

## Shropshire Cultural Strategy

### Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership response to interview questions.

The AONB Partnership is only involved in the Shropshire Hills AONB and surrounding area, and this response therefore focuses on the Shropshire Hills area. The specific points raised about the importance to culture of the landscape and natural environment are nevertheless also applicable across the whole of Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin. The Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is a legal designation covering 23% of Shropshire with the principal purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

The Shropshire Hills span a wide spectrum of cultural setting from the fringes of Telford and Ironbridge through the rural hinterlands of market towns such as Ludlow, Craven Arms and Much Wenlock, to some of the sparsest areas of population in England along the Welsh border. Church Stretton, the only town within the AONB, has a unique location in the heart of the hills and a strong Edwardian character. The Shropshire Hills have been a cultural inspiration for writers such as A E Housman, Mary Webb and Malcolm Saville. Opportunities for enjoyment and wellbeing are open to both locals and visitors through walks and outdoor activities which respect the area's qualities. The area has some of the best rights of way networks in Shropshire, most of its open access land, and a wide variety of sites, features and promoted routes.

Bordering Wales to the west and Herefordshire to the south, it is important that the culture of the Shropshire Hills is not seen in isolation. Communities are not defined by administrative boundaries and much of the cultural history is due to our position on the borders. Development of a cultural strategy needs to take this into account and work with our neighbours to have maximum impact.

### How does your position and job role contribute to Culture in the Shropshire Hills?

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership aims through the Management Plan to provide co-ordination, advice and assistance, and believes that the primary environmental aims of the AONB will be best achieved by close integration with social and economic interests. The Partnership currently has 36 members, along with a small staff team who play a co-ordinating and facilitating role and also implement some of the Management Plan actions directly.

All the members of the Partnership are involved in culture in one way or another from the Agricultural Chaplain of the Hereford Diocese to the National Trust and the Chair of local community wildlife groups (a full list of the Partnership can be found on the AONB website). The combined influence is significant right across the entire cultural spectrum except, possibly, sports and children's services.

### What agenda do you work to and what initiatives/ actions are in place that help you achieve your aims and objectives?

The statutory Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2009-2014 details the agenda for our work. It can be found on

<http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/partnership/Mgtplan09-14.htm>.

The Plan has been prepared and endorsed by the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, with formal observations made by Natural England. The Plan has been formally approved by the constituent local authorities, Shropshire Council and Telford & Wrekin Council.

There is a detailed action plan included that shows how the aims and objectives of the Management Plan will be achieved.

The actions are monitored and in some cases implemented by the Working Groups. There are a number of these partnership groups that organisationally sit under the Partnership and advice on specific topics, for example, farming, sustainable products and access, recreation and tourism.

## How does your work impact on sub-regions?

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership has a number of ongoing initiatives that directly impact the area in terms of culture. These include:

- ▶ LEADER in the Shropshire Hills- newly approved funding of £200k per year for community activity. This will fund some significant cultural activity, potentially from Forest Schools to Spiritual Landscapes
- ▶ Sustainable Development Fund- £53,000pa funding, primarily from Natural England, for community groups, businesses and individuals to become more sustainable. Funding includes cultural projects such as events and outdoor activities
- ▶ Shropshire Hills Sustainable Business Scheme- Membership scheme to promote and improve sustainable businesses and build on the Shropshire Hills sense of place
- ▶ Friends of the Shropshire Hills- new membership scheme for the public to become more involved with and better understand the Shropshire Hills AONB
- ▶ Shropshire Hills Shuttles- management of contract, promotion and familiarisation trips to reduce car use in tourism hotspots and improve local and visitor knowledge of local cultural history
- ▶ Events, activities and news brochure in the Shropshire Hills- bringing together partner events
- ▶ Creation of the Historic Environment Working Group that brings together many of the community based heritage groups to share ideas and experiences
- ▶ Church Stretton and Shropshire Hills Sustainable Tourism Strategy- help with the development of the town strategy including the countryside around the town.
- ▶ Land, Life and Livelihoods- community organisation resulting from a 'Down to Earth' project.
- ▶ Support for local events e.g. Church Stretton Green Fair, Stretton Fest and Bishop's Castle Walking Festival.
- ▶ Guided walks- trees in the landscape, freshwater pearl mussel/ rivers walks etc.
- ▶ Websites- better interpretation and dissemination of information and joined up approach through [www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk](http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk) and [www.shropshirehillsinfo.co.uk](http://www.shropshirehillsinfo.co.uk)
- ▶ Promotion of local products- shropshirehills-buylocal.co.uk and re-branding and promotional campaign for the five Shropshire Hills Farmers Markets
- ▶ Supporting community planning
- ▶ Supporting community groups e.g. Upper Onny Wildlife Group
- ▶ Training for Walking for Health walks leaders
- ▶ Development of walking routes that encourage travel by public transport including those that include part of the Shropshire Way in the route

- ▶ Working with farmers and landowners to foster support for landscape scale conservation e.g. Clun River catchment, Long Mynd- Stiperstones Working Group, woodland management
- ▶ Developing Shropshire Hills identity to encourage a stronger sense of place and attachment to the area
- ▶ Influencing planning policy and decisions to encourage a more sustainable and aesthetic approach to complement existing character e.g. Church Stretton Town Design Guidance

## **Current strengths and weaknesses of culture in the Shropshire Hills**

### **Strengths of Shropshire Hills AONB:**

#### **Landscape:**

- ▶ The landscape- all landscapes have a character but AONBs are recognised for the particular quality of their landscape and the strength of ecological and heritage influences.
- ▶ Generally effective protection by strong planning policies and decisions
- ▶ High levels of conservation activity by farmers
- ▶ One of the most geologically diverse areas in the country and this has given rise to a very diverse and interesting landscape

#### **Natural Environment:**

- ▶ Significant populations of some rare species and habitats e.g. freshwater pearl mussel

#### **Historic Environment:**

- ▶ Wonderful variety of historic buildings and archaeological history
- ▶ Good reclamation, access and interpretation of mine sites
- ▶ Community archaeology project at Acton Scott
- ▶ Strong support for Veteran Trees

#### **Quality of Life:**

- ▶ One of the most tranquil areas in England

#### **Opportunities for enjoyment, understanding and involvement:**

- ▶ Excellent opportunities for informal recreation, particularly walking, cycling and horse riding, with extensive and well maintained rights of way.
- ▶ 90% of the open access land in the whole of Shropshire.
- ▶ Excellent long distance and promoted routes that run through the area
- ▶ Many countryside sites, managed by a number of different organisations
- ▶ The settlements of the AONB, from Church Stretton to many picturesque villages are an attraction in their own right.
- ▶ High quality visitor facilities including the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre, Acton

Scott Historic Working Farm and Ludlow Museum and Resource Centre, the National Trust's Chalet Pavilion at Cardingmill Valley, the Bog Centre near the Stiperstones and English Heritage's Stokesay Castle.

- ▶ A joint Shropshire Hills events programme promotes events and activities from a number of different organisations.
- ▶ *In situ* interpretation is included at the Stiperstones, the Wrekin, Wenlock Edge and Bury Ditches.
- ▶ The area is important for more formalised education, providing a valuable resource for field trips especially in earth and life sciences and geography. The National Trust's education programme at Cardingmill Valley is their largest in the Region and the area is also popular for organised outdoor education such as Scouts and Duke of Edinburgh's Award.
- ▶ There is strong and active community interest in and around the area. Numerous local walking, wildlife and heritage groups use the Shropshire Hills, and a number of health walking programmes operate. Several organisations run volunteer programmes on topics related to the AONB, including the National Trust, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, and Parish Paths Partnership (P3) groups supported by the County Council. Other voluntary activity includes Parish Councils and Parish Plans.
- ▶ Shropshire Hills Shuttles offer alternative transport to heritage attractions, walks and market towns and are an important service to local people and visitors.

#### **Local products:**

- ▶ Five Farmers' Markets in the Shropshire Hills
- ▶ Excellent local producers, many using traditional methods
- ▶ Development of local wood products from alder coppicing
- ▶ Promotion of sustainable businesses- many businesses promote themselves as being part of the local supply chain

#### **Tourism:**

- ▶ Growing interest in sustainable tourism from tourism businesses and associations
- ▶ Strengthening of "Shropshire Hills" as a recognisable brand that is associated with the landscape and a more sustainable approach
- ▶ More walking, cycling and riding holidays
- ▶ Church Stretton and Bishop's Castle are now 'Walkers are Welcome' towns

### **Weaknesses of the Shropshire Hills**

#### **Landscape:**

- ▶ Inappropriate development is an ongoing concern
- ▶ Uncertainty over the future of livestock farming and the impact this will have on the landscape
- ▶ More funding is needed to encourage landscape scale habitat restoration
- ▶ Concerns over hill top structures such as radar and telecommunication masts and wind turbines
- ▶ Impact of climate change is unknown and not enough is being done to address it

### **Historic environment:**

- ▶ Erosion by livestock and the growth of scrub or trees, arable farming and neglect are all affecting Scheduled Ancient Monuments in the Shropshire Hills
- ▶ Historic farm buildings are at risk and though many suitable buildings have been converted, many of the more 'difficult' ones remain. Capital grants for restoration through the ESAs have secured a good number of farm buildings and these continue to be available although to a lesser extent.
- ▶ Under the Heritage Protection Review responsibilities for managing designated sites will be devolved further – from government to English Heritage and from English Heritage to local authorities. Appropriate resourcing of local authorities to take on these new responsibilities is a concern.

### **Quality of Life:**

- ▶ Tranquillity is threatened by increased road and air transport

### **Opportunities for enjoyment, understanding and involvement:**

- ▶ Access provision and promotion suitable for a broader range of users
- ▶ Poor countryside access close to where people live and reachable by public transport
- ▶ Better promotion of a consistent 'Shropshire Hills' identity

### **Local products:**

- ▶ Concerns over the viability of livestock farming
- ▶ Lack of knowledge and understanding of land based industries by many local people and visitors
- ▶ More investment needed in local supply chains

### **Tourism**

- ▶ Growing number of day visitors, especially to 'honey pots' like Carding Mill Valley
- ▶ Increased road traffic
- ▶ Insufficient promotion of farm tourism and the links between the holiday and the farm

## **Uniqueness of the Shropshire Hills**

The following 'special qualities of the Shropshire Hills are listed in the Management Plan:

### **Diversity and contrast**

With a variety of geology unequalled in any area of comparable size in Britain, the Shropshire Hills have no single dominant feature or landform. The area's landscape character is one of variety and of transition – between the lowland plains of the English Midlands and the uplands of Wales, and between north and south of Britain, and this is reflected in both ecology and patterns of human activity.

The key **elements in the Shropshire Hills landscape** are the hills, farmed landscape, woodlands, rivers and river valleys.

### **Hills**

The rocky Stiperstones, the dissected plateau of the Long Mynd, the craggy volcanic Stretton Hills and Wrekin, the harsh quarried landscape of the Clee Hills, the long wooded scarp of Wenlock Edge, and the rolling enclosed hills of the Clun Forest all have their own distinctive character. The hills define the identity of the area, and are the backbone of our

landscape. Here are found commons, heath, moorland and rough grasslands, home to upland birds including Curlew, Red Grouse and Merlin.

### **Farmed landscape**

The patchwork of fields, mostly pasture bounded by hedges, results from generations of farming. Hedgerow and field trees, including many veteran trees, give the landscape a maturity. Remnants of valuable grassland and hay meadow habitats survive. Some small scale arable cultivation mostly for feed crops is found, with larger scale cropping in the valleys which extend down outside the AONB.

### **Woodlands**

The area has higher than the national average cover of ancient and semi-natural woodland, and this is found especially on steeper slopes. Some hills are dominated by woodland cover, such as the Wrekin, Helmeth above Church Stretton and Wenlock Edge, which has continuous woodland for nearly twenty miles. There are many small woodlands, along with larger predominantly conifer plantations many of which are being diversified, parkland and wood pasture, and many small, often remnant, orchards.

### **Rivers and river valleys**

The Rivers Clun, Teme and Onny, along with many smaller rivers and streams, are relatively clean and natural in form, and of high quality. Many are lined with Alder, and home to important species such as Dipper, White-clawed Crayfish and Otter. Freshwater Pearl Mussel is found in the River Clun just outside the AONB. Valleys vary from the steep-sided batches and dingles of the Long Mynd and Stiperstones, to larger valleys with some flood meadows, and the broad dales such as Corve Dale and Ape Dale which divide up the area. A short stretch of the River Severn within the AONB divides the Wrekin from Wenlock Edge. There are no large water bodies but many small ponds, marshes and flushes.

The other special qualities defined below are characteristics which are found in different ways across the whole area, including geology, wildlife, heritage, environmental and scenic quality, tranquillity, culture and opportunities for enjoyment.

### **Geology**

The Shropshire Hills have the greatest geological variety of any comparable sized area in the UK, or indeed the world. Bedrock dates from the Precambrian almost continuously through to just into the Permian, and the influence of different rock types and structure on the landscape are clearly visible. There is a widespread mantle of more recent Quaternary deposits, and along with landforms on the lower ground these reflect the complex geological history of the last 'Ice Age'. The area is important in the history of geological science – Murchison's study of the Silurian (including the Wenlock limestone) and its fossils being notable. The Ercall has a good example of the sudden transition from metamorphosed and barren rocks to sediments containing the earliest known hard-shelled fossils in the Cambrian period.

### **Wildlife**

The valuable habitats of the AONB, especially heathland, grassland, woodland and rivers are linked to a long history of relatively sympathetic land management. Due to their transitional position, the Shropshire Hills have an unusual mix of species associated with both upland and lowland, e.g. Red Grouse and Dormice. The area holds some national rarities and is very significant in a regional and county context for upland plant and animal species such as Merlin, Snipe, Curlew, Whinchat, Dipper, Emperor moth, Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary and Grayling butterfly. It is also something of a stronghold for species

which were formerly more common or widespread, such as Skylark, Tree Pipit, Black Poplar and Great Crested Newt.

### **Heritage**

Many ancient features survive in a landscape which has seen much less change than many parts of the country. Defences such as Offa's Dyke, Iron Age hillforts such as at Caer Caradoc and Bury Ditches, and medieval castles and fortified houses such as Clun and Stokesay tell of centuries of turbulent Marches history. The Shropshire Hills has the greatest concentration of medieval castle earthworks anywhere in Britain. Much of the field and settlement pattern is very ancient, with tiny lanes, villages and scattered hamlets and farms. There are also estates, parkland, planted settlements and abandoned medieval villages, along with areas of later, more regular Parliamentary enclosure. Stone and timber-framed buildings in a variety of styles reflect the diversity of materials available. Parts of the area have seen periods of thriving industry, from charcoal burning to lead mining and stone quarrying, often accompanied by haphazard 'squatter' settlement.

### **Scenic and environmental quality**

Panoramic views can be had across and beyond the AONB, and both wide open spaces and intimate corners are found. There are contrasts from relatively wild hills and valleys to softer, settled landscapes, as well as between varying seasonal colours of heather, grass, bracken and broadleaved trees. Clean air and water are accompanied by valuable ecological functions including growing of food and fibre, and regulation of water run-off.

### **Tranquillity**

Off the beaten track and remote in the context of the West Midlands, the Shropshire Hills are a haven of tranquillity – peace and quiet, dark skies and unspoilt views. Relatively low levels of noise and inappropriate development combine with modest visitor numbers to create an unspoilt quality that is greatly valued throughout the area.

### **Culture and opportunities for enjoyment**

The Shropshire Hills span a wide spectrum of cultural setting from the fringes of Telford and Ironbridge through the rural hinterlands of market towns such as Ludlow, Craven Arms and Much Wenlock, to some of the sparsest areas of population in England along the Welsh border. Church Stretton, the only town within the AONB, has a unique location in the heart of the hills and a strong Edwardian character. The Shropshire Hills have been a cultural inspiration for writers such as A E Housman, Mary Webb and Malcolm Saville. Opportunities for enjoyment and wellbeing are open to both locals and visitors through walks and outdoor activities which respect the area's qualities. The area has some of the best rights of way networks in Shropshire, most of its open access land, and a wide variety of sites, features and promoted routes.

The cultural history of this distinctive area is ingrained in a landscape that was fought over for centuries. The Iron Age hillforts that crown most of the prominent hilltops reflect a time when people felt the need to live in fortified communities. After the Norman Conquest, the close proximity of the Shropshire Hills to Wales saw many centuries of unrest and cross-border raiding, and the earthworks of medieval motte and bailey castles serve as a reminder to these unsettled times. The archaeological heritage of the AONB also includes Bronze Age funerary and ritual monuments (e.g. round barrows, stone circles), Roman roads and villas, medieval churches, deserted settlements and field systems, and remains of ridge and furrow cultivation.

The built heritage reflects local materials from the landscape, with a rich legacy of half-timbered buildings and the use of local stone in churches and larger houses. Former mining sites, often associated with haphazard 'squatter' settlement with small enclosures encroaching onto common land, are found especially around the Stiperstones at Snailbeach and the Bog, and around the Clee Hills. The Welsh influence is strong in the west and reflected in many place names.

The value of places with regard to the historic environment may be evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal, and grow in strength and complexity over time. Heritage features are a finite resource and give people a sense of continuity and identity. The Shropshire Hills has the greatest concentration of medieval castle earthworks anywhere in Britain, and Stokesay Castle near Craven Arms is described as the finest and best preserved 13<sup>th</sup> Century fortified manor house in England.

## **What should the vision for culture be?**

The vision for culture in the Shropshire Hills should be:

- ▶ Sustainable- strong, vibrant and forward looking
- ▶ Locally distinctive- rooted in the dramatic history of the area and maximising the wonderful local products and traditions
- ▶ Celebratory- made enjoyable for all ages and easy to become involved with
- ▶ Diverse- reflecting the diverse landscape and people of the area
- ▶ Outdoors- at all levels it should be underpinned by the high quality landscape and environmentally aware to ensure future generations can continue to enjoy the area as we do.

## **How can this vision be achieved?**

This vision can be achieved by a joined up, strategic approach that recognises that not all of Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin is the same. Each area has its special qualities and this diversity should be celebrated as part of an overall Shropshire approach.

Local people know best- funding should be directed locally to encourage local distinctiveness but under an umbrella that joins up, shares good ideas and makes connections to ensure a coherent package within Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin and across our borders where there is a shared culture.

## **What are the critical success factors?**

In our experience the following would be critical to deliver the vision:

- ▶ High quality, well funded facilitation
- ▶ Support for community engagement and planning
- ▶ Continued Council support of enjoyment and understanding of the Shropshire Hills
- ▶ Excellent communication and partnership working
- ▶ Easily sourced small grants money to help deliver specific community led activity
- ▶ Education and interpretation of the special qualities of the Shropshire Hills
- ▶ A "rural rebalance" approach to future planning that encourages the development of more viable rural communities
- ▶ Development of alternative transport arrangements e.g. off road cycle routes along disused railways

▶ Better cross-border working