

Sirhowy Woodlands: the story of how a community group has reclaimed the neglected woodlands.

From spoil tip to fruit orchards

Introduction

This case study sets out the journey of a new group, how it formed and their future plans. The Friends of Sirhowy Woodlands is a very newly formed group only becoming constituted in January 2016. The woodland area is a reclaimed spoil and refuse tip which was used as a depository for steel industry and household waste, until the 1970's, after which it was reforested in the 1980's. It's now designated as a Local Nature reserve. Lots of money has been invested in the area over the years but due to funding cuts Blaenau Gwent Local Authority has been unable to manage it as it would like and has been only able to maintain statutory commitments. Without management the woodlands have become neglected, attract off roaders vehicles and bikes and are subject to anti-social behaviour. That said it remains a popular area for dog walkers.

The community group is made up of local residents, who want to make the most of the woodlands. They are going to help look after the woodlands and are in the process of drawing up a management agreement for the LA. This way the group can apply for funding to improve the woodlands that the LA cannot whilst not having the burden of full liability for the site.

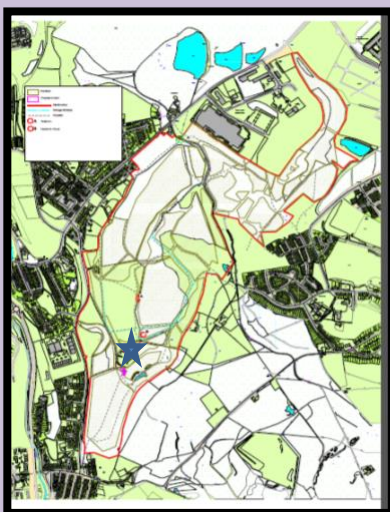
Where it is

Site location
Address: Thomas Ellis Way,
Sirhowy, Tredegar
Nearest Postcode: NP22
Grid Reference: 51°46'54.9"N
3°14'02.5"W



Woodland History

The woodland and surrounding areas that make up Sirhowy Woodlands cover about 85ha Sirhowy Woodlands in in Tredegar, Blaenau Gwent. This area is



managed as a community woodland and the land is mainly owned by the council, although it also includes two relatively small areas which are in private ownership. The site lies within the South Wales coalfield at an altitude of between about 320m AOD to the south, rising to about 395m AOD at the highest point near the centre of the site. The solid geology is dominated by the Westphalian Coal Measures which are overlain by Upper Carboniferous sandstones, the latter of which are locally exposed at the surface throughout the southern part of the site.

The site was extensively mined for coal in the past, and free-draining colliery shales arising from coalmining spoil now cover the majority of the site. There are few areas of native soil remaining.

The refuse and shale tips were closed in 1973-74 and subsequently landscaped as open grassland with small-scale tree planting, although the majority of the grass species which

were sown failed to take. More extensive tree planting has subsequently been carried out on the site since the early 1980s, in an attempt to afforest the site.

The majority of Sirhowy Hill was planted in phases between 1985 and 1990, predominantly with common alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), grey alder (*Alnus incana*), Italian alder (*Alnus cordata*), Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) and various pines (*Pinus* spp), willows (*Salix* spp) and poplars (*Populus* spp). Subsequent planting with broadleaves has taken place in selected areas, with species including sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*), beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), birch (*Betula* spp), common hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*)



Photo: Justin Phelps

The site is frequently used by dog walkers and walkers. However there is also a large amount of anti-social behaviour that occurs on the site, from off road 4x4ing, motorbikes, quad bikes. There is also a large amount of littering and fly tipping that occurs on the site. Fly grazing is also an issue

How the group came about

A resident contacted the Blaenau Gwent County Council Local Authority in the summer 2015 and complained about the litter in the woodlands and asked what they were going to do about it. The LA had heard that a Cynefin Place Coordinator* was working in the area and asked for assistance in getting a litter pick organised. The Cynefin officer organised a litter pick and managed to get lots of other organisations to join in and contribute in some way.



* Cynefin was a Welsh Government funded project run by Severn Wye Energy Agency- An asset based approach to community development, that brings together different parts of a community - local residents, community groups, local businesses, youth groups and organisations that deliver services - to help to improve the places where they live or work, making it cleaner, safer and generally nicer to live in as well as helping to provide more opportunities for business and for people to work and improve their incomes.



These are the organisations and people that have joined in with local residents or offered support in some way:

- Tai Calon Community Housing
- BGCBC
- Gwent Wildlife Trust
- Communities First
- Keep Wales Tidy
- NRW
- Llais Y Goedwig
- Space Saviours
- Renew
- Groundworks
- Tredegar Town Council
- Nick Smith MP
- Alun Davies AM



The first litter pick held on a wet winter's day succeeded in getting 18 people to attend and most of them were residents of Tredegar, numbers have increased as the group now holds regular litter picks. At the litter pick the Cynefin Officer went around talking to people finding out why they were there and how interested they were in the woods. At the end of the litter pick the Cynefin officer asked if anyone there was interested in starting up a woodland group, they gathered the contact details of interested parties and set about arranging a meeting in a local pub. At the first meeting it became clear that there was plenty of interest and the residents were interested in forming a group. The Cynefin officer acted as a broker and coordinated all the relevant people and paperwork that is needed to start up a group. ReNew provided a mentor to assist with the writing of the constitution. Llais y Goedwig peer groups provided support and advice. As a direct result of the litter pick a woodland group has now formed "Friends of Sirhowy Woodlands" with a view to taking on some of the management of the woodlands and getting it better used and more accessible to local residents. All of the following groups helped either in creation of their constitution or provided support the local Keep Wales Tidy Officer, Space Saviours and Llais y Goedwig. People of all ages from 7 to nearly 70 have joined the group and numbers are growing month on month.

The County Council has been very supportive of the group; one of the council officers is a Director of Llais Y Goedwig so the group has benefitted from having this additional support. The committee of this group is made up entirely of Tredegar residents, there are councilors and LA members, even the local MP, that are part of the group but it is Community lead by residents. The Cynefin Officer has sped up the process she acted as a connector, catalyst and broker to enable the group to be able to take itself forward with tools, materials, support and funding to go forwards. Currently the group and the local authority are working out the details of a management agreement which would formalise the arrangement and clarify roles and responsibilities of the group.

Chris Engel-Service Manager Green Infrastructure

Blaenau Gwent County Bough Council started working on the Sirhowy woodlands (85 Ha) in the early 1990's funded by the then WDA through section 15 grants. At the start of the project the main objective was to increase the biodiversity value of the area by diversifying the woodland and other habitats on site. It rapidly became apparent that local community support would be essential if the project was to achieve its full potential. Despite early attempts by BGCBC, Communities first and Tredegar Development Trust, assisted with various funding opportunities such as Cyd Coed and Play Wales, for many years there has been a failure to establish a true community interest in Sirhowy Woodlands.

The historic lack of interest has been to the detriment of the site. Incidents of anti-social behaviour, vandalism,

fly tipping and illegal vehicular access has been a constant problem for the Local Authority and local residents alike. The evidence of neglect being a constant concern for the local communities.

In the summer of 2015 following a spate of incidents and vociferous locals expressing their concerns regarding the appalling state of affairs, Jayne Hunt the Cynefin Project Coordinator was challenged to transform the local communities concerns into positive action for the benefit of the woodlands. Through the considerate handling of the local communities concerns and needs, the use of an appropriate network of organisations and holding suitable engagement events, the successful outcome has been the establishment of a constituted 'Friends of' Group for Sirhowy woodlands, with 25 members and 83 people "liking" their Facebook page.

The group have demonstrated their enthusiasm and passion for the site by completing two major litter pick events and the planting of a heritage orchard within the woodland. With further plans to develop and improve the woodlands further, this is considered a remarkable success. These are early stages in the project but already the future for the Sirhowy woodlands looks much more positive.

Barbara Anglezarke Team Leader, Communities and Regeneration at NRW said:

"The main thing is that there *is* now a group of interested and committed local people. Local motivation and support is key – and means that efforts are more likely to be sustained in the longer-term. Without local enthusiasm and connection, top-down action is rarely sustained beyond the end of time-limited and funded project work."

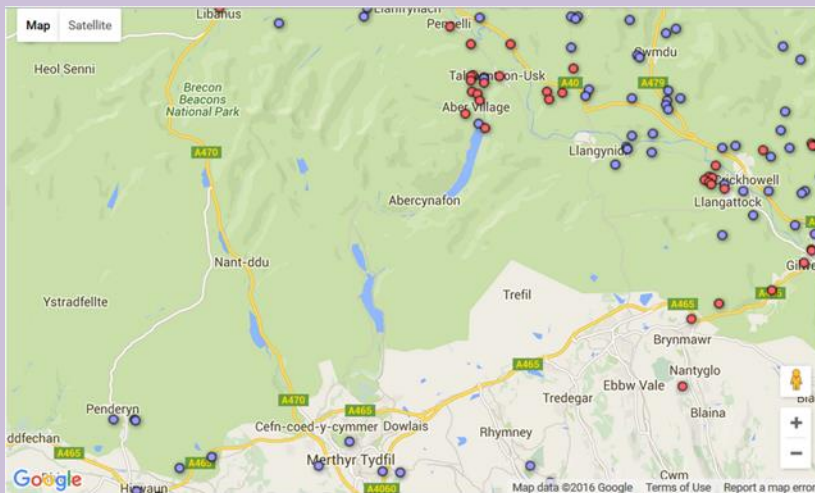
2nd Steps

The Tredegar Partnership Forum has proven very useful for the group as members of the group attend and this has assisted in making connections with useful people and led to the group's first non-litter related project, setting up a community orchard. From just one meeting the group was offered free trees (heritage) from Groundworks, then free fencing, manure and the local ecologist offered to find a suitable site, Cynefin organised with the group a planting date, rallied the troops and found out what trees they wanted and hey presto, there is now an orchard in Sirhowy woods.



History of Orchards in Tredegar

Currently there are few, if any orchards in Blaenau Gwent as you can see from this map by Peoples Trust for Endangered Species who have surveyed England and Wales for orchards. We did wonder at first if this was because of the elevation of the area: 322 m (1056 ft). However upon further research we found out that it was possible to grow trees at this elevation and we sourced the trees for the orchard from Welsh Mountain Orchards in Mid Wales, where they grow over 400 varieties of apple and pear at 1200 feet!



Pre-industrialisation there were orchards in Tredegar. In Powells History of Tredegar he describes:

Previous to the beginning of the present century the district was inhabited by farmers and their shepherds, the hills clothed with trees on each side, ferns and flowers, in rich profusion, were growing everywhere. Farmhouses and pretty little orchards dotted the surface, whose inhabitants were congenial companions, sketches of which fill the mind with poetical associations, and carry us back to those ancient times when "Nature, in all her primitive grandeur", reigned supreme.

Not only that we found a folk song which Cerys Matthews has covered called -Ar ben waun Tredegar <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ex5PTds3Jg>

Which talks about:

Eirin - plums

Cnau - nuts

Falau ym Mis Mai - apples in May

Ffrwythau o bob ryw - fruits of every kind!

So to be able to put back in our small way an orchard in Tredegar is like restoring a little piece of history.

Getting local support

Initially this was done through a number of media by putting posters up advertising the litter pick and asking people to join in through the town and woodlands itself. Emails of the posters were sent around to all the local organisations and asked to share. A Facebook page was set up by the group <https://www.facebook.com/SirhowyWoodlands2015/> and events have been set up on Facebook which then enables all members to invite all their friends to events and like the page. This has proven a simple and cheap way of spreading the word of the group and its activities

Members comments:

Ellen Jones

I am a local resident that feels so lucky to have the woodlands on my doorstep. I want to look after the woodlands as it is a great safe place for my grandchildren to play and learn at the same time as having fun also

it is free. The woodland is a piece of heaven on earth beautiful greenery scenery, fresh air filling your lungs, peaceful and relaxing with real life nature sounds all around. It truly is a magical place please come and visit us.

Our woodlands group got off the ground and moved on in leaps and bounds since Jayne's involvement she organised meetings litter picks and amazingly we are going to be planting up our orchard the end of this week this is just the tip of the iceberg she's done so much more besides.

Alyson Tippings- resident and Tredegar Town Councillor

When I first worked as a Countryside Officer in Blaenau Gwent I was involved in the original fencing, planting, design and set up of the woodlands. When the new group was set up it just seemed the natural thing to do.

I want to continue to look after something that I started a long time ago. The woodland is like an old friend that is in need of TLC and with a little love and attention it will be a great place for walking and an amazing habitat for wildlife. The new group has shown that they want to improve the woodland, diversify the habitat and make it more interesting for visitors. There is a constant struggle to overcome the antisocial elements that use the woodland but this will not put us off, it just makes us more determined than ever.

Without the Cynefin officer, this would not have happened. Jayne has enthused, organised, coaxed and driven the project forward.

Susy Arnold- resident and local business owner

The council and others had tried to get this off the ground before, I attended the first litter pick having heard about it at the Tredegar Partnership Forum and it's gone from there.

I wanted to be involved as it's an area that I walk in on a regular basis and it was done up some years ago but the paths have deteriorated and now it's a sad walk not a pleasurable walk. The pond dismays me, it has the potential to be a beautiful site and is within walking distance of a large Community. The woodland has great potential but its dilapidated and uncared for, we are in the early planning stages, we are open to ideas but we need to care for what is there and build upon it.

Some of the difficulties we have had are getting enough people who want to take on roles.

I hope it will become a well-cared for community woodland and with more young people getting involved; it would be nice to get teens involved too. Cynefin acts as facilitator - Jayne got people together and pointed people in the right direction.

Oriel M Price, local resident and Tredegar Town Councillor

We are a small group of volunteers, dog walkers and residents who are passionate about improving the appearance and usage of Sirhowy Woodlands.

The orchard project aims to transform a derelict piece of vacant council woodland into an orchard for the benefit of the whole community. It plans to provide a community growing area, of Welsh Heritage fruit trees to encourage community cohesion, a healthier lifestyle as well as encouraging insect, butterfly and bird life into the woodland. The area does suffer from fly tipping, it is our hope that with regular litter picks that the perpetrators will be deterred from this illegal practice and use the neighbouring recycling site. The orchard is helping the group to grow links with the local community including environmental groups and the council. It has also helped to create a stronger sense of community in this unknown area of woodland.

It is the intention of the Friends of Sirhowy Woodland's group to provide a resource for the local community to enjoy on a daily basis. The project also introduced the concept of growing your own food.

The orchard includes:

- an area for traditional growing;
- an events and demonstration area for educational workshops/visits if required/requested;
- an area for a community orchard made up of fruit trees.

The hope is that the group will transform the unused green space within the woodland into a public horticultural green space. Through an inclusive community approach the project will increase:

- understanding of horticulture within the community;
- pride with the space;
- use of the woodland.

Resulting also in a decrease in the episodes of fly-tipping and antisocial behaviour.

Through listening to the local needs of the community, Cynefin have looked at a cohesive approach through community partnerships. The appointed Tredegar Cynefin Officer became the catalyst for action in devising an action plan and sign posting to potential funding streams to ensure the longevity of the project well into the future. We are hopeful that through the relationships that Cynefin have helped forged with BGCBC, Keep Wales Tidy, Groundwork Wales, Tai Calon, Gwent Wildlife and the BG Biodiversity Partnership that the group will be aided to manage and diversify the area for years to come.

Future plans include:

- Blocking any access by 4x4 vehicles onto the site
- Repairing existing structures (stone wall, paths and steps)
- Increasing biodiversity on site
- Creating a reed bed habitat
- Cider and Perry making
- Using the fruit from the woodlands for cooking/jams/chutneys
- Making charcoal
- Making firewood
- Looking at how to create more Unimproved habitat
- Tree thinning hedge laying
- Creating a cycle path through the boggy area at the bottom of the site whilst creating a wetland habitat
- Installing way marking around the site- lengths of walks, difficulty of terrain etc.
- QR code- augmented reality
- Dead trees carved into creatures around the woods
- Siting bee Hives in woods
- Encouraging the Council to provide bins at main exits and entrance and fort area
- Sourcing Bat, owl and bird boxes and put up around woods

Lessons learned and Advice

- Ensure groups are community led, paid staff come and go and can be a valuable asset but ownership by the community is vital for long term sustainability.
- First meeting should be informal, many pubs will allow groups to use an upstairs room for free if the groups buys drinks from them
- Avoid being over formal this can scare people off
- Look at skills within the group and fit positions to people skills
- The Committee is made up of local residents, with councilors and the local MP and AM as part of the wider group.
- The group held a series of meeting to decide what they wanted to do and met with another local woodland group for inspiration.
- Get key local authority members, MP's and AM's onboard they are very useful people to know
- The council was willing to look at offering the group to take on the whole site under Community Asset Transfer but the group decided not to after advice from the Cynefin officer as that would mean taking on liability of the site. This could be reviewed at a future date.

- The group will have a management agreement this means that they can get grants that the LA can't apply for without taking on liability of the site.
- Be flexible enough to grasp opportunities when they arise- the orchard being the example of that
- Fixing what's there first
- Have short and long plans
- Seek expert advice-no-one knows everything, seek out the ones who do

Conclusion

With a bit of help from Cynefin (or someone in a similar role) pulling relevant parties together, acting as a broker and connector it is possible to turn these reclaimed sites into an asset that the community can fully get involved in and enjoy. With the Local Authority having less and less money they were unable to manage it. With the new community group established the woodlands is already looking better and will hopefully become the local treasure that it should be whilst helping to ensure the wellbeing of future generations.

Authors and Contributors

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