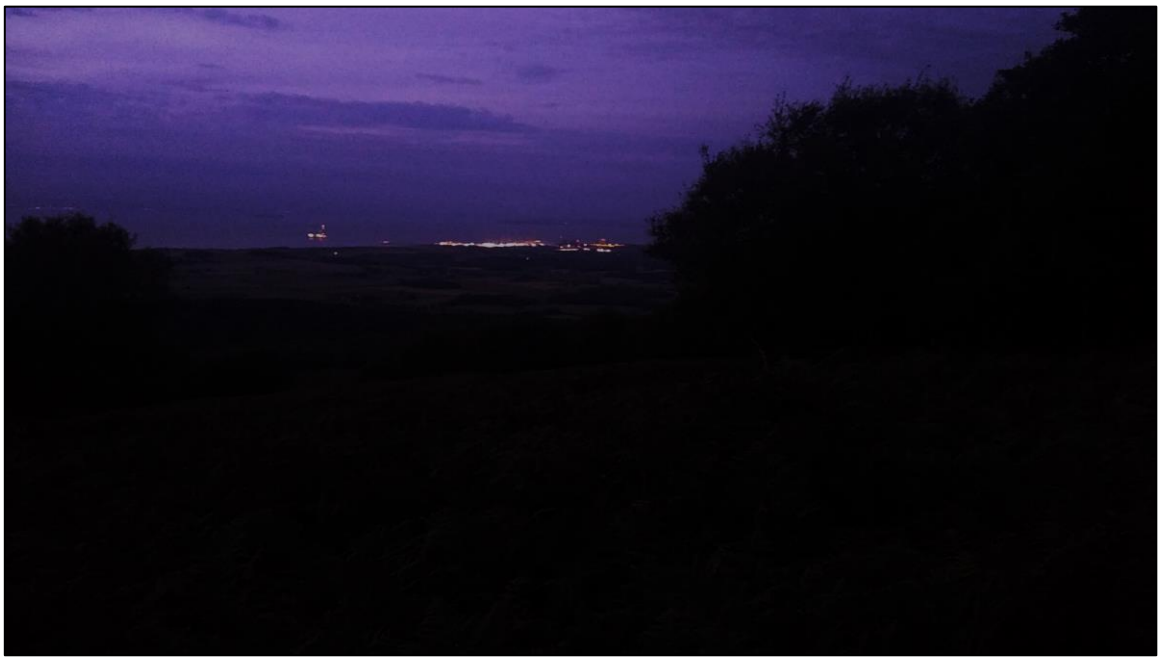


Figure 26: The lights of Hinkley Point nuclear power station, viewed from Dowsborough Hill, August 2023. Photo: Dan Broadbent.

It is one thing to enjoy an evening walk in the summer months but, in winter, there comes a point when darkness falls so fully that the division between the land and sky disappears into blackness, the horizon can no longer be discerned and it is all too easy to lose all bearing and orientation. This evening, however, the hills largely felt benign, a soft, unthreatening landscape. There was something about being out on the hills in the quiet of evening which provided a counterpoint to cliches of the night as a time of fear. As I headed back down Woodlands, I turned to look at Dowsborough one final time. It was almost

entirely in silhouette, the tree line at its summit just discernible, but all colour gone. I was reminded of Coleridge's conclusion to 'The Nightingale':

> And you, my friends! farewell, a short farewell!
> We have been loitering long and pleasantly,
> And now for our dear homes.[94]

The process of undertaking these walks, attempting to intentionally follow in both the footsteps and the spirit of Coleridge and Wordsworth, revealed anew a landscape with which I had otherwise became very familiar. Several themes emerged from this program of fieldwork. Collectively, these coalesce around the multi-layered and inter-dependent relationship of the poets and the Quantock landscape: historically, aesthetically, environmentally and spiritually. These themes are discussed in depth the following chapter.

[94] Coleridge, *Complete Poems*, pp. 244-247.

Chapter Three: Discussion of Findings

Walking a Haunted Landscape

In preparing this fieldwork, my focus was largely on the ways in which the Quantock landscape had influenced the thinking and poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. However, in carrying out these walks, the symbiotic nature of this relationship became evident, together with the realisation that any understanding of the Quantock landscape owes greatly to the influence of the poets. The very notion of a protected landscape, of which the Quantock Hills was one of the first in Britain, can be traced back to Coleridge and Wordsworth. In the poem 'Lines on Climbing Brockley Coomb', written immediately prior to his arrival in the Quantocks, Coleridge wrote, 'Ah, what a luxury of landscape meets my gaze' to describe the natural scenery. This, according to Dudley, was one of the first times that the word 'landscape' had been used in this way in English.[95] Wordsworth, as John Gaze identified, would later become one of the originators of the concept of protected landscapes and national parks.[96] In Wordsworth's words, these parks would be, 'a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy'.[97] It can, therefore, be reasonably argued that the Quantock landscape I experienced during these walks would not exist without the influence of both Coleridge and Wordsworth.

The impact of the poets is also evident in less tangible ways. The very fact that the poets were so famously inspired by this landscape has changed the hills for anyone coming after them, making it impossible to truly experience the landscape afresh. Jacques Derrida argued that the spectre is revenant, literally that which comes back and continues to haunt: it 'inhabits without residing'.[98] To borrow from this concept, the poets, though long absent from the hills, simultaneously remain present here. John Wylie related the spectre to landscape, arguing that 'to haunt a landscape is to supplement and disturb it' and during the course of my walks, it became apparent that Wordsworth and Coleridge continue to haunt the Quantocks in exactly this sense.[99] Wylie argued that even solitary walking is essentially

[95] Dudley, 'Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost', p.67
[96] John Gaze, *Figures in a Landscape: A History of the National Trust* (London: Barrie & Jenkins in association with the National Trust, 1988), p. 10.
[97] Bate, *Romantic Ecology*, pp. 42–3.
[98] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 21.
[99] Wylie, 'A Single Day's Walking', p.246.

relational, dependent upon, and creating a relationship with, both the physical landscape and its cultural history.[100] I set out intentionally, to visit particular places associated with the poets, areas which could be understood using Tilley's concept of locales: areas culturally created and full of associated symbolism and meaning.[101] These Quantock locales, such as Adscombe Chapel (Figure 2), Hoflord Glen (Figure 15), Longstone Hill(Figure 19), or Dowsborough (Figure 24), have been formed over centuries, firstly through the visits and writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge themselves, and then by subsequent scholars, artists, writers, and walkers who have sought to revisit them. Like many of these visitors, I was undertaking a kind of pilgrimage to these locales, which exist only because Wordsworth and Coleridge had been inspired by them 230 years ago. As I did so, the spectres of the poets were undeniably in attendance. Even when walking along later-planted beech hedgebanks, or looking down from a bridge that was non-existent during their time, it was impossible not to feel the poets' presence.

Expectations of Nature

As John Sheail noted, when the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act was finally passed in 1949, over 100 years after Wordsworth first mooted the concept, a key tenet was the provision of ample public access and facilities.[102] Improving and widening access for more diverse demographic of visitors remains an essential component of the management of protected landscapes, including the Quantock Hills. The Covid lockdowns of recent years have only served to emphasise the importance of access to nature for both physical and mental well-being.[103] Coleridge recognized this 230 years ago, when he acknowledged his friend Chales Lamb's exile from nature and sought his own refuge in the Quantocks (see Walk Three).

Enabling access to nature, however, inevitably requires exerting control over it. It did not take long for Wordsworth to question his call for the formation of national parks. As Dudley pointed out, he amended later editions of his 'Guide to the Lakes', first published in

[100] Wylie, 'A Single Day's Walking', p. 245.
[101] Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, p.18.
[102] John Sheail, 'The Concept of National Parks in Great Britain 1900–1950', *The Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers,* 66 (1975), pp. 41−56, p. 48.
[103] BBC News, 'Nature More Important Than Ever During Lockdown', 26 April 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-56889322> [accessed 11/11/2023].

1810, having recognised that his endorsement risked encouraging large numbers of visitors, thereby despoiling the very qualities for which he had championed the area.[104] Across the Quantocks, visible atempts are being made to improve surfaces, shore up footpaths and trackways, and to maintain car parks. However, it is not just these obvious physical manifestations that demonstrate humans' perceived dominion over the landscape. There are other less obvious tensions over our expectations of what nature should be, and here, again, the spectre of the poets is evident.

The eighteenth century saw the creation of several parkland estates across the hills. Dorothy Wordsworth's journal recorded a visit to Crowcombe Park on April 15 1798 when she and the poets witnessed:

> Quaint waterfalls, about which Nature was very successfully striving to make beautiful what art had deformed—ruins, hermitages, etc. etc… everywhere planted with unnaturalised trees. Happily we cannot shape the huge hills, or carve out the valleys according to our fancy.[105]

Like Dorothy, Wordsworth and Coleridge considered untamed nature more desirable than the contrived landscapes of Crowcombe. Such opinions are increasingly popular in the twenty-first century as solutions are sought to the environmental emergency, most obviously in debates around rewilding, for example. However, true rewilding, defined in part by Holmes et al as a 'conservation approach emphasising reduced human interventions in ecosystems', conflicts with the recognised human benefits of access to nature.[106] Such approaches to conservation also challenge our aesthetic expectations of what the natural world should look like, much of which remain heavily influenced by the notions of landscape and nature developed by Wordsworth, Coleridge and other Romantic writers and artists of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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[104] Dudley, *Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost*, p.71
[105] Wordsworth, D., *The Grasmere And Alfoxden Journals*, p. 297.
[106] George Holmes, Kate Marriott, Charlie Briggs and Sophie Wynne-Jones, 'What Is Rewilding, How Should It Be Done, And Why?, *Conservation and Society* 18.2 (2019), pp. 77-88, p. 77.

Religious Experience

Wordsworth's and Coleridge's desire for reconnection with nature extended much deeper than a recognition of the benefits to health. It is clear, from their poetry, that immersion in nature provided them with the potential for union with the divine. In 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison', for example, Coleridge imagined his friends on the Quantock summit,

> Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
> On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
> Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
> As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
> Spirits perceive his presence.[107]

This is the first clear reference in any of Coleridge's poetry to the reverence in which he held the Quantock landscape, and he did so within a framework of explicit religiosity.

In his depiction of the awestruck senses 'swimming' as the landscape was revealed to be something beyond physical, there was a sense of the division between landscape and viewer breaking down. Although they were fleeting, I experienced my own moments of reverie during the course of my walks. Although these experiences can be interpreted as having a spiritual or religious dimension, not least when considered via Wiliam James' definition of religious experience, they can also be explained rationally. For example, I became aware that my method of walking was very different to that employed by the poets. Wordsworth and Coleridge adopted a form of walking akin to what Tim Ingold described as wayfaring: actively engaging with the country that opens up along a given route, rather than travelling directly from A to B.[108] The poets were thereby discovering the Quantocks anew, allowing the landscape to reveal itself gradually, step by step. In contrast, I found myself tending to walk much more quickly through more built-up areas or along tarmac roads, attempting to reach those areas I deemed to be of significance as quickly as possible. Only when I approached the locales associated with the poets, or areas of particular beauty, did I slow to a more natural pace, allowing myself to become more engaged and aware of my

[107] Coleridge, *The Complete Poems,* p. 139.
[108] Ingold, *Lines*, p. 78.

surroundings. It was in these moments that my own brief episodes of reverie occurred, and I was overtaken by the sensation of union with my surroundings, just as Coleridge and Wordsworth individually reported.

Jabr wrote of the ways in which different forms of walking impact on our physiological and mental states,

> Walking at our own pace creates an unadulterated feedback loop between the rhythm of our bodies … the pace of our feet naturally vacillates with our moods and the cadence of our inner speech; at the same time, we can actively change the pace of our thoughts by deliberately walking more briskly or by slowing down.[109]

Similarly, the poets engaged in differing ways of walking which inspired their individual creative imaginations. According to Bate, the poets' friend and publisher William Hazlitt observed that, whereas Coleridge preferred to compose whilst 'walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copse-wood', Wordsworth wrote 'walking up and down a straight gravel walk, or in some spot where the continuity of his verse met with no collateral interruption.'[110] Taking this observation further, Colley noted the relationship between 'the landscape's ever fluctuating and vibrant being', and Coleridge's 'hastily written notebook entries'.[111] In contrast, Nicholson described the carefully revised entries which Wordsworth made in his own Quantock notebooks.[112]

Where one walks can also impact on one's mental state. My sublime experiences occurred in the woods (Figure 9); on the summit of the hills looking out over a sea and sky and a landscape of seemingly endless hills (Figure 19); and beneath an awe-inspiring sunset as night fell (Figure 24). Adopting Bachelard's 'Poetics of Space', Wylie theorised that the immensity of just such settings 'resonates with a daydreaming state of preoccupation and self-reflection, a peculiarly intense space of interiority itself experienced as boundless'.[113] Bachelard himself suggested that in such situations, 'two kinds of space - the space of

[109] Jabr, 'Why Walking Helps Us Think'.
[110] Bate, *Romantic Ecology,* p. 49.
[111] Colley, 'Coleridge Walks', p.28.
[112] Nicolson, *The Making Of Poetry,* pp. 188-189
[113] Wylie, *A Single Day's Walking'*, p.238

intimacy and the world-space - blend. When human solitude deepens, then the two immensities touch and become identical'.[114] In these ways, the types of walking adopted by the poets in particular settings, likely contributed to Wordsworth's 'sense sublime' and Coleridge's 'swimming sense', which can, in turn, be understood as co-productions of their mental states and the landscape through which they walked to inspire their poetry.[115]

The Power of Nature

For both Coleridge and Wordsworth, such experiences were indicative of the potential for deeper relationship with nature. Both poets, for example, repeatedly wrote of nature as a teacher, offering access to an 'other lore'. Pite critiqued this idea, observing that it failed to offer any genuine ecological understanding.[116] However, these poems suggest that the other lore is neither rational nor material but profoundly spiritual. In 'The Tables Turned', Wordsworth advised a 'wise passiveness' wherein one might be open to such learning.[117] In this way, he was foreshadowing James' descriptions of religious experience in their necessary passivity. In 'Frost at Midnight', Coleridge likened nature to the language of God itself.[118] In this sense, to receive the other lore also accorded with James' understanding of religious experience as having the 'noetic' quality of knowledge being imparted.[119] Piper interpreted Coleridge's religious beliefs at the end of the eighteenth century as centred on nature being 'the visible action of God, exerted through intelligent forces [which], when organised, formed the Divine Mind'.[120]

Nature, however, was not always benign. Certainly, for Coleridge, the other lore is also linked to the untameable power of nature, so awesome that it can only be described with reference to the supernatural. Whether it is the character of Geraldine emerging from behind a great oak tree at which Christabel prayed, the punishment unleashed on the Ancient Mariner, or the untameable personification of nature in 'The Foster Mother's Tale', Coleridge was in awe of the power of nature as a destructive force, which threatened human notions of civilisation. These supernatural poems also contain an essential liminality, existing

[114] Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space,* p.203.
[115] Pite, 'How Green Were The Romantics?', p.357.
[116] Pite, 'How Green Were The Romantics?', p.365.
[117] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 99-100.
[118] Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, p. 231.
[119] James, *The Varieties,* p.380.
[120] Piper, 'The Pantheistic Sources Of Coleridge's Early Poetry', p. 54.

in a world which is part human, part fantasy. This liminal quality reflected the poets' own lives during the Quantock period, when they were young men delaying adulthood, attempting to balance their increasing worldly responsibilities with their desire to follow their artistic muse and explore the boundaries of what it was to live fully in the world. Both men came to understand that relationship with nature was an essential part of a truly authentic life.

In the 'The Foster Mother's Tale', for example, Coleridge explicitly yearned for a time before humankind became 'civilised' and, in the process, began to become separated from the natural world, a process exacerbated by the rapid industrialisation of the latter eighteenth century. Such thinking anticipated by almost 200 years much modern environmental analysis, including Naess' concept of Deep Ecology.[121]

Dark Green Religion

However, in attempting to understand the poets' relationship with the natural world through the lens of Dark Green Religion, one must first explore the true depth of that relationship. Ronald Rees described the landscape aesthetic of the Romantic Movement as a mixed blessing which, though inspiring the movement for the conservation of nature, also 'confirmed our anthropocentrism by suggesting that nature exists to please as well as to serve us'.[122] Whilst Wordsworth and Coleridge were aware of the damage done to nature by escalating urbanisation and industrialisation at the end of the eighteenth century, their concern was primarily for how this would impact on people, rather than with nature revered for its own sake. In 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison', for example, Coleridge's prime concern was not the natural splendour he describes, but the value of that splendour to his friend Charles Lamb. Similarly, the central theme of Wordsworth's, 'Tintern Abbey' was the power of nature to comfort and transform the mindset of both himself and his sister. Such examples might reasonably be interpreted as representing an anthropocentric relationship with nature, an attitude which contrasts sharply with the insistence of environmentalists like

[121] Arne Naess, 'The Shallow And The Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary', *Inquiry,* 16 (January 1973), pp. 95–100.
[122] Ronald Rees, 'The Taste for Mountain Scenery,' *History Today*, 25 (1975), p. 312.

Næss, who urged an eco-centric world view, rooted in the understanding that the ecological crisis stems from a sense of separation between human and nature.[123]

The ecological depth of the poets' relationship with nature was further challenged by the fact that, as both Downey and Noble observed, following the Quantock period, both Coleridge and Wordsworth moved away from pantheistic or panentheistic understandings of God, to settle upon a more orthodox Christianity.[124] Therefore, if it existed at all, any shift in consciousness from anthropocentric to eco-centric, can be argued to have been only temporary in the case of the poets. In this light, the religious radicalism of the Quantock period might be interpreted as a short-lived experiment. To be taken into account, however, is the fact that Coleridge and Wordsworth were living and writing within an entirely different historical and environmental context from the likes of Naess, Sponsel, and Taylor, unaware of the implications of environmental emergency and climate crisis. How the poets' individual senses of spiritual ecology might have developed, had they been aware of these threats, can only be guessed at.

Walking the Quantocks in the poets' footsteps, whilst immersed in their poetry, and attempting to experience the hills as they had done, revealed an entirely new mental and spiritual landscape existing within the physical one with which I was so familiar. The Quantocks became a landscape more than just naturally beautiful, or historically rich, but one within which the supernatural could be sensed, the divine experienced. The fluidity of both Wordsworth's and Coleridge's individual spiritualities could be glimpsed, and this was emphasised when assessing my experiences and those of the poets, through Taylor's four-fold framework of Dark Green Religion. For example, walking to the ruined Chapel at Adscombe (Walk One) and through the enchanting Quantock Woodlands (Walk Three) helped to reveal evidence of Spiritual Animism in the agency that Coleridge allowed the natural world in his great supernatural poems 'The Foster Mother's Tale' and 'Christabel'. The fleeting sense of union I experienced on walking through the woods towards Holford (Walk Two) can be seen as moment of Gaian Spirituality, which resonated with the 'sense sublime' Wordsworth described in 'Tintern Abbey'. Coleridge's 'This Lime Tree Bowyer My Prison' contains evidence both of Gaian Naturalism, in its recognition of the practical value

[123] Naess, 'The Shallow And The Deep', pp. 95–100.
[124] Downey, *Wordsworth's Religious Philosophy*, p.3-4; Noble, 'A Transcendent and Pragmatic Vision', p. 31.

of nature as a refuge from mental stress, and Gaian Spirituality, in its explicit depiction of the interconnectedness of all things.

This fluidity in interpretation of their own relationship with nature, points to the sense of experimentation which Nicolson recognised of the poets' Quantock period.[125] At the root of their beliefs, however, was an awareness of the close but fragile relationship between humankind and the natural world, an acknowledgement that this relationship was under threat of being broken, and of the need to repair that connection. For both Wordsworth and Coleridge, repairing that break was a fundamentally spiritual yearning.

[125] Nicolson, *The Making of Poetry,* p.2.

Chapter Four: Conclusions

This dissertation set out to explore the relationship between the poetry produced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth during their time spent in the Quantock Hills, and contemporary spiritual and religious approaches to addressing climate crisis and environmental emergency. Specifically it sought to understand whether the poetry the produced during that period can be interpreted as early examples of Taylor's concept of Dark Green Religion, and, if so, how this might add to current debates within the field of Green Romanticism.

To that end, utilising a phenomenological method, adopted from Tilley, which understood the hills to be a historic, cultural landscape, I undertook a series of walks which followed routes and visited specific locations which inspired the poets. Walk One (Map 3) led from Nether Stowey, where Coleridge lived, to the ruined chapel of Adscombe, inspiration for his poem 'The Foster Mother's Tale', which explored the tension between the wildness of nature and human attempts to tame it. Walk Two (Map 4) followed one of the routes most familiar to the poets, linking Coleridge's Nether Stowey Cottage, with Alfoxden, the mansion Wordsworth rented on the edge of Holford. Walk Three (Map 5) was a circular walk taking in several locations of particular importance to the poets, including the waterfall at Holford Glen and the summits of Longstone Hill and Hare Knap, via the wooded combes which inspired some of Coleridge's most explicitly supernatural poems such as 'Christabel'. Walk Four (Map 8) was a night walk, undertaken to replicate the many walks which the poets undertook in the hours of darkness.

The aim of these walks, was to experience afresh a landscape with which I am very familiar, attempting to glimpse it as the poets had done. Although, for well over 100 years, writers such as Greswell, Lawrence, Dudley, and Nicolson have sought to follow in the footsteps of the poets, none have done so with the explicit intention of exploring their spiritual relationship with the Quantocks. My own intention was to compare my experiences during these walks with those of the poets, and to attempt to interpret them within a contemporary framework of Dark Green Religion. My working hypothesis at the outset, was that the Quantock writings of Coleridge and Wordsworth could indeed be reasonably considered as examples of Dark Green Religion. At face value, many of the poems produced during the Quantock period, particularly those of Coleridge, displayed evidence of

experimentation with forms of pantheistic and panentheistic nature religion. As such, these writings seemed to fit with both Sponsel's interpretation of Spiritual Ecology, and Taylor's definition of Dark Green Religion, as belief systems and practices which understand nature to be intrinsically sacred. Over the course of the walks, however, it became apparent that the poets' relationship with the Quantocks was, and remains, far more nuanced.

A Symbiotic Relationship

For both Coleridge and Wordsworth, their relationship with the Quantock landscape was deeply symbiotic. The beauty and variety of landscape, flora and fauna inspired some of both poets' greatest work, including poems such as Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and Wordsworth's 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey'. In turn, the Quantocks provided a canvas onto which the young writers could express the sense of freedom, exploration, and experimentation which they shared at that time in their lives. As discussed in Chapter Three this reciprocal relationship with the Quantocks, and the works it produced, subsequently created the landscape as it is experienced by many visitors today. This is true both in the sense of it being a historic, cultural landscape, consisting of various specific 'locales' such as Holford Glenn, Adscombe Chapel, and the view from Longstone Hill, which originate culturally from the poets' time there, but also in the myriad practical ways that the present-day Quantock Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is managed. As Dudley observed, much of our understanding of what constitutes an aesthetically beautiful landscape originated with Coleridge who was the first to use the term 'landscape' to describe natural beauty, and Wordsworth who was an early champion of the creation of protected landscapes.[126] In these ways, the poets' presence on the hills can still be keenly felt.

Faith in Nature

My walks also helped to reveal the extent to which a sense of interconnection between humankind and nature infused the poets' individual spiritualities. When analysing the environmental credentials of Wordworth and Coleridge, scholars of Green Romanticism, such as Bate and Mckusick, have tended to downplay the religious or supernatural. Instead,

[126] Dudley, *Not All Who Wander Are Lost*, p.73.

as Ottum and Reno observed, such scholarship emphasised the physical nature of the poets' interaction with the natural world, with any sense of spirituality arising from their immersion in nature being explained through scientific understandings of the neurological impact of physical activity within nature.[127] However, the poets' Quantock writings are full of attempts, both implicit and explicit, at mediating the relationship between the natural world and the divine. For example, in 'Frost at Midnight', Coleridge portrayed nature as 'that eternal language, which thy God Utters' (lines 60-61), whilst in 'Fears in Solitude' he found Religious meanings in the forms of Nature' (line 24).[128] In Wordsworth's case, the poems of the Quantock period are often overshadowed by his later works, and this perhaps serves to mask the spiritual radicalism of his youth. However, as Nicolson observed, his Quantock experiences fed directly into 'Tintern Abbey', his first great truly poem.[129] Composed on his departure from Alfoxton, this poem offers his clearest depiction of the joining of the human and divine via contemplation of nature.

> … the breath of this corporeal frame,
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul.[130]

Here, Wordsworth described a form of meditation in nature, during which the soul was awakened as the body was stilled, and union with nature, seen as an expression of God's creation, could occur.

By undertaking these walks, following in the poets' footsteps, I gained glimpses, fleeting and fragmentary as they may have been, of the kinds of experiences which inspired the poets. For example, on Walk Three, my sense of being close to the divine on Longstone Hill, mirrored Coleridge's depiction of his friends viewing the magnificent 'many-steepled tract' stretching out 'Beneath the wide wide Heaven' in 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison' (lines 22-23). The meditative reverie I experienced on Walk Two echoed Wordsworth's

[127] Ottum and Reno, 'Recovering Ecology's Affects', p. 3.
[128] Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, p. 232 and p. 239.
[129] Nicolson, *The Making of Poetry*, p. 311.
[130] Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 110.

‘serene and blessed mood’ in which ‘We see into the life of things’, expressed in Tintern Abbey (lines 43-51). Similarly, the sense of religious awe I experienced as night fell on Woodlands Hill on Walk Four, resonated with Wordsworths vison off the ‘glory of the heavens’ in A Night Piece (line 13).[131]

As noted in Chapter Three, there are rational explanations for such experiences which derive from spending time in nature. Wylie, for example, argued via Bachelard’s ‘Poetics of Space’, that solitude within an awe-inspiring natural landscape could break down the perceived barrier between the self and one’s surroundings.[132] My experiences might be understood as being a product of my mind being receptive to the environment in which I was immersed, the landscape and my own mind combining to create an experience that might be interpreted as religious. As observed in Chapter Three, these experiences often met the criteria for religious experience set out by William James, containing elements of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity.[133]

For Wordsworth and Coleridge, such experiences confirmed the pantheistic spiritualities that Downey and Noble respectively identified in the poets’ early works.[134] The freedom of their Quantock experiment allowed them to explore these ideas further, pushing their thinking to the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy and projecting them back onto the landscape, its flora, fauna, and skyscapes in a symbiotic spiral of creativity. The results were some of the most memorable English poetry, which have, in turn, influenced western understanding of the relationship between humankind and the natural world up to the present day.

Final Thoughts

Through my professional work, I felt I knew well both the Quantock landscape and its importance to Wordsworth and Coleridge. I was surprised, therefore, by the extent to which the process of walking the hills intentionally in their footsteps altered my understanding both of the poets and of the landscape itself. Areas of the hills which were familiar to me revealed themselves anew, presenting new insights. These included a realisation of the

[131] Wordsworth, *Poems,* p. 301.
[132] Wylie, *‘A Single Day's Walking’*, p.238.
[133] James, *The Varieties*, pp. 380-382.
[134] Downey, Wordsworth's Religious Philosophy, p. 4; Noble, ‘A Transcendent And Pragmatic Vision’, p. 31.

reciprocal nature of the poets' relationship with this particular landscape. I also gained an understanding of just how far-reaching the poets' influence has been. Their role in the creation of national parks, landscapes where nature is legally protected, is well attested by the likes of Dudley and Sheail; their influence on the environmental movement, recognised by scholars of Green Romanticism such as Bate and McKusick. Of deeper significance, however, is the extent to which, even at that early date, the poets were aware of the severing of the link between humankind and the natural world, the same break observed by Deep Ecologists such as Naess, and which lies at the heart of much current environmental activism. Their time in the Quantocks was dominated by attempts to find ways of repairing that connection. What has long been overlooked, however, particularly by Green Romanticism, is the extent to which their writings of the period are full of acknowledgment that the division was fundamentally a religious one.

For Wordsworth and Coleridge, to find oneself disconnected from nature was to be disconnected from the divine. This alone is enough to allow an understanding of their beliefs through the broad lens of Spiritual Ecology. More specifically, my fieldwork helped to reveal evidence of various forms of Dark Green Religion in their respective personal cosmologies: Spiritual Animism, Gaian Naturalism, and Gaian Spirituality. The desire to reconnect with nature, which is increasingly evident in our society, is rarely interpreted as a longing for the divine. However, it is just this longing which Taylor identified by including activities which on first impression appear entirely secular, such as surfing and environmental activism, within his concept of Dark Green Religion. It is therefore entirely appropriate to view Wordsworth and Coleridge's time in the Quantocks, their relationship with nature during that period, and the writings it produced, as early examples of Spiritual Ecology and forerunners of Dark Green Religion. As such, Wordsworth and Coleridge's Quantock period also has much to offer current debates in Green Romanticism, particularly with regard to the metaphysical aspects of their relationship with the natural world which have been overlooked by much ecocritical scholarship. As the scholar of ecocriticism McKusick argued, with echoes of the thought of both Sponsel and Taylor, if a revolution in human consciousness is required to save the planet, Wordsworth and Coleridge 'may well prove to be the poets we needed all

along'.[135] The radical spirituality evident in the much of the poetry from the Quantock period places it at the border of Green Romanticism and Dark Green Religion, offering fertile ground for further investigation by scholars from both fields of study.

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[135] James C. McKusick, 'The Future of Ecocriticism', *Wordsworth And The Green Romantics: Affect And Ecology In The Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Lisa Ottum And Seth T. Reno (Durham: University Of New Hampshire, 2016), pp. 233-240, p. 240.

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