

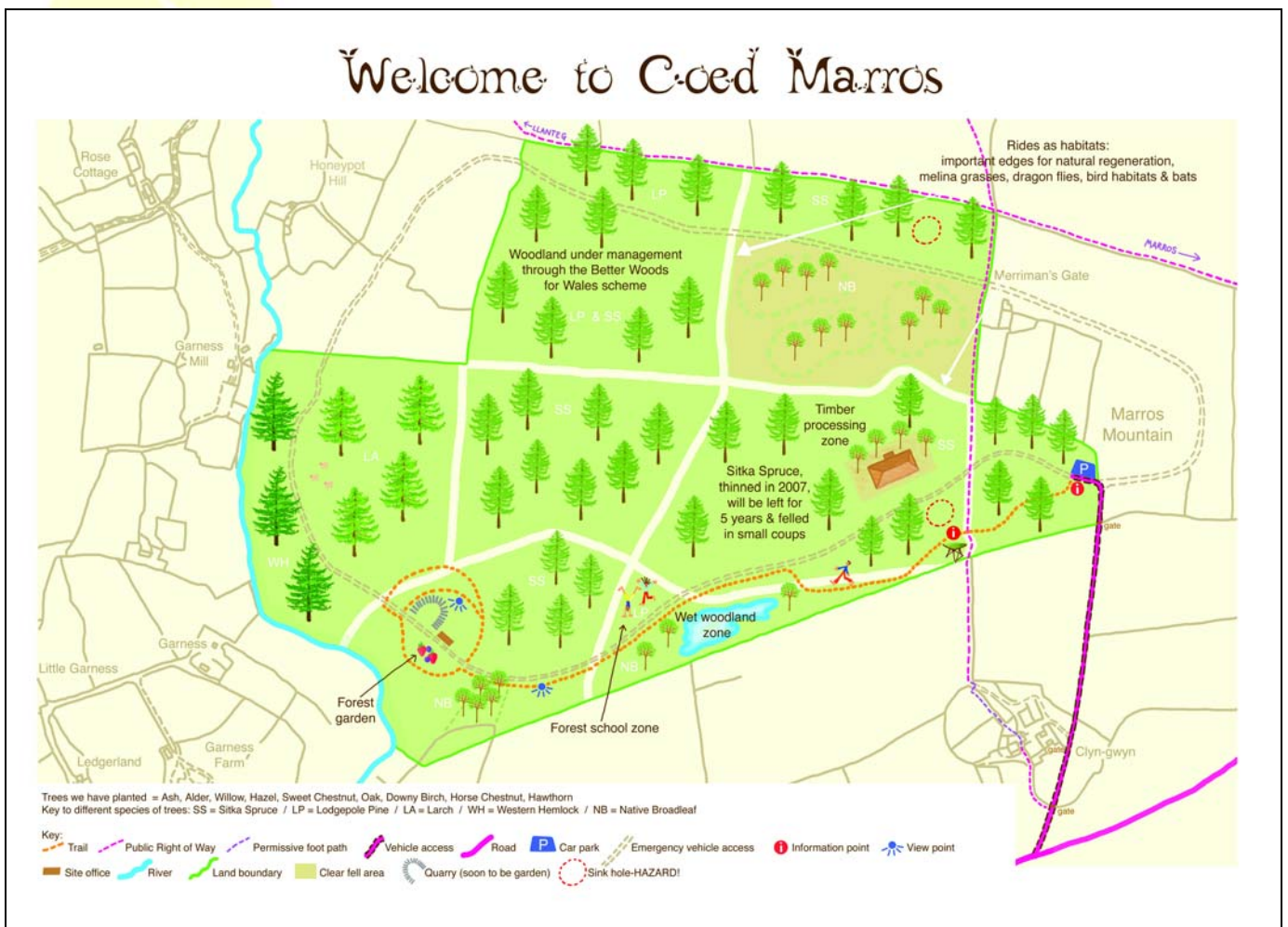
## Case study 5

# Turning a vision into reality: Coed Marros Co-operative

The Coed Marros Co-op is a group of five people who have pooled their resources to purchase and develop Coed Marros as a community woodland. Over the last five years the Co-op has primarily focused on developing a Community Woodland using Permaculture principles, livelihoods for themselves and a strong and supportive link with the local community. Funding has come from Cydcoed, the C-Change Trust and many cash and volunteer time donations. Coed Marros is also a Willing workers on Organic farms (WWOOF) host and regularly runs events with volunteers and are developing plans for the woods to be used by different groups. The co-op is supported by the Permaculture Association, Co-ops UK, Wales Co-operative centre and registered with Environment Wales.

The case study includes:

- 1) How the history and wildlife on the site have influenced planning.
- 2) Development of the Co-operative Company, purchase of land and taking on a grant project.
- 3) The use of Permaculture as a basis for woodland management.
- 4) Problems encountered along the way, how they were overcome and the lessons learnt.
- 5) Opening up access and engaging with local communities.
- 6) Addressing Council Planning issues.
- 7) Forest Plans and Volunteer events.
- 8) Challenges and opportunities for the future.



## The woodland site

The woodland site is situated on 'Marros Mountain' in S.W. Carmarthenshire close to the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. The mountain is a limestone plateau providing free draining, shallow soil, and slopes gently downwards from 155 m in the N.E. to 95 m in the SE and then steeply down to the stream at 55 m. A unique feature of the site are a number of sinkholes which are 'craters' up to 10 m and 15 m across resulting from the collapse of underground limestone caves thousands of years ago.

The site is mainly covered in conifer species with Sitka spruce and Lodgepole pine, being dominant, with areas of Western hemlock, Hybrid larch, and some Corsican pine. Most of the areas without trees have dense bracken growth reflecting poor soil quality with brambles, gorse, grass or marsh grass dominating more fertile areas.

A large compartment was clear felled in 2006 (before it was purchased by Coed Marros) and re-planted with mixed native broadleaf species. An area above the southern boundary was cleared and planted with broadleaves in 2008, including a new hedge to the southern boundary, and planting to the previously clear area above the stream which forms the western boundary.

Adjoining the stream there is a downstream riparian ancient woodland which provides a seed source resulting in broadleaf regeneration (Birch, Hazel, Rowan, Oak) in Coed Marros. However, the large rabbit population, and shade from the conifers has prevented much of this regeneration from growing more than a few inches in height.

There is a stone forestry track around the site linked to an access track that runs through an adjoining farm approx half a mile to the road which runs between the coastal villages of Pendine and Amroth (and includes a bus route). A public footpath also runs from this road right through the woodlands and out through the Northern Boundary where it joins a network of other public footpaths.

The hilltop, coastal location provides a climate of strong contrasts. It is exposed to South West onshore winds from the sea, and to cold northerly winds, but the existing coniferous tree cover provides effective shelter from these. This is one of many reasons not to fell too many of the conifers at once. The wind also affects the amount of work that can be done in the woods. e.g. It is too dangerous to do Forestry work in strong winds, so work plans have to be adaptable to weather conditions.

**View from the forestry track looking down the valley to the sea**



### *History of the land*

We are fortunate in having good historical research about Marros Mountain. 'Mountain' here refers to common land without title; a rough pasture/non cultivated upland area.

Archaeological evidence show pre-Roman settlements from the coast at Morfa Bychan, up the valley to the North edge of Marros Mountain. There are also numerous Hill forts on high points by the coast to the South and a hill fort on an adjoining neighbour's land. We were informed that there was historical evidence of an original ancient stone circle on the mountain that was destroyed 150 – 200 years ago. In 2009 we re-created a stone circle at a location dowsed for us by a Geomancer.

In 1300 the land became part of the Lordship of Laugharne. The remains of the feudal strip system can be seen on aerial maps taken by the RAF before the original tree planting began. Strips ran North/South across the site and remained in use until around 1600 when the land became common grazing heathland.

Although the ridge and furrows are no longer visible, as the forestry ploughing destroyed them, many of the old hedge banks remain, some on the boundaries of the plantation compartments, and others going through them.

This has influenced our site planning: we wish to preserve the hedge banks, remove trees from shading them, where possible replant the hedges on top of them, and in some places re-build new rides following old track ways.

Records from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century show that there was a much larger population in the Marros parish than there is now, and shows how it gradually reduced during the century. There are also the physical remains of a 19<sup>th</sup> c. squatter settlement to the N.E. of

our part of the site. The land came under ownership of a local family, the Howells, sometime before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War.

Mr. Howells sold the 173.5 acres of land that was to become a forestry plantation in the late 1950's to investors from London, the circular access track was put in and the site planted with conifers from 1960. Some of the men who did this planting came to our first open day in 2007, and told us that an area of plantation was destroyed in forest fires in the early years, so the earliest conifers date from 1964/5 some of the Lodgepole pine is natural regeneration. The plantation was managed by 'Tillhill Forestry', who did the first and second thinnings. A local farmer used the land for unlicensed shooting parties, and a local LEA outdoor centre ran orienteering activities. The vehicle access to the road was built in 1985 to allow unimpeded access from the road without going through the farmyard following the public footpath.

In 2005 the land was divided into four lots and put up for sale. Marros North, East (Merriman's Gate), and North West (Honeypot Wood) were all sold before we bought the largest area, Marros South, in the spring of 2006.

### **Wildlife**

Although mainly a conifer plantation the site has many open areas with a variety of habitats and supports a surprising abundance of wildlife including dragonflies, rabbits, mice, badgers, slow worms, adders, a wide range of bird species, and many others.

The forestry rides between the plantation compartments have not been used for extracting timber for many years and these have become important wildlife corridors where much of the broadleaf regeneration occurs. Ruts left in the ground in the past by heavy harvesting machines have formed small ponds with reed grass and habitat for insects, small invertebrates, and amphibians. They also provide water for birds, and regular RSPB surveys by one of our neighbours have shown a large range of species including many 'Red list' species on site. One of the great features of this site is that it contains large areas of tree cover that provide habitat for many types of bird. For example; the woodland and particular the edge provides a habitat for game birds (pheasants, grouse and woodcock), birds such as Wren and Robin, cone feeders such as Bullfinches, migrating birds looking for shelter and refuge (Wheatears), raptors and scavengers (Red Kites, Goshawks, and Buzzards). This showed us that conifer woodlands are not necessarily the wildlife deserts that they are depicted, as long as they are properly thinned and some light can reach the ground, also they have lots of border next to more open ground.

Our planning must ensure that we are very careful about removing any habitat in our forestry plans, and that we create new habitats such as wetland areas for ducks, geese, and wading birds as well as other wetland ecosystems whilst also enhancing existing habitats by the choice of trees that are planted (or encouraged).

Past members of the Co-op have done ecological surveys of the land and we also had the land inspected by the head of the local Wildlife Trust (who specialises in wetland species) who was very excited about the potential for the project to enhance and protect biodiversity on the site. There is also an opportunity to find more wildlife enthusiasts from the area to conduct regular detailed surveys and recommendations for protecting and enhancing ecosystems on the site.

## **Development of Coed Marros Co-operative**

The four founding members of what was to become Coed Marros Co-op met as volunteers on land-based projects. We decided to form a group and look for land for our own project. After a period of time looking for suitable woodland we we found some land that ticked most of our boxes – e.g. not too steep a slope, mature trees for timber, near to the sea, good access, proximity to local villages, and a price that we could afford by combining our savings at Coed Marros. Our offer was accepted in Nov 2005.

### **How to find the land you want**

*When looking for land, there is so much on offer, but how did we find this idyllic place that fits our needs? Mike and Caz used a process learnt in their Permaculture course called a think and listen.*

*Each person had a set amount of time to write down what they were looking for. Having lived together on different land projects we had a good idea of what we didn't want so the process of design by elimination helped here too.*

*Our process:*

- 1) Each person took 30 minutes to write down what they wanted for their future (in our case it was buying woodland to establish livelihoods).*
- 2) We then read our visions to each other and looked for similarities.*
- 3) We then looked for patterns and details.*
- 4) These we turned into a mantra or a guiding statement that we held firmly in our minds. "South facing, near the sea, a mix of conifers and broadleaves, good access, in South West Wales with its own private beach".*
- 5) We kept repeating our mantra and one day we visited Marros woods and for Caz she realized it was the place when she fell over and from tiredness decided to sit for*

*a moment, after a while the clouds lifted and the sun was warming her face and the sea appeared in the distance. As she looked around she noticed the level of native regenerating amongst the bracken and with a huge mixed feeling of excitement and in trepidation shouted "this is it" "Oh no!!!"*

*We were so amazed that all of our wishes had come true (apart from the private beach – although we are a very short distance from many sandy beaches) and felt a sense of reassurance and confirmation of the fact that if you are clear about what you want and keep your vision focused then the universe will provide. We had been looking for woodland for ages with no success and it was only when we realised that our vision was too vague, and sought to remedy the situation, that what we were asking for immediately fell in our laps with minimal effort*

### **Forming a company**

The land purchase process took several months so we made use of the time by spending time together developing our collective vision and ideas further. We focused on being able to look after the land, form a community around it, and set up land based businesses and livelihoods. At the end of 2005 we obtained advice from the Wales Coop Centre and agreed to form a Ltd Company, run as a not-for-profit workers co-operative so we would have a structure for working together in a mutually beneficial way. The company was registered in January 2006.

### **Land purchase**

On 19th April 2006 the purchase of the 88.9 acres of Marros South was complete and we met to sign the land transfer and camp in the woods for our first weekend.

In the meantime a Mr. Tomas had bought the 43.7 acres comprising Marros North, harvested the trees to one compartment of approximately 20 acres and replanted it with a broadleaf mix. In the other compartment he developed a 'Woodland Safari' business in which his guests camped and experienced wildlife of the area. After a year he decided to relocate the business and put Marros North up for sale. He gave us first refusal and we agreed to purchase his land. Russell Miller joined the co-operative with an investment in Marros North. In June 2007 we owned adjoining areas totalling 132.6 acres.

### **Separating ownership and management**

Our main priority for the land is to set up creative, dynamic and emergent systems that can serve our principles for many generations to come. The management plan covers many decades and we would like to think that sustainable systems could be in place for hundreds or maybe thousands of years.

Trying to find legal structures within which to manage and own the land for future generations has been challenging. It seems that if anyone wished to leave the Co-op or they die (and incur inheritance tax) the land could be split up. This could prevent the management plan for the whole wood from continuing into the distant future and could involve considerable energy/money leakages from the system which would threaten its long-term viability. Bearing this in mind we have sought to reduce the threats to a break up of ownership of the land by keeping the ownership of the land and the Co-op as separate entities.

By separating the company that manages the land from the ownership of the land it means that the land is not an asset of the company so that in the event of the Co-op going bankrupt the land would not be split up and sold.

This means:

- a. No matter how successful the on-site business activities may be they would not be able to usurp the vision and mission of the owners. The businesses can be overseen by the owners to ensure that they are not damaging the land and deviating from the original aims, and whilst the same people are initially involved in both ownership and Co-op, this could change over time.
- b. It will guarantee the protection and enhancement of environmental, social, spiritual as well as economic capital of the site for many generations of humans and non-humans.
- c. It will provide long-term resilience and stability to the human and non-human dependants on the site by protecting them from the fickle nature of short-term human economic systems.
- d. The baton can be passed into the future by having a mechanism for vetting new Trustees to protect the overall vision and mission of the owners.
- e. If the businesses on site were to go bankrupt, the owners would not be liable for the debts.
- f. The ownership could be expanded in the future (whilst protecting the original aims),
- g. The land would not be liable to inheritance tax since the landowner would be a potentially immortal organisation which will mitigate one of the threats to the integrity of the site.

## Current structure

### Landowners

Share and agree long term Vision and Mission of land use based on Permaculture ethics and principles. Own:

- freehold of land
- standing timber
- on-site communal infrastructure.

### Coed Marros Ltd.

Leasehold agreement based on vision and mission, underpinned by agreements on conditions for land use:

- following Permaculture Design
- peppercorn rent of £1/annum
- purchase of trees based on market price of standing trees at time of felling
- creation and maintenance of communal infrastructure legacy.

## Realising our vision

There are five main criteria that underpin our vision of the use of the land:

1. To preserve and enhance the *bio-diversity* of the site. This is the first community that we are concerned with, and requires some protection after years of uninvited shooting parties using the land before we bought it.
2. To engage with the *local community of place* (of humans) in the area, and welcome them back to the land.
3. To develop *education* opportunities on the land as an outdoor classroom for learning, teaching and research. This will engage with a *community of interest* focussed around education as these people will come from nearby and further away.
4. To develop sustainable, land based *livelihoods* that will incorporate sympathetic management of the land with making a positive contribution to the local economy.
5. To *creatively support and nurture the people involved* in the project so that they can positively evolve at the same time as the project evolves.

We found it imperative, and we can't stress this point enough, that prospective co-owners or managers of a project with a 'Vision' also 'dig deep' into their own psychology to sincerely and honestly explore and present their individual personal agendas and visions that motivate them to become part of a group vision and mission. In our experience, when we have failed to do this it has inevitably led to conflict as the personal agenda eventually starts to rise up after the initial idealistic enthusiasm has worn off and it can start to work at odds to the overall group vision. This can be very disturbing for all involved and can lead to disharmony and fracturing of the group.

From our experience people often start projects for many different reasons and motivations that can be hard to describe and pin down. It is vital to critically review one's own motivation and honestly assess their compatibility with the group agenda before

agreeing to venture into such a life changing project. A land based project that is creatively exploring different ways to do things places a lot of demands on individuals to grow and change. It is important to make room for reviewing these changing personal agendas. It is by keeping track of the trajectory of these individual agendas that one can avoid conflicts of interest.

Openly accepting that change is inevitable and usually hard going, as well as regularly keeping up to date with people's needs for support or solitude, is vital to help nurture this positive and dynamic process. Neglecting to do this can have negative consequences on the individuals as well as the group. The bottom line is the need for everyone in the group to have the ability to communicate effectively and to take responsibility for themselves and the group as a whole. Regular transparent, supportive and non-judgmental forums are vital to feedback the nuances of personal change and shifting needs into the mix with the demands of running a active project in harmony with a dynamic universe. It is a vital but delicate balancing act where a sense of humour is generally a necessary quality along with a generous attitude that seeks to serve others in the group as well as oneself and the project.

### Permaculture design ethics and principals

Permaculture ethics and principles have guided our work at Coed Marros. 'Permaculture' is a term coined in the 1970's by two Australians -Bill Mollison, and David Holmgren. They defined a permanent agriculture system based on a set of principals so that work is carefully and thoroughly designed in conjunction with nature and natural processes and then implemented with the intention that the systems set up will be as self sustaining as possible and will lead to productive and truly sustainable results with improvements to the land, water management and micro climate whilst giving many different yields.

The **3 Permaculture Ethics** can be summed up as '*Earth Care, People Care, Fair Shares*', these ethics neatly show the purpose to our project, and connect us with the many millions of others who are also

working towards a fairer, healthier and more harmonious human culture.

Throughout our project we try to adhere to these as ethical principles as far as possible.

**'Fair Shares'**- When we had the chance to apply for money from Cydcoed we applied the "single element multi-function" principle which means using one element (in this case money) for multiple purposes. For the grant this translated into agreeing to do much more work with the money than we could have if we

had paid for all the labour. Once we had the money we were able to do even more than we had previously anticipated. We agreed to be only paid for certain aspects of the work and volunteered for the rest. Within the group, some of us were more able to afford to do this than others so priority was given to paying for the labour of those who had less financial means at their disposal.

Throughout the project just and fair attitudes and actions amongst people have been vital for nurturing trust and cooperation.

Permaculture principles	
<p><b>Principles</b> (as defined by David Holmgren)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Observe and Interact.</li> <li>2. Catch and store energy.</li> <li>3. Obtain a yield.</li> <li>4. Apply self regulation and accept feedback.</li> <li>5. Use and value renewable resources and services.</li> <li>6. Produce no waste.</li> <li>7. Design from patterns to details.</li> <li>8. Integrate rather than segregate.</li> <li>9. Use small and slow solutions.</li> <li>10. Use and value diversity.</li> <li>11. Use edges and value the marginal.</li> <li>12. Creatively use and respond to change.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Principles</b> (as defined by Bill Mollison)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Relative location.</li> <li>2. Each element performs many functions.</li> <li>3. Each important function is supported by many elements.</li> <li>4. Efficient energy planning.</li> <li>5. Using biological resources.</li> <li>6. Energy cycling.</li> <li>7. Small scale intensive systems.</li> <li>8. Accelerating succession and evolution.</li> <li>9. Diversity.</li> <li>10. Edge effects.</li> <li>11. Attitudinal principles (i.e. turning a problem into a solution).</li> </ol>
<p><i>As can be seen the two sets of principles are broadly the same although expressed in different ways. Both have been included as they each have their merits and we may refer to either set.</i></p> <p>Holmgren principles taken from <a href="http://www.permacultureprinciples.com">www.permacultureprinciples.com</a></p>	

**'Earth Care'** - We needed to fell and extract trees, and after various quotes from outside contractors to do it with big machinery that have a big impact on the land, we decided it would be more beneficial if we used the money to train ourselves with the use of chainsaws so we could fell the trees ourselves. We then employed a local forester with smaller scale equipment which more closely fitted the profile of extraction methods that we were likely to practice ourselves in the future. We then helped him in the extraction process. This resulted in a much lower impact on the land (and minimised the use of fossil fuels than if we had used heavy machinery) and enabled us to develop forestry skills and experience.

**'People Care'**- The flip-side of the approach mentioned in the above paragraphs, however, was that in our enthusiasm we multiplied our work load considerably, this made it even more of a challenge to complete the work we had pledged to do in our grant application by the deadline, and it left us exhausted. When we reviewed the process at the end of the grant we realised that this was the Ethic that had been somewhat neglected. Although the people involved

had gained useful training and experience they had pushed themselves physically, mentally and personally well beyond their comfortable limits and we took a long time to recover. This could, however, be viewed as a price worth paying since the skills gained have been useful. But it also serves to demonstrate the delicate balancing act and occasional trade-offs amongst the Ethics and Principles that sometimes have to be made.

However, the neglect of People Care is not sustainable in the long-term for anyone and in future we will have to give a lot more attention to developing it whilst moving forward with our project.

### Cydcoed grant

During the land purchasing period we applied for a Forestry Commission Cydcoed grant and accepted it with a mixture of excitement, and apprehension. The grant was due to run out in 2008, and this deadline forced the pace of our planning, but also offered the opportunity to form links with the local community and build valuable infrastructure for the site. Progress

on the Cydcoed project was slow in 2006 as we needed the chance to get to know the site properly and work out our priorities properly. The initial visit from Cydcoed produced mixed results as we had two stand-in officers who had differing suggestions, resulting in some confusion and delays before a replacement officer came to help us through the project. Early in 2007 we held a series of intensive site meetings, clarified what we wanted to achieve, and defined what we could achieve with the grant.

We decided to apply for the grant because we wanted to take advantage of the funds available to improve community access. We decided to prioritize this over other essential infrastructure because of the benefits it would bring to our connection with the local community.

#### Cyd Coed funding comprised money for.

- *Building new gates in order to open up the public footpath.*
- *a car parking area at the site entrance.*
- *2 information shelters.*
- *a hard standing and shed for timber storage and processing.*
- *marked trails along permissive paths that we opened up through areas of the land.*
- *planting of several thousand trees.*
- *publicity for producing information leaflets and maps about the project, and our website.*
- *two very successful opens days, the first being to celebrate the reopening of the public footpath in 2007 and to welcome people back to the mountain, as it has always been a meeting place and used to connect Llanteg and Marros. The second in 2008 was a celebration of finishing of the Cydcoed project, which included horse logging and wood carving demonstrations.*

#### Mule logging training



#### Reflections

- We were committed to doing more work than we were skilled or able to do in a limited time which meant we ended up compromising more than we would have wanted on personal and group development.
- Some of our members joined us after the Cydcoed project was agreed and they were not able to change the works we had already agreed to do. This they found to be a permanent source of frustration which led to inter-personal clashes. The tight deadline set by the expiry date of the Cyd Coed grant gave little time to resolve these issues, and we lost 2 people from the group, while the rest of us were under considerable strain by the time the project finished.
- One of our Co- op members did not live locally and this made it more difficult to co-ordinate meetings and work days.
- Most of us ended up camping on the land for long periods of time as we found this was the only way we could monitor contractors and get the work done. This was despite the lack of infrastructure such as water.
- We did not have sufficient training and discipline in facilitating meetings. As a result we were not very efficient with our meeting time, and feedback from the field was often slow to filter into the management process. This inevitably led to a lot of 'firefighting' which called on the small number of Co-op members to dig even deeper into their reserves of energy and be willing to drop anything they were involved in at a moment's notice to focus on clearing some critical block that could have been anticipated earlier. This added to the stress and fatigue.
- Despite, and as a result of, the pressure that we put ourselves under, the three of us who remained at the end showed that we were deeply committed to Coed Marros. But none of us felt we gave each other the credit for the effort and sacrifice that was put in, as a result the experience tends to be viewed in a negative light despite the many achievements.
- Although we have worked through many of these problems, we have not yet been able to re-capture the enthusiasm and pioneering spirit that we had at the start of the project. The inspirational energy has not yet been recovered.

In retrospect it is difficult to say what we could have done differently other than not take on the Cydcoed grant. This would have given the project more time to grow organically, but without the funding we would

have had to wait until we were in a position to provide community access, resources, facilities and opportunities that came with it. It also spurred us on more quickly than we might have done without the grant to seek local community support for the project which has since proven very beneficial.

### Lessons learnt

- The key to a successful future in moving out of the doldrums and into the next phase of Coed Marros lies in approaching new challenges with refreshed energy rooted in a realistic sense of what is achievable based upon our skills and abilities, what time and energy each of us are willing and able to give and within which is a deeply rooted drive towards self-realisation.
- We are now in a position to say that rather than nearly destroying the group, our experiences with Cyd Coed could be seen as being what really started to make the group.
- Lots of lessons were learned the hard way, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. It is all a matter of attitude and humility that views failures as future opportunities for success.
- Another lesson learned is that Co-op members have to be vetted carefully. In the earliest stages of the project we need pioneering types with idealistic, realistic, positive, skilled and generous qualities, and an ability to communicate clearly with other people.

### Other funding

We also received funding from the C-Change Trust which funded the planting of several thousand trees on the site. Indeed the Trust was officially launched on the site and a class of children from Tremoilet Primary School were there to take part.

More recently we had a donation of about 500 wild native fruit and nut trees from the Woodland Trust as part of their 'More Trees More Good' campaign. We have recently registered with Environment Wales and look forward to gaining funding for many exciting and vital projects within Coed Marros.

#### Tips when thinking about looking for funding:

*First define your vision and mission for the project then work out your aims. Only after that look for funding to fit what you want to do. Don't do it the other way round or you could risk working to the funders' agenda rather than your own. With Cydcoed we had already decided to do the works for which we applied for funding.*

*Use funding to move your project closer towards funding independence rather than dependence which is unsustainable. With this in mind funds can be focused more skillfully towards the goal of making the project self-sustaining.*

## Lessons learned from the first few years of Coed Marros Co-op

- Projects like this need a mixture of pioneers, visionaries, doers and a good manager to keep it all going to plan.
- We have made some progress on our meetings structures, our decision making and implementation, and have got to know how each other tick
- We have learned how to let go of issues and to keep the project ahead of our egos
- Planning properly before committing to action
- Taking small achievable steps but not being scared to make big decisions when needed
- We need to be able to present our project clearly to prospective members and they need to be carefully vetted over time for both parties to assess one another's compatibility.
- Identifying where and how time and energy are lost.
- A generous giving attitude is vital when working within a co-operative.
- Awareness of the '80/20' principal. (i.e. the principal states that at the start of a project 80% effort has to be put in for 20% benefit, so that later on once systems are up and running 20% effort will produce 80% benefit.). In other words it is not always going to involve this much hard work and personal sacrifice.

## Community support

Shortly after buying the land we came face to face with a problem of access through the neighbouring farm. In retrospect we did the right thing in introducing ourselves and being friendly to the owners of the farm, but we were naive in assuming that they would be friendly back to us. Instead of this we received suspicion over changing their status quo and resentment of our use of the access track. We were slow to respond to their hostile actions in putting barbed wire on the gate tops of the access track. This may have given them the impression that we were weaker and less sure of our rights than we actually were.

This situation caused considerable upset and feelings of intimidation amongst our group, but ironically their actions helped to galvanise support for us from other neighbours who disagreed with what they were doing. We were reassured that lots of other people had, over the years, been treated with the same contempt and they were glad someone was standing their ground. Of course we had no other choice.

The requirements of the Cydcoed grant also helped motivate us to meet our other neighbours and seek their support for our project.

Consequently we spent much time visiting every house and farm around the woodlands introducing ourselves, showing that we were normal people with positive aims and that we wanted to open up access to areas of the woodland for the benefit of the local community. In the process we found out how quickly false rumours can spread in rural areas and how important it was to show a friendly face. Many households gave us a warm welcome and invited us in for cups of tea, we found out a lot about the people's family history, links, stories, and gossip. We also gained written commitments of support for our project, and this came in very handy later.

It is something we would recommend every Community Woodland Group to do, particularly at the start of the project. This is especially important for groups like ours who have recently moved into an area. The rural grapevine is very rapid and any false or malicious rumours, whilst livening up country life, can take a lot of correcting if left to run free for any length of time.

Initially we would also recommend not to hold a large public gathering to introduce your project as they can be hijacked by a few outspoken and aggressive people. In fact these meetings may tend to attract opponents of your project more than those community members who are supportive. Visiting door to door and in small groups is perhaps more productive. Generally people seem to be hospitable if they are in control, in their own homes.

There is a history of 'Alternative Lifestyle' groups setting up in rural areas, and trying to get away from the outside world, turning their backs on the local communities. However laudable their aims and bright their dreams are, they can tend to come over as aloof and this can cause suspicion and resentment from the surrounding residents (whether they have been there for generations or are recent incomers). A group buying land and starting a project on it are planting themselves into other peoples' territory, (irrespective of the land ownership) where views are often conservative, ways of life regular and gossip is the spice of life.

This can be particularly true for a group of English people buying land in Wales firstly because of the long and painful history of English invasions and exploitation, and secondly because of a recent history of incomers from England buying farms and other properties and then putting up fences around the boundaries to exclude people from them. As one local

resident explained to us- he is very wary of English people because they always seem to do this, often quite maliciously which happened over access to some of his own fields. He went on to describe that the attitude to land ownership in traditional rural Welsh culture is that people can walk across other people's land and do not fence it all off just to block access, or try to block off Rights of Way. The local people seemed to find it refreshing that Coed Marros Co-op were reopening traditional rights of way and adding some extra ones through our land.

We have had volunteer weeks and weekends, Permaculture and Wilderness courses, Forest School and Mother and Toddler groups, and large Open Day events over the last five years.

### Feedback on Open Day

*One of the best comments from our local teacher was that we were "bringing the community back together!" Everyone who has visited and taken part in our events has been wowed by the beauty of the woodlands saying they have a very different feel to them than most plantations.*

### Forest School, education and community Links

Another important link with the local community was made when Caz and Jasmine started a Forest School in the woods.

This involved bringing children up from the local village primary school at Tremolet. Apart from the benefit to the children this project gave us good links with the local community as the children would tell their parents what they had been doing and gave us an opportunity to meet them and broaden our community links.

Over the course of two years all the children between the ages of 5 -11 came up to attend the Forest School learning through play in the outdoor environment. Soon after their first visit the school organized a sponsored walk to raise funds to kit themselves out with wet weather gear with which to visit the woods.

Since then, the school has had a cut in funding, which means they cannot afford to visit. We are still in contact with them and other schools who would love to visit regularly. We would like to organize activities on site so that those that make money could fund ones that don't. This way we could afford to subsidize the school visits as we feel it is a vital link that needs to be re-established and maintained.

### Volunteer activities

We recognized from an early stage of the project that we wanted to have volunteers to help participate in the Coed Marros project because:

- We had experience working with volunteers and knew that it can be a positive experience for them and us.
- It would, help to integrate people from both the local community, and the 'community of interest', into Coed Marros.
- It would also provide the potential for us to expand our membership and get more people involved.

#### Tree planting Spring 2011 Volunteer day



#### Family Camp 2009 and 2010

The Family camp was born out of a need to get more families involved in the project. Once Mike and Caz had started a family, it became clear that their priorities had shifted. Inviting other families to camp together in the woods for a week proved to be a very beneficial experience. It resulted in most of the people who came, returning to the monthly volunteer weekends that we set up as a direct result of the feedback from the first camp. The weeks are now a fixture in our and are filled with lots of quality outdoor time. This event is open to anyone and is based on skill-sharing; each family brings something new to the week. Lots of great camp fire food is made and many adventures are had amongst the trees.

#### Volunteer Weekends and Weeks

These events help to get a lot of essential maintenance work done on the land (e.g. bracken bashing, path maintenance, tree planting and maintenance, ditch clearing, fruit tree grafting etc.) and learn skills along the way. In 2010 we had monthly

volunteer weekends and also had two volunteer weeks with camping and communal kitchens in the woods. These focused weeks, with an average of 10 people working together resulted in a great deal of work getting done, and we were able to mix in workshops, forest games, and campfire entertainment. It was also very positive for the few of us that were struggling to keep the project moving day to day to have this big boost of energy and activity on the site.

The second Volunteer week set up the facilities for the Applied Permaculture Design course that followed it. This was a test for Coed Marros to see whether our facilities and infrastructure were sufficient to support a residential (camping on-site) course for 30 people. The course also helped develop the design of Coed Marros. The result was a design for a log-timber frame community kitchen and a process for expanding our membership.

#### Caz's Top volunteers tips

- *Plan well in advance.*
- *Advertise in as many places as you can.*
- *Make use of the local volunteer bureau for help CAVS is our local office.*
- *Ensure you get feedback from the volunteers and engage them in designing the next events.*
- *Our top tip for 2011 is that we need to give something back to encourage people to come, so this year we are adding in a series of mini courses during the weekend. Our first on in March 2001 we ran a mini teach on how to plant a tree and basic tree identification.*
- *Ask people to bring food to share, this creates a lovely bonding time over lunch and promotes a sense of sharing amongst the group (at present we have no budget to feed volunteers – this is OK as long as you tell people what to expect).*
- *Remember people are all busy and they need to be valued and appreciated for giving their weekend up to come help your project.*

#### In summary we developed community links by:

- Visiting neighbours to introduce the project and seek letters of support.
- Started Forest School.
- Held two 'Open Days'
- Have annual Family Camps.
- Have volunteer weekends and volunteer weeks.
- Being a member of 'Llais y Goedwig' links us with a community of other similar groups, and the support network of the organization.
- Donate large Christmas trees to the village of

Amroth every year.

- Trade with the local community selling woodland products (currently logs through the local shop, the money from which is often spent on the shop's own groceries helping to recycle the money locally).

#### ***Ideas for the future***

- Develop the volunteer events so that people participating in them help to organize and run them.
- Expand the volunteer base so that people from the community can help in day to day running of the project.
- Start a 'Back to the Land Apprenticeship Scheme' so that people can train in woodland skills whilst helping to do jobs on the project.
- Develop the 'Friends of Coed Marros', so that the community has the opportunity to be more closely involved in the project.
- Hold more education courses for the benefit of both the Local Community and the Community of Interest.
- Hold an annual open day event.
- Develop the idea of a Community Supported Forestry scheme similar to CSA.
- Continue to develop trade with local businesses as much as possible and be part of the local economy, this helps to cycle money within the local area and helps businesses to support each other.

## **Legal problems and issues**

### ***Public access***

When we bought the land at Coed Marros we found that the boundary fence had been built across a public Right of Way that crosses the land from North to South. This used to be a vitally important route for people walking from Marros to the Church at Llanteg. Nevertheless this route was contested by a neighbouring farm who claimed the route as private access to the woods for shooting despite a right of access to Coed Marros being in both deeds. With the support of the community we re-established this route with the Cydcoed grant. At our first Open Day to officially re-open this footpath, many of the people who came said that they used to play there as children, but had not been there for decades.

After we opened up the public footpath we contacted the local Rights of Way Officer. As luck would have it, we timed our approach just before Carmarthenshire

**First open day: some of the local community crossing the reopened public right of way heading towards our woods.**



County Council Rights of Way Department had submitted an application for a European grant to restore and create rights of way following the coast of Carmarthenshire and extending a mile inland. Although we were outside of the area they were looking to focus on, they were so impressed with us opening up access and exploring the historical use of our path and its links with surrounding paths that they decided to add all the paths that immediately surround and join up with ours to their grant application. They were successful and this resulted in the whole area around Coed Marros having rights of way reopened, improved and new links created to join up to the coastal routes.

### ***Local Planning Control Issues***

In late July 2007, (when we were all away from the site) the local council served an Enforcement notice on us as individuals and on Coed Marros, claiming that we had changed the use of the site from Forestry to residential and demanding that we remove our site office (static caravan), kitchen bus and two caravans from the site plus a tarpaulin covering our fire pit. This had resulted from a complaint from one of our neighbours and compliance would have prevented us from continuing the Cydcoed work as these supposedly residential developments were the work camp that we had set up in order to enable us to undertake the forestry and grant work.

We decided to appeal and spent a full week in the office at the beginning of 2008 intensively researching planning law and gathering evidence so we could put our case together, spending time visiting other neighbours and securing letters of support as well as lengthy correspondence with the Local Authority and Planning Inspectorate. This was one of the most intensive times that we worked together.

The Enforcement Notice was thrown out on appeal as an 'Anulity' as it contained both factual errors that we had highlighted, and contradictions which said that many of our allegedly residential developments were also 'ancillary to forestry' which is what is required for planning permission. We explained to the inspector that the structures were temporary and we didn't want planning permission for them. We were also awarded costs by the inspector to 'discipline the council' for their heavy handed approach and failure to follow their own procedures of best practice.

Overall, the process resulted in being a positive experience for us as it showed how well we could work together. However, it took up a great deal of the time and energy that we needed to put into the Cydcoed project which compounded our problems with completing the grant work on time.

### **Recommendations for dealing with Planning Departments**

- Having a clear vision for our project helped us to respond quickly and with a single voice to the Planning Enforcement Notice.
- Being positive and pro-active in dealing with Planning Departments will often result in you getting a 'kicking' from them. Do not be upset by this, Planning officers have been deceived enough times by devious rural applicants to have a very cynical view of any developments, or proposals, especially if they do not fit into the conventional pattern for the area.
- Do not overestimate the competence of Planning Departments and do not underestimate their ability to deviate from their own guidelines if your group becomes a target.
- Remember, however mean and unfair the local Planning Dept may seem to be to your group, they do a very valuable job in protecting the countryside from profit motivated green belt development, and 'peri-urban' sprawl. Tourism and Industry are exceptions to this as they help create jobs, this is why one green caravan concealed in a woodland is far more of a planning problem to them than a National Park coastline or hillside covered in a thousand gleaming static caravans and massive, ugly metal framed barns.
- Research the local Planning guidelines and policies. Besides this being a duty for any group that presumes to be part of the community, it can also give valuable justification for the proposals of a Community Woodland group if they, for instance, fit into parts of the 'Tourism', 'Sustainability', 'Education', or 'Job Creation' policies. At Coed Marros we found 17

different reasons why our group should be allowed to live on the land (if we ever chose to do so), mainly from the L.A.'s own Sustainability policy.

- Know your Planning Law and have a strategy before you do anything that could be questioned by the Planning Department. This would mean that in the event of a planning threat you would not be put on the back foot and would feel confident in your legal position.
- Do not be intimidated by threats such as Enforcement Notices. Remember even the Planning Department have to follow planning law, though they sometimes act as a law unto themselves.
- Study your Local Authorities' planning policy guidelines. The Planning Department often forget to do so before taking rash actions against you.
- Many 'Planning Consultants' are ex. Planning Officers who have jumped ship. They have knowledge of the local Planning policies as implemented (rather than as written), what strategies are likely to work, and probably know many of the people who work in the LA. However, they tend to recommend applications that are not very different from the ones they would have approved when working for the council. They may not be able to think 'out of the box' and as such could be more of a hindrance than a help for a group that was trying to make creative and sensible changes to standard land use patterns. It maybe be better to seek advice and guidelines from groups such as Chapter 7 (<http://www.tlio.org.uk/chapter7>)
- Try to make friends with your neighbours, and let them know about your ideas. Even if they do use it as ammunition to try and get rid of you there is a greater chance of them making a planning complaint if they see something happening, but do not know what it is, or see a Planning Application Notice without being told about it beforehand.
- Be dispassionate, clear, and confident when dealing with Planning Departments and if they are hostile be ready to appeal to the Planning Inspectorate.

### **Coed Marros – The future?**

One of the design groups from the Applied Permaculture Design course in 2010 continued their work after the course had finished (as part of their Design Diplomas). They sent us a table of stages that they suggested Coed Marros should go through in

order to develop and expand. The key recommendation was that we do not build a 'fence' of elaborate structures that we stand inside and ask people into, but that we invite people in to be part of the Co-op development.

We had some reservations about accepting this as we had worked hard for five years around core aims and we did not want to risk sacrificing them. So as a starting point we set out a list of our 'non-negotiable's; these represent the vision and core values that we have held since the beginning (e.g. keeping the land as mainly woodland, not allowing speculation on its property value etc).

We also recognized the need to clarify the process of joining Coed Marros as well as specifying the different levels of membership, from 'Volunteer', to 'Friends of ' to 'Full Member'. This is work in progress at the time of writing, but the time has come where this issue needs to be urgently addressed as the type of land management we are planning and size of the site will require a much greater number of people to be involved for the vision to be realized. The incentive for people to join has also been clarified in terms of the potential to earn livelihoods from the land (e.g. from timber products, education, eco-tourism etc.) whilst establishing sustainable energy and food security.

We have also identified funding streams that will allow people to gain transferable accredited skills as part of a one year apprentice at Coed Marros. This could represent a step towards 'Full membership' of the Co-op allowing people to get to know the land and the project whilst also allowing us all to get to know one another. Importantly it will give the project a much needed boost of people energy.

### **Forest Plans**

An application to the Forestry Commission for the 'Better Woods for Wales' grant has helped to bring our focus back to the practical issue of developing clear strategies and proposals for managing the timber on site, and converting the tree cover from coniferous plantation to continuous cover with a complex mix of conifers and broadleaves including coppice, fruit and nut trees, whilst retaining some existing good quality timber trees. We intend to plant to increase resilience to climate change and will spread the risk of failure of timber crops so our eggs are not all in one basket

We started a fruit tree nursery in 2010 and held grafting and budding workshops. We hope to bring back many local fruit tree varieties and supply young trees to the community.

We have also started to develop our Social Enterprise businesses to provide some income for the project and the Co-op members. This includes the sale of

Christmas trees and firewood logs through a local shop in Pendine.

We plan to develop these enterprises further and have built a large hard standing area where we can work-adding value to the timber that we extract from felling, into products ranging from joinery timber, to furniture, kit buildings and log cabins, and develop the log sales further so the local community has access to sustainably managed, locally grown products.

### **Sawmilling on the hard standing**



### **Organizational needs**

There needs to be an accurate assessment of 'common pool resources' (e.g. firewood) on the site and agreements made between the members of the group as to their methods of sharing and allocating these resources. As well as agreements regarding appropriate times to take them etc. (e.g. no disturbance in bird nesting season). This is the only way that a limited set of resources (e.g. firewood) can be managed sustainably in the long term. There must also be accurate monitoring of the annual amount extracted to ensure that it does not outstrip the annual growth of firewood in the woods.

To make the management of Common Pool Resources possible and easier there is a need to establish, reinforce and sometime enforce agreements regarding their use. The bureaucracy, however, needs to be kept to a minimum so the short supply of available energy is not diverted too much towards making this happen. A good way of reducing this burden is to ensure that everyone is party to the agreements in the first place as well as part of the systems to monitor and enforce them. This may be best done on a rotation basis. To reduce the need for excessive monitoring and enforcement of agreements it is vital to create and nurture group 'Accepted Norms.' that help guide appropriate behaviour of the group concerned when utilising a limited 'Common Pool Resource'.

## Concluding remarks

Coed Marros is at the beginning of a much needed new stage of its development. Throughout the last five years the learning curve has been steep and many lessons have been learned the hard way. There are few regrets, however, as we have faced each challenge head on and have grown as a group as well as individually. It has been very humbling when amidst the turmoil of setting up and managing human systems we observe all around us nature regulating its own systems with such ease. This has helped to reinforce the view that a Permaculture Design approach that seeks to work with the flow of these natural forces is definitely the way forward. The whole experience has taught us firsthand the vital importance of nurturing not just the manifestation of the physical project but the growth of the individuals as well. In fact without this dual focus a land based project like ours is simply not sustainable in the long-term.

It has taught us how much, despite our idealism for a better way of living, we have become molded and supported by our modern society in both positive and negative ways. That in seeking to move beyond the limitations of the unsustainable parts of modern society we have to almost become like children again as we learn completely new skills and retune our senses to the real world that reveals itself ever differently each day. If we had not just somewhat jumped straight into the project feet first it is debatable whether we would have started the project at all. It has been hard work but very rewarding and to be highly recommended to anyone with an interest in sustainable woodland management.

## Summary of advice from our experience

- Actively engage with the local Community from the start.
- Cast the net wide for help.
- Knowledge and courage are strong allies against adversaries.
- Move only at the speed you are able.
- Be realistic with your planning.
- Growth of a land project requires parallel personal growth of the individuals involved.
- Good communication and compassion are keys to success.
- Good record keeping is vital.
- Humility when assessing performance means you can all learn from your mistakes.
- Use funding to work towards being independent

of funding.

- Observe the land for at least a year before you do anything.
- Ensure individual personal agendas are compatible with one another and the project.
- Advocates representing non-human biodiversity need to be involved in all decision making processes and meetings.
- A Fair Share for all starts with first deciding what you can give to a system rather than simply what you can take from it.
- Be very specific in the details of your unselfish visions and the forces of the universe will help you to fully realise them.
- Be creative when designing ownership and management institutions to ensure that your legacy lasts well into the distant future.
- Keep a visitors book and seek out letters of support in order to collect testimonials.
- Create a small manageable start up group. This reduces conflicts of interest and means decisions can be made easier. Also it is a lot less threatening to the local community if there are a small number of initial pioneers for a project landing on their doorstep. After a settling in period it is easier for more people to join the group.
- Reduce bureaucracy to a minimum. This makes the project easier to manage as well as increases the fun of being involved in it whilst freeing up more time to implement plans on the ground. It is very easy to direct limited human resources to management tasks that are not essential.
- Try to buy the land and capital equipment outright so there are no debts to burden the project with at the delicate conception stage. The less financial pressure the project is under, the easier it is to think out of the box to create alternative livelihoods which may take longer to become profitable but also may outlast ones that are designed to serve more short term interests. For example; we need time for our fruit trees to grow before we can sell their fruit, and we need time for the split firewood to season before it is sold.
- It may be necessary to live on the land full time if you want to keep your finger on the pulse.
- You must have clear signs informing visitors what areas are accessible and what activities are permitted otherwise this vacuum will be filled by visitors' own assumptions. Sometimes it is necessary to put up signs to say what isn't allowed too.
- It is vital to clearly define the 'Common Bonds' that bind the group together in their pursuit of

the vision. This helps to maintain a common focus and serves as a constant reminder to individuals why they decided to join the project. It also helps potential new members to see clearly the main hub around which all members activities revolve.

- There needs to be a clear definition of members' Rights and corresponding Responsibilities. This keeps things clear and again helps newcomers make informed decisions about whether they want to get involved in the project. It can also help to resolve or avoid future conflicts.
- All agreements between members must be honoured or changed by group agreement. There has to be a bit of slack with this that allows compassion to enter into the equation. Even so these issues need to be fairly and critically reviewed when they come up so the lessons learned can be fed back into the agreement making process for everyone's benefit.
- It is vital to synchronise carefully the availability of individuals for group tasks. This is often the hardest thing to do and lots of energy can be wasted trying to find a date on which everyone is free (herding cats!). It is much better to set dates well in advance so that individuals can arrange other commitments around the group tasks.



*"We and all the Pony Club Members have had a lovely time in the woods. Thanks for the welcome. Marros Riding Centre."*

*"All of you should be immensely proud of your achievement. You have built it and the people have come. What a wonderful journey you are on. Norman Phillips"*

*"Lush woods, loved all the exercise, place has huge potential! Many thanks for a great few days. Wish I could stay on. Callem Davies"*

*"Very inspiring week in the woods. Beautiful people, amazing place. Karen Gaw"*

*"One of my favourite places – magical, magical woods, great people, well organized great to learn cob making/wood chopping/camp building...hope to see you again soon. Thanks xx. Amy Allen"*

*"Thankyou for sharing your space with us these last few days and for reminding me about my own path. See you all again in the future (hopefully near future!) x. Tamsin Leighton-Boyce"*

**"Compassionate, grounded, earthcare and peoplecare. New family found in the coop members. I have no words to express the deepness of the experience that Coed Marros is. My deepest gratitude and love to Caz, Looby, Chris, Mike, Dave and all Family members. Paul Eagles"**

**This Case study has been prepared for Llais y Goedwig by David Petty, Mike Pattinson and Caz Phillips members of the Coed Marros Co-operative.**

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### Testimonials – a selection from our visitors' book

*"It is fantastic visiting here from the craziness of the city. Your forest is sacred and special. May your project and dreams manifest, grow roots and bloom. Lots of purple blessings, Abbie"*

*"Greatly enjoyed our visit to such a wonderful forest. It is such a marvelous conception. John Scott"*

*"We had a fantastic day. A lovely place with a great future. We look forward to coming back. Carolyn, Ray and Archie Ablitt."*

*"Seeds of hope. Well done. Good luck. Paul Wimbush"*

