

Case study 1

Responding to opportunities: Blaen Bran Community Woodland

This case study sets out the story of a small woodland in Upper Cwmbran in the County borough of Torfaen that was an early leasehold acquisition by the Forestry Commission in the 1930's. Subsequent history saw the leasehold pass through private hands before an embryonic community group in the form of a Trust had the opportunity to take over the lease and bid for grant funding. In the process the community group evolved from a Trust to a Company limited by guarantee and has gone on to also become a registered Charity.

Many lessons were learnt on this journey and those related to managing damaging activities, involving the wider community, generating an income, building local networks and keeping it all going are related here.

The advice arising from the experiences of Blaen Bran Community Woodland are summed up as three 'P's';

- **Persistence (keep going),**
- **Planning (make it flexible to accommodate change) and**
- **People (be inclusive, have fun and look after each other).**

Woodland History

Blaen Bran Community woodland (BBCW), or Coed Gwaun y Fferiad to give it's Welsh name, lies to the north west of Wales's only new town, Cwmbran, and is an area of 40 hectares (100 acres) around a disused reservoir which used to supply water to the communities that made up Cwmbran.

Forestry Commission

The recent history of forestry goes back to 1931 when the Llantarnam and Llanfrechfa Water Board who own the reservoir and catchment area opened negotiations with the Forestry Commission to plant 107 acres adjacent to the reservoir. The lease (for 999 years) was signed in December 1933 and the area was planted by the Forestry Commission between 1937 and 1938 mainly with Scots Pine and Japanese Larch, with some Norway Spruce in smaller and wetter areas and a few Sitka spruce planted to the north of the reservoir. Tracks and paths were lined with Beech.

In the mid 1980's the Japanese larch and some of the Scots pine and Norway spruce were felled. At this time

a right of way was negotiated with Pontypool Park Estates to extract timber to the Mountain Air road. The felled area was replanted with Japanese Larch in 1988 and some internal fencing constructed to protect the young trees from sheep damage.

Blaen Bran woodland- from ridge looking North East



Photo: BBCW

Private ownership

In the early 1990's the Forestry Commission sold their interest in the 999 year lease to Chantler Timbers. At about the same time the water board – now part of Welsh Water Authority – sold their freehold of the reservoir and woodland to Messrs Peterson and Roberts, who set up a private company.

Following the lease transfer Chantler Timbers obtained permission to fell over half the woodland. This followed much negotiation on landscape issues and involved felling Scots Pine in the SE of the wood plus smaller areas of Japanese larch and Norway spruce.

The 1990's also saw motorbikes using the wood for off road trails, New Age travellers coming through, and attempts by Messrs Peterson and Roberts (owners of the freehold) to develop paintballing and a planning application for a holiday village.

In 1998 a Mr Charles Larkin bought the lease from Chantlers with replanting conditions. Sovereign woodlands carried out the replanting and also put in perimeter sheep fencing. Unfortunately fences were cut and much planting destroyed so further planting was done by compartments in 2001, including a mix of

Williams, Secretary and Mark Crew, Treasurer were appointed as the Company officers.

History survey

One thing that the Trustees (and then Directors) were interested to take forward was a history survey to get a sense of place. There had been coal mining in the local area within living memory – the Upper Cwmbrian colliery had been closed in the late 1920's – and there were signs of earlier mining activities. Local house and place names – Mineslope Cottages, Brickyard Cottages, and The Incline – bore testament to an industrial heritage. A historical survey was therefore included in the activity plan agreed with Cydcoed, and a prominent local historian, Bob Trett, ex officer at Newport Museum, was engaged to undertake an archive survey in December 2005.

This traced the first recorded clear reference to the 'land by the Bran brook under the hill of Mynydd Maen' to a deed of 1452. The area was part of the extensive Edlogan estate which was industrialised at the dawn of the industrial revolution. Later came larger scale industrial development principally mining which affected the lower part of the present woodland the upper part, despite the slope and height, was used for farming. This area of farmland as planted by the Forestry Commission in the 1930's and old field walls and part of the Blaen Bran stone farmhouse can still be seen.

Part of the value of having a history survey done was to understand the landscape and how it had evolved, as well as proving a useful means of getting the community interested in the woodland today.

Blaen Bran - 1920



Exerts from History survey

Edlogan was one of the possessions of the Welsh lords of Caerleon. In 1278 Morgan ap Gruffydd claimed the manor by right of inheritance but that he had been ejected by Gilbert de Clare, earl of Hereford and Gloucester. Edlogan passed, together with the lordship of Usk, to Elizabeth of York, daughter of King Edward IV, and wife of King Henry VII. In 1558 it was purchased from the Crown by William Morgan of Llantarnam. In 1766 the then owner, Lord Chedworth, sold the manor of Edlogan to John Hanbury.

In 1793 Thomas Stoughton obtained agreement to have a "Level Road" (probably with a rail track for horse-pulled wagons) through the grounds of Glyn Brân, called Gwern Escob, and to sink one shaft or pit in the wood.

The Cwmbrian Colliery/Mine Slope (Level 1) and the Porthmawr Colliery (Level 2) were opened in 1837 by R.J. Blewitt, just below the present Braen Bran Community Woodland. These levels were also worked for fireclay. Most of the surviving evidence for the complex of colliery buildings, the associated railroads, cottages, and brickworks is immediately below the present Community Woodland. However an airshaft exists in Coed Gwaun-y-ffeiriad, above Cwmbrian Colliery, and is shown on Ordnance Survey maps in 1882 and 1920. Underground there was an extensive system of tunnels, including the "tunnel to Pontypool" shown on John Prujean's map of 1843 and a deed map of 1854.

A complex of field boundaries, tracks, a tunnel entrance, and buildings ("Blan Brain" farm) are shown on the tithe apportionment map of 1840. This clearly shows that the bulk of the Community Woodland, over 69 acres, was "Blan Brain" (i.e. Blaen Bran) Farm and belonged to Capel Hanbury Leigh of Pontypool Park. The tenant was Howell Saunders. About 10 acres were arable land, and the rest pasture, rough pasture and brake.

Environmental survey

In a similar vein the Directors agreed with Cydcoed the usefulness of undertaking a wildlife survey to better understand the flora and fauna of the area and to get some advice on appropriate management to both preserve existing habitat areas and improve others to increase biodiversity.

Gwent Wildlife Trust (GWT) was engaged to survey the site and identify any biodiversity constraints that may influence land management decisions. GWT was also invited to provide management recommendations to help maintain and enhance wildlife interest throughout the site. It was recognised by all parties that ambitions would be constrained by funds and manpower, so recommendations were designed to be achievable by a small group of volunteers working to a tight budget.

The survey was done in the summer of 2005 and reported in the September of that year. All

recommendations were keyed to the forestry compartment map of the site. This helped in terms of both developing and then reviewing a management plan for the next 5 years.

Key Issues for BBCW

Probably the key issue that had drawn in community interest in the woodland was seeking to make it attractive, accessible, and to stop (where possible) those activities that had degraded the area – fires, dumping and off road motor-biking.

An important condition of the lease was to maintain perimeter fencing – this was to try and keep both sheep and motor bikes out. Deliberate cutting of fences was evident, and up to dozen motor bikes were seen at a time in and around the woodland. A number of cars had been abandoned and torched in and around the woodland, and litter was a generic issue as many local people picnicked and camped there, particularly in the summer months.

Burnt out car –woodland boundary 2003



Photo: BBCW

Deliberate fires have been a constant problem in the woodland since before the community woodland group first came together. The challenge has been to retain community involvement but reduce the damage and negative aspects of this.

Fire damage – 2008



Photo: BBCW

Lessons learnt

BBCW has a fairly short history – dating from the creation of a steering group in 2003. Like all community groups it has had highs and lows, successes and failures. There have been many learning points along the way and an analysis of this is considered under a range of different headings or themes.

Managing activities

This was a major issue for the directors. It was the desire of the group to have Blaen Bran as an attractive woodland area free from degradation that would draw many to become involved and for local people in Upper Cwmbran to view the wood as ‘their’ space. There was agreement in the group to try and keep off road bikes out and reduce vandalism, with the understanding that it was better to encourage a sense of ownership rather than have a ‘keep out’ mentality. Getting the perimeter fencing repaired was a lease condition as well as being what the group wanted to do – but also catering for clear pedestrian access by putting kissing gates in at entrance points. It was also a question of encouraging those who walked the woods regularly to report when fencing was cut or damage detected – and then fixing it as soon as possible.

The directors looked to make contact with the Fire Service – to advise on fire breaks and how to improve access for them, and they also recognised the importance of engaging with young people. Pupils from the local primary school, Woodlands Junior School, were among the first volunteers to plant some trees in 2003 before the group took over the lease.

The directors also quickly learnt that the wood needed to look ‘cared for’ – i.e. that rubbish was cleared quickly as well as repairs done promptly, and that signs were in place to let people know that off road bikes weren’t permitted, or firearms for that matter – it sounds obvious, but police advice was to make people aware so they couldn’t say they didn’t know.

The directors also learned to have very simple signs – A4 paper glued to entrance signs – easy to replace if defaced, hard to tear off, easy to run off!

Another key lesson was ‘toning down’ signs – so they moved from ‘No motorbikes, No Firearms’ to ‘Do please enjoy the woodland. For the benefit of all users, off road motor-biking and use of firearms is not permitted’

Ensuring rubbish is cleared – and providing rubbish bags



Photos: BBCW

Summary points: Managing activities

- Persistence – in doing repairs, putting up signs
- Being open to ideas and suggestions – fireplace area, 'Alamo' motorbike fence
- Being ready to change things – encouraging 'do's' rather than listing out 'don'ts'
- Zoning activity – encouraging activity in certain areas

Community involvement

Important lessons here were to use word of mouth to make contacts and encourage people to become members, to hold events for members and to use a range of communication channels. Members are encouraged to give e-mail addresses so they can be notified of walks, projects, etc and a website was (and is) seen as very important to give information. <http://www.blaenbran.org.uk/>

The aim was to try and hold different events that

would attract interest – from history walks to wildflower walks, from tree planting to BBQ's and

picnics. Information and communication has been through website posting, e-mails, flyers, newsletters and posters at the entrance to the woods. All Directors have 'tapped into' existing groups and networks – such as local choir, local pubs, schools, etc.

AGM's of the group have always had an 'open forum' slot for ideas and suggestions and membership has been fairly consistent at 90 – 100.

Summary points: Community involvement

- Value of some annual events – History walk, woods in winter, autumn social
- Having one person to co-ordinate a particular event (the directors had endless debates on what to provide at a social!)
- Linking with other groups - autumn social done in partnership with Friends of the Earth
- Providing contact names/numbers for people to get in touch
- Good connections with local businesses – one pub sponsored membership cards
- Not trying to be too complex
- Following up ideas – such as taking part in the December 2009 'Tree o'clock' event, when 120 people got involved in planting trees

Income generation

In common with many groups BBCW gained impetus from the Cydcoed funding initiative, and the opportunity to shape a funding bid provided the incentive to purchase the leasehold and to go from a Trust to a limited company. The Cydcoed grant was over four years and so encouraged medium term forward planning. BBCW recognised the need for some consistent funding to cover the annual costs of being in existence – insurance as woodland (lease) owner, insurance for volunteer work in the wood, leasehold payments (£13.50/year), a way lease, company registration and accounts, and essential maintenance works, etc.

Applications to a number of other grants have been made – with mixed success. A key lesson has been that even if funders come back asking for more detail it still won't necessarily mean a successful application! The group were successful in getting funding from some Wales wide bodies – including Millennium Stadium fund, Wales

Arson grant and Keep Wales Tidy. We have also had success with some local grant funding applications – to the Welsh Church Fund, to the Cwmbran Trust and to the Torfaen Voluntary Alliance (TVA). These have mainly been for capital items rather than revenue, and the latter two have enabled purchase of a second storage container, a small tractor and a chipper.

A lesson has been that some of the local application processes have been easier – such as to Cwmbran Trust, where only a short 'business case' had to be made. Unsuccessful, but time consuming applications were made to the Aggregates Levy and to the Coalfields Trust. We were successful in persuading the latter that Upper Cwmbran should be a 'coal field' ward (with a mine having been next door to the wood) but still didn't get any money.

We also made an application to Environment Wales and found it helpful to go through the registration process that then meant one could apply for a range of grants for specific activities under a loose project. Two such projects have gone forward with them.

Summary points: Getting grants

- Important to look locally and nationally for grant funding
- Learn from experience – preparing cases, collecting background, etc can be carried over from an unsuccessful bid to another funding application
- Follow up grant applications and look to establish a clear link person from the group (not always the same person)
- Be ready to respond promptly and look for key evidence – some articles on arson on the mountain in the local paper were helpful to support an Arson Grant application.

As well as grant funding the group saw a need to get some other income to cover annual operating costs. Timber extraction had only limited possibilities but some has been felled and sold drawing on inherited (pre-purchase) felling licences. Membership income is very useful – at £10 per member annually, times 100 members gives sufficient income to cover insurances and lease payments. There is also a membership category for "horse riding members" who pay £30 per member annually for the right to ride horses in the

woodland. We also had an approach from a new local small business to access the wood for pony trekking and this yields a quarterly payment of £150 plus payment in kind – for example provision of a digger to clear ditches and move heavy stones. Social events have also held raffles – the emphasis is firstly on enjoyment, but if people are having fun then they are more willing to 'chip in'. A recent joint social with Friend of the Earth raised £70 for each group.

Summary points: Generating revenue

- Useful to see the woodland as a venue that can be hired for some events – such as fell races, scout camps, pony trekking
- Any income is useful – make sure you don't try and extract too much or you lose good will
- Payment in kind is very helpful – the man with the digger, the contractor who can exchange chippings for logs, the person making donation for a Christmas tree, etc
- Making use of contacts for small scale, local, timber sales – we were only offered £4/tonne by a contractor selling to Aberthaw power station but rather more by some locals

Linking with others

The group recognised early the need to tap into links that members already had – and that this could provide skills and expertise that were needed. Examples were legal advice and witness when the group became a Trust, accountancy advice when annual accounts had to be first done, and the wide range of forestry contacts that David Parsons had as forest agent.

It was also a case of following up contacts from conversations – for example, someone mentioned to

one of the Directors that a Lowland Search and Rescue dogs group were looking for areas to train, and this was followed up – and ended up with them coming to the wood perhaps 4 or 5 times a year for training exercises. In a similar vein, a local police dog handler asked about exercising his dog in the woods – and we were happy to agree and give access as a police presence was helpful in being a potential deterrent to some types of behaviour.

Summary points: Linking with others

- Following up contacts and conversations – some bear fruit in unexpected ways
- Using links and connections that members have
- Joint work on common interests
- Being ready to follow up ideas – such as Trafalgar tree planting

Other points

There are a variety of other learning points. An important aspect is having a big enough committee and encouraging all to be involved in different ways. BBCW has a committee of 12 Directors - some have moved off and others come forward to take their places. This helps spread the workload and allows people to contribute where they feel able – whether administration, leading/organising events, practical work. Regular meetings are also important. The BBCW Directors meet every month, except August (with the December meeting being informal in a pub) and so far over 5 years have never been inquorate. A reasonable size committee also allows for people to step back a bit if personal circumstances change – and we have worked hard to keep people on board, even as ‘sleeping’ members for a while. Similarly the group recognises that some people won’t want to be Directors but are happy to work regularly in the wood.

Events have sometimes been erratic – depending on other commitments but this is OK if what is done is done well, and encourages people to visit the wood.

The group have varied between having a newsletter for members – or a flyer letter drop around the local area – and it is still not clear which is best.

Directors and members all have different motivations – ranging from those interested in actively managing the woodland and those wanting to have a very light touch. Some saw purchasing the lease as an end in itself, for others the wood is a possible income generator. It is important therefore to look to balance up views and strong personalities!

Some mistakes have been made – for example a contractor brought in to do some ditching work didn’t use the best tools for the job, and people complained about the amount of ground dug up.

Horse riding has also been an issue – some very much in favour and other less so – as with many things, establishing good communication has been important – meeting riders, encouraging membership, asking that only main tracks are used in bad weather, etc

The relationship with the landlord has also been an issue – his communication is only via his solicitors and there have been one or two challenges as to whether lease conditions have been adhered to.

Some committee roles have been difficult to cover – particularly the Treasurer, with three different temporary/short term arrangements before now having a regular Treasurer.

Summary points:

- Actively seeking key skills and people – such as Treasurer
- Recognising different member interests – having a range of different activities and events
- Nurturing/supporting Directors and the work they do
- Recognising that some people will want to be invited to events/activities – others will just come!

The future

This is always hard to predict – we certainly never envisaged we'd be where we are now five years ago. There has been development of 'getting equipment' whilst grants (with some match funding) have been available – with a view to being able to do heavy duty maintenance jobs ourselves. It may be that there will be opportunity to link up with other community groups to share costs on training and to hire out equipment. We also have to look at what to do with felled larch thinnings, and whether we can find markets for firewood. Keeping a careful eye open for *Phytophthora ramorum* (so called 'sudden oak death') is also a concern given that other larch woods in the Afan valley some 60 miles west have been significantly affected. We also have to consider whether we make more efforts to zone activities in the wood and how we balance up more people using it with efforts to broaden biodiversity.

Concluding Remarks

Every community woodland experience will be different, reflecting the diversity of human interests. Hopefully the narrative laid out here of one group's experiences will be useful for others wanting to become involved with community woodlands. If there are three words we'd use to summarise our experience they would be:

Persistence – *keep going because you don't know what may change tomorrow*

Planning – *always in pencil, because things always change*

People – *coming together, can achieve a lot – not least of which is having fun!*

Horse logging open day 2010



Photo: BBCW

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