Preface

The research for this book took place from 2008 to 2012. It ran in tandem with an archaeological project involving a fieldwork survey of the entire heathlands, and excavations of multiple sites during the same time period directed by Chris Tilley. It is important to acknowledge this in terms of the discussion of this being a contested landscape. After moving to the area and having decided to visit all the prehistoric cairns, Chris went walking on the heathlands with Tor, his dog. These became walks with a purpose. After seeing all the cairns he decided to walk between them in order to study their relationship to each other and the unique Pebblebed landscape in which they are situated. He quickly became fascinated with the pebbles and how these bright and rounded objects transform what otherwise might appear, to the casual observer, to be a quite monotonous landscape. Realizing that this was unlikely to be just a contemporary appreciation, he then initiated the project. From an archaeologist’s perspective he is trying to create a story of the past in the present: a story involving the topography; a story involving the pebbles, the land, the sea, the sky, the sun; and integrate these things into some kind of sense of how it might have been, all the time trying to link past and present. And so the anthropological project investigating the meaning and significance of the contemporary heathland and its pebbles arose.

All the research was carried out by Chris and Kate Cameron-Daum. It was very much a collaborative exercise in which both of us were engaged in participant observation and interviews with over one hundred informants. Chris and his family were living in the research area and Kate was staying with them: this had definite advantages in that the field site was quite literally entered when leaving the front door of the house. This permitted sustained engagement with both the heathland landscape and those working there or visiting it throughout the years and in all weathers and seasons. This facilitated, we believe, something of an intimate ‘insider’s’ (the punctuation marks to be emphasized) knowledge of the landscape and the establishment of ongoing personal contacts and relationships. During the course of the archaeological research and the
anthropological research discussed here the landscape has become a powerful element in the formation of our own biographies and identities.

We both wanted to study anthropology as students because we were interested in the lives of others and how an understanding of them might lead us to reflect on our own lives and experiences. Although the two cannot be separated, we did not choose to study anthropology to learn about the anthropologists conducting the research, their lives, trials and tribulations in the field. We take it as axiomatic that it is from the ethnographic self that accounts arise, that self-reflexivity in research is fundamental and that all our findings are subjective (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1998; Okely and Calloway 1992; Davies 2008; Collins and Gallinat 2010). One of the great strengths of contemporary anthropology is that it foregrounds the subject and subjectivity rather than claiming a spurious objectivity from a supposed elimination of the self. Subjectivity forms the very basis of our knowledge of the field arising from being there, observing, talking, reflecting.

However, so-called ‘auto-ethnography’, foregrounding the researcher in the research, we believe has an unfortunate tendency to rapidly turn into a form of narcissistic navel-gazing in which the anthropologist, rather than the people he or she wishes to understand, takes centre stage. Taken to its logical extreme, anthropology then becomes a discipline that is about itself and the personalities and lives of those involved – who would really want to study that?

Many discussions of this conflate what to us are two rather different concepts: the personal and the subjective. While research is subjective this does not mean that the personality and life-history of the researcher and the circumstances in which the research has been undertaken have to be discussed and foregrounded as fundamental starting or ending points for analysis or alternatively as a form of constant dialogic encounter in the text. We, the researchers, are of course present throughout the text. Everything we have discovered arises from our subjective presence in the field research but we do not wish to turn the spotlight brightly on ourselves. The anthropological ‘stage’ belongs firmly to our informants and their lives. We have been the stage managers of the text and were present during the four-year performance of persons and groups in landscapes that we recount. Our textual presence only surfaces when absolutely necessary or in situations when we ourselves became some of the main actors, or to occasionally exemplify social practices through our own involvement in them.

The vast majority of anthropological research still follows the traditional model: the isolated anthropologist and his or her people with
whom he or she interacts. We do not believe that this is a satisfactory research model to follow in the future. The research undertaken here has involved our active collaboration throughout and that, we believe, has had some positive outcomes. We will mention here a few of them. Our different genders meant that if people were reluctant or uncomfortable talking to one of us they might do so to the other. This was particularly important in the context of the male culture of the Royal Marines and so, while both of us conducted interviews, it was only Chris who camped out with them during their training exercises. Our differences in ‘seniority’ (a professor and an independent researcher, known to some of our informants) also made a difference in that a few people who in a number of cases acted as ‘gatekeepers’ to meeting others only felt it worthwhile engaging with someone who was, in their perception, important. Conversely this was off-putting to others who felt much happier talking to Kate.

By undertaking multiple interviews with some people, usually with anything up to six or twelve months in between, we were able to discuss between ourselves what we had learnt and attempt to address obvious failures in the kinds of information and insights that we had acquired, or information that was contradictory or ambiguous at best. But most importantly we were able to support each other and discuss as we went along, engage in dialogue with regard to what to do next and develop a further interpretative understanding. The outcome of anthropology is not a research result but a form of conversation with others, and a conversation is not about results but an end in itself. Having engaged in a long dialogue between ourselves, we offer the text as a way of engaging in one with others.

Chris Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, May 2016.