Preface

This book presents the results of an archaeological research project that took place between 2008 and 2011 on the Pebblebed heathlands of East Devon. This ran in tandem with an anthropological project in the same landscape published in a companion volume to this (Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017). The original idea was to integrate and publish the results of the archaeological and anthropological research together. However, it became clear as the work proceeded that this would result in a book of unmanageable size, hence the decision to publish two books directed to two different audiences. In one sense this is both ironic and regrettable as it reinforces the entrenched disciplinary boundaries that the research was designed to dissolve. However, both volumes are thoroughly integrated in that the major theme of embodied identities in a landscape resides at their core and I hope that some will wish to read them together. It was very much the case that insights derived from the anthropological project informed the archaeological research and vice versa. Both are concerned to understand the materiality of a unique landscape the bedrock of which consists entirely of pebbles.

From an archaeological point of view the landscape being discussed was virtually a black hole. George Carter, an enthusiastic and utterly unconventional amateur archaeologist who published only two short papers in the Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society, undertook the only excavations that had taken place here, mostly in the 1930s (Carter 1936, 1938). Even these had long since been forgotten. There was only one radiocarbon date from the Iron Age hillfort of Woodbury Castle at which rescue excavations had been undertaken in 1971 following road-widening works, the only excavation of any kind that had been conducted since Carter’s day. Beyond this the only information available was a catalogue of some of the prehistoric and historic sites in the National Monuments Record and in the Devon Historic Monuments Archives, giving some basic information, together with Grinsell’s (1983) list of barrows of South and East Devon that
proved to be unreliable. It seems likely that Grinsell spent very little time on the East Devon heathlands, unusual for a man who had so devotedly paced almost every barrow in southern England. He seems to have largely relied on a thin undergraduate dissertation for information about cairn distribution.

The archaeological establishment had dismissed Carter as an unwelcome crank, yet he had made some spectacular finds and was the only person who had carried out extensive fieldwork in the area. He had undertaken the difficult task of excavating pebble cairns and making some highly original observations about them with regard to pebble patterning and the structured distribution of what he called blue stones. This seemed well worth following up.

Despite its unique geology the Pebblebed landscape itself was little known. Most visitors walked only in the vicinity of the main prehistoric site, Woodbury Castle, and on a weekday one could walk across the entire area rarely seeing anyone else apart from the Royal Marines on their training exercises. It was serendipity and my dog, Tor, that took me first to the heath in October 2004 and I was quite astonished to find myself in a pebbled landscape, so I started to ‘walk the past in the present’ and undertook a landscape study of the cairns (published in Tilley 2010: ch. 6). This led on to the field research and excavations of the Pebblebeds project.

In 2007 I visited the Fairlynch local history museum in Budleigh Salterton and was pleasantly surprised to find a small room almost entirely devoted to a display of George Carter’s archaeological and geological investigations and finds from the area, together with a photograph of him. Previously I had visited the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter searching for archival information about him but had discovered very little. Having made enquiries about the Fairlynch display I found out that one of his daughters, Priscilla Hull, who had co-founded the museum, was responsible for the Carter exhibition. So I went to visit Priscilla, who lived nearby, to ask whether she might have any of his papers or photographs. I also wanted to know about a site called Jacob’s Well, some photographs of which, a flaked pebble and some wooden stakes, were part of the display but about which there was otherwise no information.

Priscilla, a very sprightly lady who was then 87, talked at length about her father. She did have many of his papers and photographs that she told me she had rescued from being thrown away and was delighted that I wanted to look at them. So I visited her house, where she spread out his papers on a long table in the living-room once a week for six months. Later she gave them all to me for safe keeping. They proved to
be a treasure trove of unpublished information, directly leading on to the excavations at Jacob’s Well and other sites discussed in this book.

One of the things that Priscilla wanted me to do was to date the wooden stakes that her father had found at Jacob’s Well. She said that she had taken them to Exeter Museum, where the wood had been identified as being oak but nobody was interested enough to help her date them. So two of the stakes were dated and we knew that Jacob’s Well was a Bronze Age site. Over the years of the project we managed to take Priscilla to some of the sites we were excavating and to Jacob’s Well, which her father had excavated on digs that she had participated in as a young girl. I also regularly updated her on what we had found, dating and other matters. It is to my great regret that she did not live long enough to see this book published.

The project excavations started in June 2008 at a small pebble cairn in an isolated area of the heathland visited by few members of the public, that was later christened Tor Cairn. There were no tracks to the cairn across the dense gorse and heather. To reach it required going down into a deep valley on a Royal Marine sheep track, crossing a stream with the track then leading up to a much larger cairn on the top of a spur. Thereafter it was wading down-slope along the top of the spur through the dense and spiky gorse and heather. The cairn was barely discernible and there was some doubt whether it was really a cairn at all until the vegetation cover was removed. The walk from the nearest parking place carrying all the equipment and tools took twenty minutes.

Since the excavations were taking place in a Site of Special Scientific Interest that was also designated as a Special Protection Area for endangered bird species, this necessitated a bird survey to be undertaken ten days in advance of the work in June. The understanding was that if any ground-nesting birds were discovered in the vicinity of the cairn the excavations would have to be abandoned. This made planning for the work almost impossible. In following years the excavations took place from late August through September, after the bird-nesting season was over.

The restrictions imposed by Natural England seemed somewhat draconian in view of the fact that this was only a small group of six people digging in one tiny area of the heathlands, walking to the site carrying all their tools and equipment, and only working during office hours. The team contrasted themselves with the Royal Marines, who had a near constant presence on the heathlands during both day and night, were allowed to camp out there, could move anywhere off tracks, drive vehicles to their various training areas and sometimes created a lot of noise and disturbance. So there appeared to be one set of rules applied to some
who had an inalienable right to be on the heathlands at any time that did not apply to us who were potentially dangerous outsiders.

Excavations on some days took place against a background of the booming of grenades in the near distance. The walk to the excavation site required passing through an area of woodland regularly used by the Marines as a harbour (rest) area during the night and through other areas used for camouflage and concealment, sniper training and map-reading exercises. At times the juxtaposition of the excavation team carrying buckets, brushes and spades, and the Royal Marines holding their rifles with their helmets and jackets stuffed full of bracken, hiding and crawling through the gorse, or with recruits laying out their kit for early morning inspection, seemed quite bizarre.

Tiring of carrying the excavation and surveying equipment on and off site every day we soon took advantage of the dense gorse cover by hiding it near to the site. Nothing was ever stolen. After the first year, excavation work was often undertaken at multiple sites across the heathland and the excavation team expanded to include local volunteers who had attended talks given by me to the Fairlynch Museum and other local history societies. One of these, Jan Oke, a local children’s author, helped me undertake an archaeological survey of the entire heathland during 2008–10. After the project was over she went on to study for a degree in archaeology at Exeter University. Another volunteer, Jill Cobley, undertaking a PhD at Exeter University on antiquarian archaeologists in Devon that is now completed, aided by her husband Jim, happily accepted the task of carrying out a survey of all the contemporary pebble structures in the villages and towns surrounding the heathland. The records are now lodged in the Devon Local History Archives in Exeter.

During the course of the project, groups of the Devon Young Archaeologists visited us and took part in the excavations. Open days were established and advertised by Jim Cobley, who personally guided groups of people to the sites. A temporary project exhibition was set up in the Fairlynch Museum and a website was created. The response by the public to the project work was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Wayne Bennett produced a fantastic glossy pebble poster that was to be used to create publicity for the project and sold to generate some finance for the excavations. In the end the printing costs far outweighed any returns and we never sold many. I still have several hundred now used as scrap paper.

The project was run on a shoe-string budget throughout, since no research council funding was forthcoming. All the money that was available was spent on radiocarbon dating and environmental analyses with 23 new dates being obtained. Members of the project team who were not
local volunteers were accommodated in my house and garden, and in a
flat belonging to Jan Oke in Exmouth and by Jenny Moon in her house
in Lympstone. Members of the project team took it in turns to cook food
in the evening and paid for it and their travelling and other expenses
themselves.

The manner in which centres and peripheries are created and
maintained in the field of archaeology is interesting. Sites and land-
scapes about which we already know a great deal seem to attract fund-
ing, while those about which we know very little do not. I suppose it
is a question of a safe bet. Small grants that had been provided during
2009–10 by the Historic Environment Department of Devon County
Council were terminated when the austerity measures introduced by
the Conservative-led Coalition Government began to bite, so even
the hire of a digger and driver for topsoil removal and replacement
on a cropmark (enclosure) site in 2011 had to be funded by me. It all
seemed at the time like a struggle against the odds and I had a strong
sense of fellow feeling with George Carter and the manner in which
the establishment had treated him.

I take full responsibility for the published text. In those chapters
not written entirely by me the names of other authors involved or the
individual authorship of the chapter is given at the head. A series of
online appendices accompanying this book may be downloaded from
UCL Press. These are referred to in the book as ‘See Taylor, Appendix 1’,
for example.