Yarner Wood is located on the eastern fringe of Dartmoor, two miles west of Bovey Tracey. It covers 150 hectares (372 acres) which consists of, mainly, upland sessile oakwood with areas of birch, upland heath and some conifers. Until 1951 Yarner Wood was privately owned. It was declared a Nature Reserve in 1952 with four subsequent extensions. It now has SSSI* and SAC** status, described as ‘one of the best remaining examples of ancient oak woodland in Devon and Europe’.

Yarner Wood is now part of a much expanded area, known as East Dartmoor National Nature Reserve managed by Natural England, the government’s advisor on the natural environment. Natural England provides practical advice, grounded in science, on how best to safeguard England’s natural wealth for the benefit of everyone. Their remit is to ensure sustainable stewardship of the land and sea so that people and nature can thrive. It is their responsibility to see that Britain’s rich natural environment can adapt and survive intact for future generations to enjoy.

Since it became a nature reserve, Yarner Wood has been a place of scientific research. In fact, when it was first purchased by the Nature Conservancy, it was used for a range of ecological research projects and was only open to visitors who had permits.

Mr Toby became the first warden of the reserve; he had been employed as gamekeeper by the last private owner, and he continued to look after Yarner Wood until 1965.

It was opened to the public for the first time in 1963 during ‘National Nature Week’, although only eight people took advantage. In 1965, an ‘educational trail’ was created and in 1972 a longer trail was created but permits were still required. From 1973 the public were finally allowed to visit the wood without a permit.

In keeping with the aims of Natural England, Yarner Wood is now an open access site and anyone is free to visit. The reserve has a band of volunteers who research, work in and help to maintain Yarner Wood’s special habitats, history and wildlife.

* Special Site of Scientific Interest (UK Conservation designation)  
** Special Area of Conservation (EC Habitats Directive)
This year is the sixtieth anniversary of Yarner Wood’s acquisition by the Nature Conservancy, making Yarner Wood one of the first National Nature Reserves (NNR) in the country. Natural England approached Devon Guild with the initial idea of a joint project designed to celebrate this birthday.

It was agreed that the project should involve young people and the use of craft skills, with the focus on Yarner Wood and its history. To this end making work which would mark out a nature trail through the wood, and provide something for visitors to sit down on, was agreed.

Two professional carvers, Reece Ingram and David Brampton-Greene, photographer Simon Williams, who has been photographing Yarner Wood over the last five years, and a poet, Andy Cunningham, worked with groups of students from local secondary schools in a series of relief carving, photography and text workshops.

The carving workshops used green oak timber grown in Yarner Wood. Natural England identified various branches which needed to be taken down during autumn 2011 so that they would be ready for the June workshops. These took place on-site, in Yarner Wood, in the last two weeks of June this year. Students from four local secondary schools worked with the carvers, writer and photographer to produce some of the work on show.

When the exhibition at Devon Guild finishes, the posts and benches will be returned to Yarner Wood where they will be permanently installed. The photographs and text will then be on view in Yarner Wood’s ‘Field Museum’ for the remainder of the summer.

This project had several aims:

- To actively engage young people in their heritage and craft skills through a learning project based on the history and ecology of Yarner Wood
- To encourage, through inclusion in an exhibition and time spent in Yarner Wood, a younger audience to visit both venues
- To encourage young people to consider the future of heritage, heritage crafts and the role of cultural and environmental organisations
- To include the work of children and young people in a gallery exhibition

The Devon Guild and Natural England would like to thank the Heritage Lottery Fund for their support, the students who took part, their teachers, the workshop leaders and the Yarner Wood volunteers.
There is no documentary evidence of Yarner Wood prior to the sixteenth century. The oldest part of Yarner House was built around 1500 and the wood is first mentioned in an inventory of the King’s Forests in the reign of Edward VI (1547 – 53).

A map from 1771, and a later map from 1809, shows fields at the western end of the reserve and the Yarner Stream Valley as open ground. Apart from that, the area was wooded, as now, but extensively coppiced. Coppicing is a traditional method of woodland management which takes advantage of the fact that many trees make new growth from the stump or roots if cut down. In a coppiced wood, young tree stems are repeatedly cut down to near ground level. In subsequent years many new shoots will emerge, and, when these are ready for harvesting the cycle begins again. Coppiced hardwoods, such as Yarner provided, were extensively used in tanning and charcoal production.

In 1820 a tramway to carry granite from the Haytor quarries to the Stover Canal was built; this passes through the south-eastern corner of Yarner Wood. Horses pulled the wagons along the granite rails and although the tramway closed in 1858 the rails and a milestone are still clearly visible.

Yarner Wood also contains the remains of Yarrow Mine, a copper mine which was operational from 1856 – 1867. It reached a depth of 50 fathoms (100m) and employed 40 – 50 men. The winding and crushing machinery was water-powered. The drawing shows how part of the mine would have looked when it was working; today most of the ruin has gone.

Yarner Wood and the mine are featured in the 1912 book *The Forest on the Hill* by Eden Philpotts which was made into a silent film in 1919.

Bovey Tracey Pottery Leat (c.1850) runs right across the wood. A leat is a man-made stream – in this case built to carry water downhill to the pottery factory in Bovey Tracey.

Yarner Wood holds the remains of several charcoal hearths – saucer shaped depressions in the ground – about 1.5m in diameter. Charcoal is produced by limiting the air supply to a slow burning pile of wood. The resulting partly burned wood (charcoal) has a hotter burning temperature than wood. Charcoal production in Yarner Wood was well established by the early 18th century. Charcoal was used to smelt iron, lead and copper.
Yarner Wood is known for its oak woodland which has international importance. Part of the reason for this importance is that over 500 species of plants and animals are associated with Atlantic oakwoods. Fungi, ferns, mosses and lichens, flowers – bluebells, anemones and primroses – migrant songbirds – Redstarts, Pied Flycatchers and Wood Warblers – and larger birds such as Buzzards, Jays and Woodpeckers use oakwoods as nest sites.

The breeding bird community of Yarner Wood also includes other resident birds such as Nuthatches, Treecreepers and many of the tit and thrush families.

Larger mammals, such as deer and otter, and smaller ones, Hazel Dormice, Wood Mice, Bank Voles and seven species of bat, including the Soprano Pipistrelle and the nationally rare Barbastelle all live in, or frequent, Yarner Wood.

Insect life is also abundant with 33 species of butterfly and 650 species of moth recorded in Yarner Wood. The most numerous invertebrate population is the wood ant; their 800 nests have an estimated population of 200 million.

The root systems, the bark, the branches and the leaves of an oak tree provide habitats for many different life forms. A remarkable tally of over 300 species of lichens has been recorded as growing on oak trees; bryophytes, the species of plant that includes mosses, has been counted as 65. An oak tree can grow for 200 years, live for another 200 years and then spend 200 years slowly dying. In that time it has acted as a hotel, food factory, host, symbiotic partner and all-round home provider. It is the centre of a vegetation community and a biodiversity hotspot.

Large areas of Europe were once covered by temperate, deciduous forests in which oak trees predominated. Today, only a small proportion of those forests remain. The current management plan for Yarner Wood has the preservation of the oakwood habitat, with its typical associated flora and fauna, as its primary objective. Although the woodland was heavily coppiced in the past, it is now recognised that allowing nature to manage the woodland is the best way forward for the proliferation of ferns, bryophytes, lichens and birds.

Within this management plan are grazing and browsing areas with specific management of footpaths and special features. This allows for contrasting examples of what happens under varying conditions – the ‘natural’ as opposed to the ‘managed’.
The geology of Yarner Wood is mixed; part of the area lies on carboniferous rocks, hard mudstones and shales of Lower Culm age. In the southeast corner of the reserve there are bands of shale and sandstone and at the far western end is Dartmoor granite. The rock is overlaid with mixed stony debris in a loam or clay matrix. Above that is the soil, the layer which links the underlying geology to the land surface and atmosphere. The soil in Yarner Wood is predominantly acidic.

Altitude varies from 70 – 330m, described as moderate to steeply sloping, and there are two main streams, the Yarner and the Woodcock. There is a narrow band of peat along the lower part of Yarner Stream which widens out into the valley bog.

The climate is mild and damp, similar to South Devon, but the higher altitude brings higher rainfall, winds and lower temperatures than the lower or coastal areas.