

# Living Levels Volunteer Role



**Role title:** History Researchers to join the Gwent Levels 'Sewer's RATS (Research and Transcription Service)' Historical Research Group

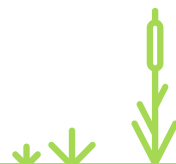
**Description:** The Living Levels Partnership is looking for volunteers to explore the story of the Gwent Levels through the records of the Monmouthshire Court of Sewers as part of the 'Recapturing the Historic Landscape' project. The records reveal the impact of tidal and fluvial flooding, the continuity of land tenure, settlement patterns, local government in action, and much, much more. Sewers in this instance are watercourses, either natural or manmade, and commissioners of sewers throughout England and Wales held jurisdiction over drainage and sea defence in low-lying coastal lands including the Gwent, Somerset and Gloucestershire Levels beside the Severn Estuary. The Court of Sewers was a court of record, on a par with Quarter Sessions, and many of its commissioners were also justices of the peace. The work of the court affected almost everyone living on the Levels because tenants and landowners were responsible for repairs and maintenance. The records are therefore brimming with personal names. **This is an exciting opportunity for volunteers both with and without previous research experience.** Together you will learn how to get the best out of the Gwent Levels' finest historical archive.

Land reclamation and sea defences around the Severn Estuary date to Roman and Medieval times and underlie a drainage/sea defence network which today is largely overseen by the Environment Agency, Internal Drainage Boards and Natural Resources Wales. The areas covered by these organisations are dictated by local topography and therefore remain very little changed from those of the courts of sewers for which regular records survive from the early-eighteenth-century in Monmouthshire, and from 1583 in Gloucestershire. Those for Somerset are extant from the late-eighteenth-century. Presentments and minute books detailing the drainage and transport systems, devices within the watercourses to prevent tidal incursion, and the provision and maintenance of sea walls are a rich resource. Major land and sea floods did not drive our predecessors from the Levels; they were home to generations of families. Their farming methods and settlement patterns reflected that regular winter land floods and tidal inundation were viewed as natural hazards, and the rich alluvium deposited by the tides over the farmland was often welcomed.

Perhaps when you saw the word 'sewers' you thought of rats! The late Rick Turner (who was instrumental in developing the Living Levels project) thought that the history group should be called the RATS (Research and Transcription Service) in recognition of its work using the records of the Monmouthshire Court of Sewers. The language of those records can be a challenge. They contain many archaic terms, often unique to land drainage and no longer in use. Rick started 'Levels Lingo', a glossary that will be further developed during the Living Levels project.

The research undertaken by the RATS will form part of the Recapturing the Historic Landscape project which has several other strands. These include field surveys, archaeological investigations and GIS mapping. The following research topics have therefore been carefully chosen to enhance not only these aspects, but also aid the creation of interpretation boards and oral histories.

- The Gwent Levels 100 years ago
- The Gwent Levels 200 years ago



# Living Levels

## Volunteer Role



- The impact of the railways on land drainage and landscape
- The tidal flood of 1883
- The fluvial floods of 1947
- The 'Great Storm' of 1703
- Place names and personal names from surveys and maps
- Who lived where on the Gwent Levels in 1881
- The Rumney Bridge incident of 1846
- The improvement of Windmill Reen, 1883

There will also be opportunities for volunteers to extend their own existing research projects. The historical documents relating to the great tidal flood of 1607 are currently being studied by a University of Bristol PhD student who is linking into the Recapturing the Historic Landscape project. It is hoped that every member of the RATS will share their work with a wider audience - be that through story boards at History Days, within a Living Levels publication, on the website or a short talk. **Don't be daunted - you will be fully supervised and supported throughout the research and writing up processes.**

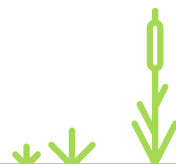
**Where:** Home-based for the research but group meetings will take place at the Living Levels Partnership Office on a monthly basis and there will be opportunities to visit libraries and archives as part of the project

**When:** We'll organise monthly meetings **from January 2019** which will be facilitated by our research supervisor who will provide training and guidance to help the 'RATS' develop research skills and knowledge of some of the key topics and documents. These meetings will be a **change-chance** for the group of researchers to share their findings and experiences. There will also be opportunities for the volunteers to present research findings at events organised as part of the wider Living Levels programme. These events are part of a yearly programme of regular events at venues all across the Levels. *[insert link to events calendar]*

**Commented [LU1]:** If you put this in for now, then after January it can be reworded so that people can join the existing group if they want

**Commitment:** As much or as little time as you'd like to dedicate to your research project – this project will cater ~~to-for~~ those with no experience of this type of research and those with existing research interests which they want to deepen.

**Why we want you:** The only systematic study of the history and development of the Gwent Levels was that published by Stephen Rippon (Stephen Rippon, Gwent Levels: the Evolution of a Wetland Landscape (York, 1996). Using tracings of the Commissioners of Sewers Maps of 1830/31, he was able to characterise the different parts of the historic landscape of the Levels and identify the sequence and potential date of the different episodes of reclamation. This pioneering and highly influential study looked at the macro-scale and did not realise the full potential of the Sewers Maps or make any attempt to interrogate the thousands of other documents relating to the Commissioners' work in Gwent Archives.



# Living Levels

## Volunteer Role



~~This material is catalogued, but not calendared, nor any key documents transcribed. None are available on line.~~ This project provides the opportunity to study what is recognised as one of the most outstanding historic landscapes in Wales. The research will significantly enhance knowledge and understanding of the management of the Levels in the post-medieval period and about the lives of those involved – helping to advance collective knowledge of the volunteers, project partners and the wider stakeholders engaged with the project. Content from this project will also enhance future educational and interpretative content which the Living Levels partners are developing alongside this work, helping to ensure that the heritage of this fascinating landscape is passed on to future generations. The Gwent Levels was created and has been sustained for at least 1,000 years by the cooperative effort of those who lived there. For its unique historic and natural environmental qualities to survive a full understanding of and an engagement in studying the documentary and physical history of this unique area is vital. In this way this project underpins the whole Living Levels Programme.

**What's in it for you:** You will have a chance to learn new skills in documentary research and will have access to training in the study of the court of sewers records, paleography, 'Levels Lingo', local history sources, organising research, writing up and referencing research. The activities will be led by heritage professionals who will provide comprehensive training to enable you to undertake other heritage-based activities as part of and outside the Living Levels Programme.

**The skills / talents you'll need:** No previous research experience is necessary ~~though as~~ we can tailor research projects to suit a range of experiences and interests. This project is suitable for anybody with an interest in the history and heritage of the Gwent Levels.

**Notes:** Any notes?

Commented [LU2]: None

**For more information and to sign up for this project, contact:** Gavin Jones, Living Levels Community Engagement Officer [Gavin.Jones@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Gavin.Jones@rspb.org.uk)

 @ourlivinglevels  Our Living Levels  Our Living Levels TV

[www.livinglevels.org.uk](http://www.livinglevels.org.uk)