

Blue Remembered Hills project



The Blue Remembered Hills project ran for five years from 2003 to 2007. These pages provide a brief summary of the achievements of the project.

Developed principally between the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership and the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Blue Remembered Hills was one of the first Heritage Lottery Fund 'Area Partnership' projects. With a budget of £1.4m, the project was also supported by Shropshire County Council and the Environment Agency. Principally by means of events, advice and grants, the project aimed to raise interest and capacity among landowners and the wider community for conserving and enjoying the landscape of the Shropshire Hills.

The project's main outputs were:

- 5,140 people attended 189 events, enjoying and learning about the Shropshire Hills.
- Almost 50,000 local provenance trees were distributed for planting in the area.
- Management was improved in 100 neglected orchards, 111 Wildlife Sites and 46 wildflower meadows. 28 grassland sites were brought under a new grazing regime.
- Alders were coppiced on 42 riverbank sites and 98km of riverbank were brought under Management Plans.
- The distribution of black poplars was comprehensively mapped and 541 new trees were planted on 135 sites.
- Management Plans were completed on 40 veteran trees and works carried out on 8 trees.
- The 'Down to Earth' community engagement process was run in six areas, and 20 community projects were developed.
- Interpretation panels were installed at 15 sites.
- Three footpaths were improved, and new cycle routes and the Blue Remembered Hills Bridleway were created.
- Detailed education work was carried out with 42 different schools, and 6,542 children and adults were involved in educational activity.

Many people learnt new skills, found new neighbours and had a good time. The project worked across a number of theme areas, which are described below.



Down to Earth was a process that enabled communities to learn more about their local landscape and identify what they saw as important to them. It then supported their initiatives to conserve and enhance these things. Down to Earth was run in six areas: the Upper Onny, Brown Clee, Around the Wrekin, Clun Forest, Clee Hill, and the Rea Valley.

Over 20 community projects came out of the process and the groups were helped to raise nearly £100,000 to support their projects. Many people developed new skills such as dry stone walling, wildlife identification, interviewing and oral history recording. Three books were published – *'Bettws y Crwyn - History, Geography, Farming and People'*, *'The Upper Onny Valley'* and *'The Industrial Heritage of the Rural Parishes Around the Wrekin'*.

The Down to Earth process encapsulates a feature of the whole project – that the measurable outputs do not tell the whole story, and **the softer 'outcomes' are hard to define but are among the most important parts of the project**. A DVD was produced from interview filming carried out in the Clun Forest which demonstrates, in ways that a report never can, some of the key outcomes of Down to Earth and the project as a whole:

- **Strengthening communities**
- **Harnessing support for conservation**
- **Involving farmers**
- **Building capacity for the future**

For a copy of the 16 minute DVD please contact the AONB Partnership. Also available on our website is a factsheet on the Down to Earth process and *'The Blue Remembered Hills Experience'* – a 20 page booklet produced for a Heritage Lottery Fund dissemination event. A fuller mid-term evaluation report and more detailed information on particular project elements are available on request.



Alders

Until recent times, Alders along rivers such as the Corve, Clun, and Kemp were coppiced for charcoal and clog making. With the decline of these industries coppicing largely ceased and now many trees are nearing the end of their life. Large trees shade out the

river and banks, and fall into the river destabilising banks and potentially causing damage in times of flood. The habitat of nationally important species as Otter, White-clawed Crayfish and Freshwater Pearl Mussel has declined. Through funding and advice to landowners, coppicing has been carried out on 32km of riverbank, and 46 management plans were produced for a total of 98km of river.

Coppicing is the only known means of controlling Alder *Phytophthora* disease, which is widespread in the area, and could be as significant for the landscape as Dutch Elm Disease in the 1970s. Alder timber from every site coppiced during the project found some commercial use, mostly as firewood. This, in conjunction with the grant, was significant for many landowners in going ahead. Much work remains to be done, as all the management plans only cover about 2% of watercourses in the Shropshire Hills. Alder management is being continued through the AONB Partnership's Rivers Project.

Black Poplars

One of our rarest native trees, the Black Poplar is found sparsely throughout the Shropshire Hills. The Arbor Tree at Aston on Clun is a famous example, and advice and support was given for the management of this relatively young, but important tree. Work was also carried out on a number of mature trees to prolong their life, and awareness raised of Black Poplar through a set of displays and models and a variety of events. New Black Poplars were planted, but as planting a rare tree randomly would undermine its value, 135 sites having a historic link with the tree were carefully chosen. In total, 541 trees were planted maintaining an appropriate ratio of male to female trees.



Veteran Trees

We are fortunate to have a concentration of veteran trees in the Shropshire Hills, adding to the atmosphere and richness of our countryside. Some of these trees are hundreds of years old, the eldest Yews over 1,500. Veteran trees are amazing - they started their lives many centuries ago and through the ages have provided fuel, animal fodder and building timber. Today they are vital for the survival of many plants, animals and fungi. What's more, they look wonderful.

A large girth, hollow trunks, rotting wood, lost bark and fungi are all tell-tale signs of veteran trees. Tree cavities provide roost sites for Pipistrelle and Noctule bats, and invertebrates like butterflies and beetles depend on decaying wood in order to complete their life cycles. Many communities of extremely specialised mosses and lichens are also found on these trees. Clearly, by supporting our veteran trees we support our wildlife. Also, many of these veterans have a story to tell, perhaps through their role in history as special meeting places or parish boundary markers, or through local legends. Though mostly unprotected, their needs are often fairly simple – avoiding direct damage, and indirect effects such as soil compaction in the root zone. Occasionally careful pollarding or removal of unbalancing limbs can prolong the life of a tree. 10 training days were held on surveying for veteran trees, and over 250 people attended. Over 400 veteran trees were identified and 40 detailed management plans produced. 8 trees had grant aided works carried out on them. To get involved with veteran trees see www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk or www.treecouncil.org.uk.



Local Provenance Trees

To help ensure there are many native trees in our landscape for future generations, the 'Free Trees Scheme' shared out nearly 50,000 trees grown from seeds and cuttings from provenance areas 403 and 304 (Midlands and Wales). Unlike imported trees, local trees are better adapted to local conditions. The timing of bud burst and fruiting of local trees is in fine balance with the wildlife they support, providing nectar, nuts and berries to coincide with the needs of the wildlife they support. The project worked closely with landowners, community groups and schools to provide suitable trees for 364 sites, with advice on their planting and aftercare.



Wildlife Sites, Wildflower Meadows, Upland Management

Our grasslands, heaths and marshes have been shaped by centuries of livestock grazing, and many plants, butterflies, birds and mammals are dependent on these open habitats. Without grazing, aggressive woody species out-compete smaller and more delicate meadow flowers and grasses, and the diversity of species tends to decline. Agricultural improvements such as drainage and use of fertilisers and high levels of stocking can also damage these habitats.

Wildlife Sites are places which are not protected by national designations, but are identified by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust as locally important. Recent decades have seen loss or deterioration of grassland sites especially, as these are vulnerable to changes in use of the land. During the Blue Remembered Hills project all 215 Wildlife Sites in the Shropshire Hills were visited. Many are small, but 202 sites contained examples of habitat featured in Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan. 111 Management Plans were prepared, 8 training events were held for owners, and the Clee Hill Meadow Owners Group was established.

In the last 50 years over 90% of our wildflower meadows have been lost, mostly to agricultural improvements or to development. The project supported enhancement of 46 meadows through fencing, seeding and producing new grazing and hay cutting management plans. The Technical Guideline Sheets that were produced through the project are available from the Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

On upland sites the emphasis was on restoring grazing to appropriate sites where this has ceased sometimes years ago. This often required renewal of fencing and sometimes cutting first, as well as establishing the best mix and timing of grazing animals. Hardy cattle are especially valuable for conservation grazing as they break up the ground with trampling and tend to create a more varied habitat than sheep. Through the Blue Remembered Hills project, 27 sites were brought under a new grazing regime with Management Plans. Exmoor ponies were used at one site - Mahorall Farm, where visitors are welcomed (www.farmcider.co.uk).



Orchards

Small orchards are common on lower ground in the Shropshire Hills, but many have become neglected. They are important habitats to species including mistletoe, as well as being a valuable cultural part of the landscape. 135 orchards were visited through the project, resulting in active management of 100. 38 management plans were developed by experts, and 303 people attended pruning and other orchard management courses. A new Fruit Tree Collection was planted at the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre, and factsheets about orchards are available on the Discovery Centre's website. To help raise awareness and involve people, two new community apple juicing schemes were supported - Clunton Scrumper's Community Juicing Scheme and the Hayton Community Juicing Scheme.



The work of these project elements was supported by the cross-cutting themes of Education and Interpretation, Access, and Product Development.



Education

This element of the Blue Remembered Hills project was delivered by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Over 200 trips were run as part of the project, taking 6,452 children and adults into the Shropshire Hills, with activities to suit all Key Stages and many subjects. 578 teachers received environmental training and 36 educational projects were completed. A guide for schools entitled *'Where Wild Schools Go'* was produced, which is packed full of information on wild places to take pupils and things to do.

The project also helped a very successful Forest School on the Walcot Estate. Children toasted marshmallows, looked for mythical dragons and developed confidence and self esteem through connections with their local landscape. Forest Schools are spreading across Shropshire, and are not just for early years children. The Shropshire Wildlife Trust's education service continues and can support schools with planning advice, school grounds development and curriculum linked activities. For further see the schools pages at www.shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk.



Interpretation

A key aim of the project was to raise awareness of the Shropshire Hills, and to help people understand and experience the landscape. To achieve this 167 events were held, with a total of over 5,000 people taking part. These events covered wildlife, geology, human impact on the landscape, local history and folklore. Some events were scientific, others included artistic interpretation and storytelling. A stall was put on at 12 shows and other events to promote the work of the Blue Remembered Hills project and 750,000 leaflets were produced and distributed.

15 interpretation panels were placed to explain aspects of the landscape. Locations included the Bitterley Cockpit, the Community Orchard at the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre and the Yew at Norbury Churchyard. Working with the Discovery Centre, the project developed an interactive exhibition which will grow to become a pictorial archive of the Shropshire Hills. The project also supported 'Museum on the Move' and ran training courses for 'Walking for Health' leaders on interpreting the countryside. The project worked with Natural England to develop 'Stiperstones in a Rucksack', an activity pack aimed at families, available from the Bog Centre. At Polemere Nature Reserve the project supported the establishment of a bird hide.

Access

Being out and enjoying the landscape directly is key to people building their attachment to it, and the project included a number of aspects of improving access and promotion. Footpaths were improved at Oak Farm at Ditton Priors and a new circular permissive walk route created at Middle Woodbatch Farm near Bishop's Castle. Working with the Countryside Access Team at Shropshire County Council, the project developed the 35 mile Blue Remembered Hills Bridleway route around the Clun Forest. It also supported the Forestry Commission to develop four new off-road cycling routes in Eastridge Woods near Pontesbury. The routes are graded, so that there is a ride for all abilities.



Product Development

The inclusion in the project of an economic strand was very valuable, and allowed a variety of initiatives to be supported in the developing fields of local products and sustainable tourism. These included:

- Walking Festivals in Bishop's Castle, Church Stretton, Cleobury Mortimer and Ludlow
- The Shropshire Hills Shuttles bus service (see www.shropshirehillsshuttles.co.uk)
- The Craven Arms Community Food Initiative
- Alder flooring and firewood markets from coppice timber
- Farmers Markets around the Shropshire Hills
- Oak Farm Tea Rooms.



The Future

Much of the work carried out in the Blue Remembered Hills project will be continued by partner organisations, landowners and community groups and by the AONB Partnership itself. Two members of project staff have been recruited into core posts in the AONB Team and another has been funded through new project work. The knowledge, skills and experience retained are invaluable in keeping up links and developing ideas for the future. The experience of the project feeds directly into core work of the AONB Partnership and also to the Sustainable Development Fund and the developing programme of LEADER in the Shropshire Hills.



The Blue Remembered Hills project team won the Community Services 'Team' Award in Shropshire County Council's Outstanding Contribution Awards 2007-8.

The Blue Remembered Hills project would not have been possible without our funders:



and without the many landowners who gave their time and money, and all those people who care about the Shropshire Hills who took part. Thank you.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership, hosted by Shropshire County Council, managed the Blue Remembered Hills project and will continue its work to conserve and sustain the landscape of the Shropshire Hills.

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership

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