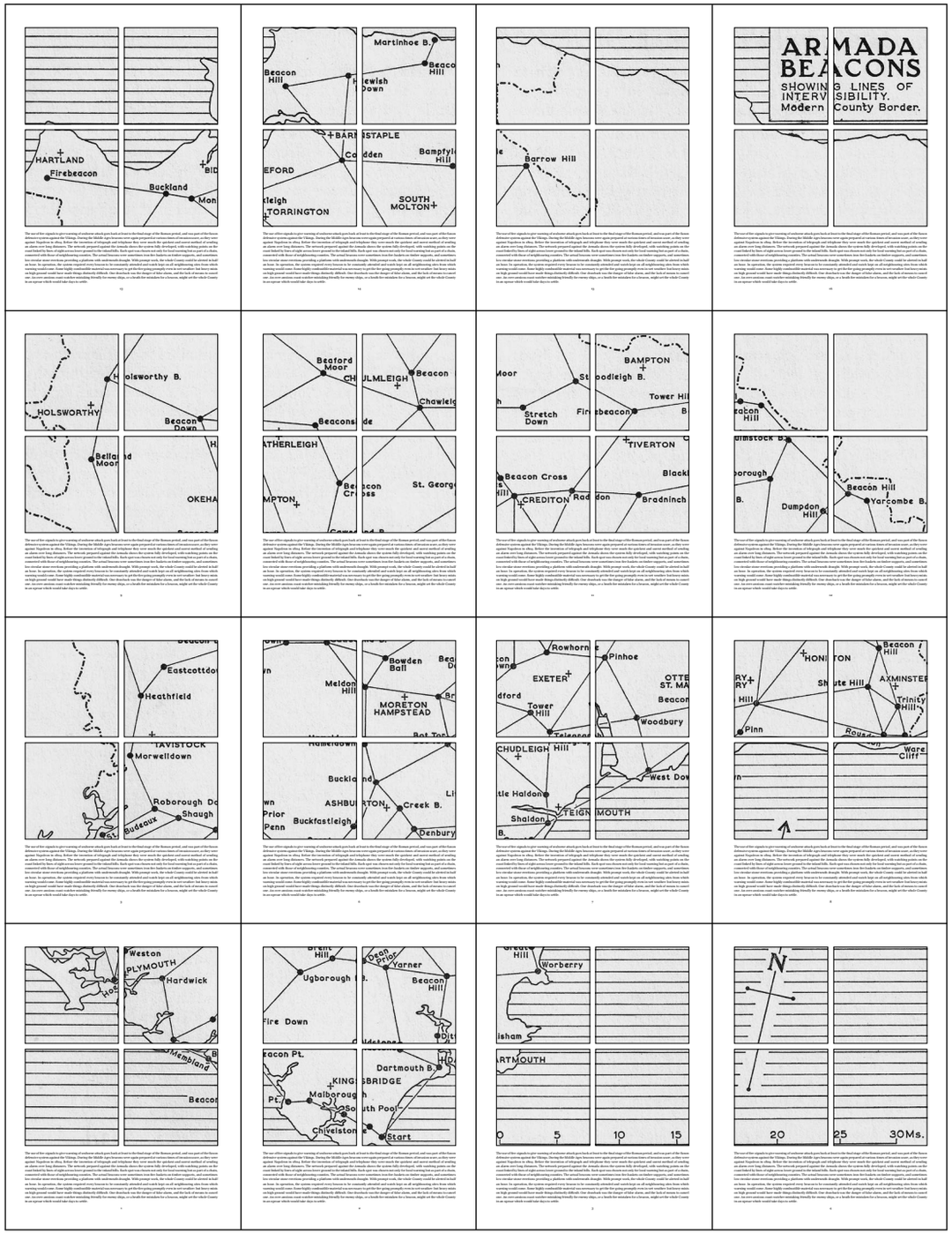
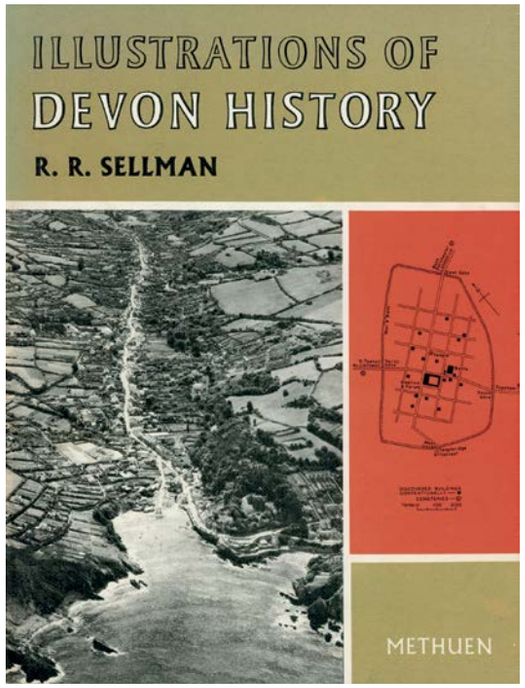
Network

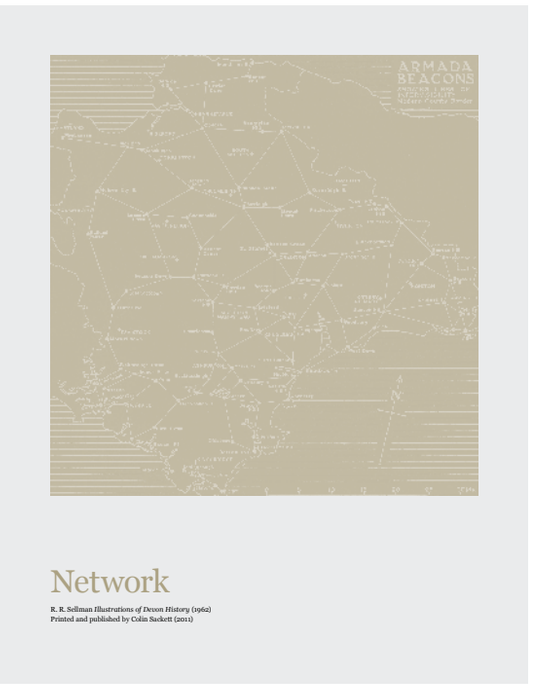


'Armada Beacons, showing lines of intervisibility'; fragmented in sixty-four parts with repeated text, p.1–16.

16pp, 270 x 210, digital on white cartridge, sewn pamphlet, glassine wrapper; Axminster, 2011.



The text (below) and illustration (left) are from the topic 'Armada Beacons', in *Illustrations of Devon History*, by R. R. Sellman, published London, 1962. Sellman was an author and editor; from the early 1950s until the 1970s he published over thirty books on historical subjects. The illustrations in the publications were often drawn by the author, and in the case of this textbook include maps and plans as well as depictions of events and artefacts.



Seen several centuries later, where networks of digital information have proliferated and communication made almost instant, the relaying of alarm by hillside beacon is rudimentary, but, as Sellman describes below, the possibility of error caused by lack of vigilance or misapprehension is the same now as it always was; erroneous news or mischief can be passed by any means, while interconnections are ever fallible—if one fails, the whole fails.

The use of fire-signals to give warning of seaborne attack goes back at least to the final stage of the Roman period, and was part of the Saxon defensive system against the Vikings. During the Middle Ages beacons were again prepared at various times of invasion scare, as they were against Napoleon in 1804. Before the invention of telegraph and telephone they were much the quickest and surest method of sending an alarm over long distances. The network prepared against the Armada shows the system fully developed, with watching points on the coast linked by lines of sight across lower ground to the inland hills. Each spot was chosen not only for local warning but as part of a chain, connected with those of neighbouring counties. The actual beacons were sometimes iron fire-baskets on timber supports, and sometimes low circular stone erections providing a platform with underneath draught. With prompt work, the whole County could be alerted in half an hour. In operation, the system required every beacon to be constantly attended and watch kept on all neighbouring sites from which warning could come. Some highly combustible material was necessary to get the fire going promptly even in wet weather: but heavy mists on high ground would have made things distinctly difficult. One drawback was the danger of false alarm, and the lack of means to cancel one. An over-anxious coast-watcher mistaking friendly for enemy ships, or a heath fire mistaken for a beacon, might set the whole County in an uproar which would take days to settle.