



#ConnectMe – Resource Pack 3

Celebrate your street – together!



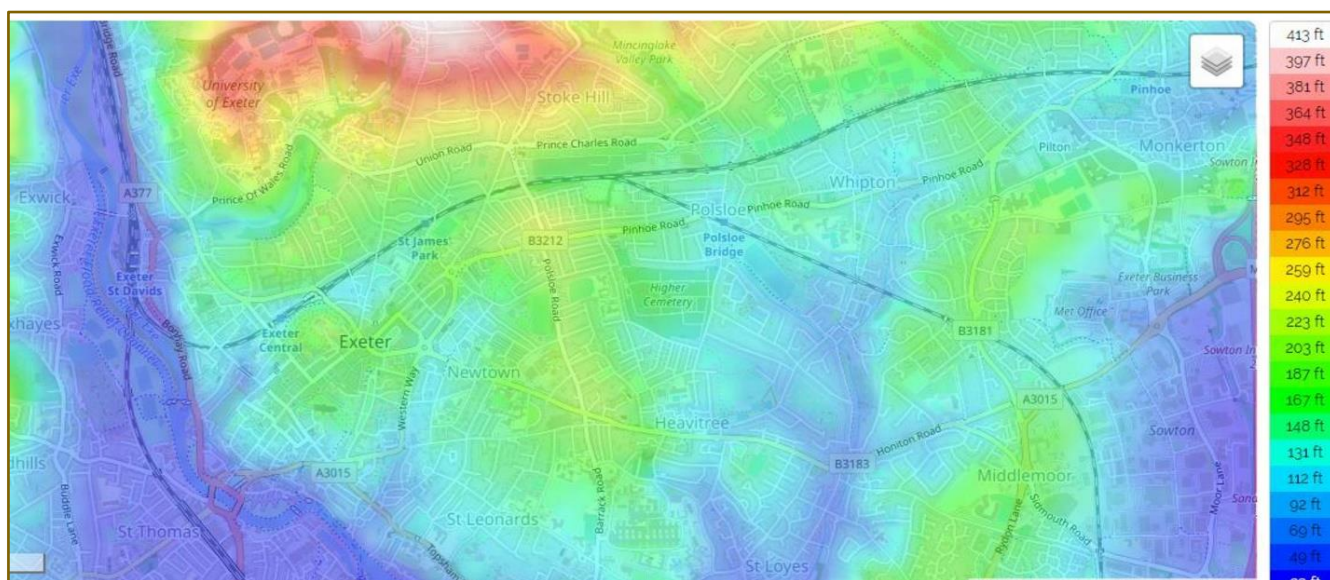
Unit 2 - “Reading” your place – the natural environment

What do we mean by “reading” your place? Well, it’s an invitation to remember that no matter what we, as humans, have done to the landscape the fact is, the ground beneath your feet – your patch of the earth’s crust – has been here a lot longer than any of us and has got its own story to tell.

So, it’s great to start by mentally stripping back the buildings, the tarmac, the telegraph poles and all of the trappings of the modern world and remind yourself what lies beneath.

Topography

This means the lie of the land and you can trust it not to have changed significantly since the end of the last ice age, i.e. since humans re-inhabited the British Isles. That’s why it is important to note it – it is your link with the past and it is the authentic skeleton, the bare bones, of your place.



The topography of the Exeter area

There can be exceptions to this of course. Rivers can change their courses suddenly, landslides can re-configure the sides of valleys and mountains but on the whole you can trust, if you feel the muscles of your legs straining as you lean forward into a slope, that you are reacting in exactly the same way as your ancestors did before you.

So walk the length of your street, or around your block of flats/apartments, so that you can get a sense of the lie of the land. Where does the sun rise and set in relation to the orientation of your street? Does the land fall away on either side, meaning that you're on a ridgeway or is it all flat indicating a floodplain? Remember, unless there have been major works in your area, the lie of your land is the same today as it's been for the last 10,000 years, at least!

Water

The human relationship with water has always been profound and rich. We have found ways to divert it, dam it, drain it, culvert it, pollute it, use its power, swim in it, sail on it, fish its resources. Our rivers are our lifeblood, they mould our landscape and impact on how and where we live.

Did you know?

There's plenty of evidence that humans have always had a special and spiritual relationship with water. Celtic and Romano-British communities laid votive deposits and even human bodies in rivers and bogs.

Epigraphic (inscriptions) evidence tells us that Verbeia was the goddess of the River Wharfe in Teesdale and many Celtic shrines are also positioned to overlook rivers such as at Chedworth on the river Coln. The goddess Coventina presided over the natural spring and well at Carrowburgh on Hadrian's Wall.

Of course, in our modern urban landscapes many of our waterways have been culverted or piped underground but the evidence of their past presence can still be found. Again, topography is a clue. Where there is a hill, there is a valley and in that valley water would have run at some point, even if it can't be seen today. It can be very easy to climb up a hill in our modern streets and miss the fact that just 100 years or so ago a babbling brook would have run along the bottom.

Losing connection with our waterways is a sadness and potentially more impacting on our physical and spiritual wellbeing than we know. We all feel calm near water. However, by scouting out your hidden waterways or perhaps by hearing the reminiscence of neighbours, you may well recover some of that connection.

Place names

In your search for water, place names can often be a great help. Coombe, Cwm, Brook(e) or Pond are all good indicators that there is lost and hidden watery heritage right beneath your feet.

We all know that ancient farms and fields often lend their names to modern housing estates. For instance, “Barton”, in Devon, can hint at a direct relationship with Anglo-Saxon land division. “Wic” or “Wick” means farm.

Street names also often have a story to tell. Historic events such as the relief of the Siege of Ladysmith in South Africa, can unleash a wave of commemoratively named streets and landscape features.

Geology and soils

There’s something very subliminal about our local geology. It’s literally beneath our feet and therefore our notice most of the time. But, in fact, there are few aspects of our environment that quite so profoundly influence our lives. Patterns of settlement and building often relate directly to the underlying geology not only in the choice of site but in the building materials used. Proximity to water and other resources will decide whether your place was part of the Industrial Revolution or remained predominantly rural. The very colour of your bedrock and local clays will be reflected in the bricks and building stones. Exeter’s locally made red bricks contrast with the yellows you find further east and north.

So, take a moment to see what the predominant building material is on your street. Is it the same colour as the soils in your garden? If not, why not? Make a note of any anomalies or questions because finding the answer to these could turn out to be an excellent way to connect with your neighbours.

The sky/viewpoints

It’s very important to take in the view from your street. We discovered this on Sweetbrier Lane in Exeter. The view offered from the top of the road, looking to the East, proudly shows Woodbury Castle, the Iron Age hillfort and a Bronze Age barrow on the horizon. This reminds us that even our Cities are part of a wider prehistoric landscape.



The night sky

And don't forget to go outside at different times of day. It's great fun to take pictures at dawn and at sunset but also to see if there's anything to be seen of the night sky. In our cities, light pollution can be a problem but it can sometimes be surprising just how much of our stellar landscape can still be seen.

So, the first part of your Street work is just to go and take another look. Concentrate mindfully on the lie of the land and on the sky above. These are the things that re-connect you with your heritage and your landscape and these are the things that you and your neighbours share.