

Living the Levels

The final newsletter for the
Living Levels Landscape Partnership



#Loving Your Levels
Looking back on Living Levels

NEWS OF OUR LEGACY

Living Levels Programme Manager, Alison Offord, updates us on the future work of the Partnership.

I am sure many of you may be wondering what will happen to Living Levels once the current funding period ends in March 2022. I want to reassure you that myself, the team and the partners have been working incredibly hard to put together plans to ensure there is continuity for Living Levels beyond that end date next year.

As such we have brought in some consultants to help the partners write a legacy plan for a future legacy partnership which will build on the current momentum and support generated through Living Levels.

The plan is also being developed to set out how the partnership will help ensure that the Levels can meet the challenges of the future, including from the declared climate and nature emergencies. As such, the partners are working up an ambitious long-term vision and action plan to enable the partnership to stay together to drive this work forward, while continuing to offer support for events, training and volunteering as per the current phase.

The plans are progressing very positively and there is broad support from across the current funding partners to keep the partnership together.

The major challenge in a post-Brexit and Covid recovery economy is undoubtedly funding and resources which have been severely impacted by these developments across the partners.

Nevertheless, there is a very strong will to continue with the good work of the Living Levels and support for the partnership extends right through the current partners to Welsh Government with explicit support from Julie James MS being pledged in her statement on protecting the Gwent Levels and at the most recent Gwent Levels Working Group chaired by John Griffiths MS.





The Living Levels Partners Board have been asked to support an 18-month transition phase to take the current Living Levels partnership to a future partnership model right through to 2050.

This 18-month transition phase would see continuity with some current staff retaining their posts and the time would be used to plan the next five years of work in the Levels. As a transition period where the primary tasks are planning for future, there would be less 'delivery' during this period, but there will continue to be opportunities to engage and help shape the future of the partnership. Community engagement will be an important cornerstone of this work.



The Partners Board have approved the proposal for this 18-month transition phase subject to the necessary funding being found. Good progress is being made with securing this funding too, even in this very difficult climate which is testament to the strength of the partnership and good will of the funding partners. Final decisions are expected to be made shortly after Christmas.

As this is the last edition of the Living Levels newsletter, updates on this in future will be posted on the website news section directly and direct communications will also be sent to the current volunteers and groups who are active on the Levels.



In the meantime, I wish you all a healthy and happy Christmas and New Year, and thank you once again for your support!

THE
Gwent Levels
Sense of Place
TOOLKIT



MAKING AMBASSADORS OF OUR RESIDENTS

Recognising the importance of those that live, work and play on the Levels being the best ambassadors for the area, Ed Drewitt and Louisa Aldridge were commissioned to bring this concept to life. Ed shares with us the ambassador's story.

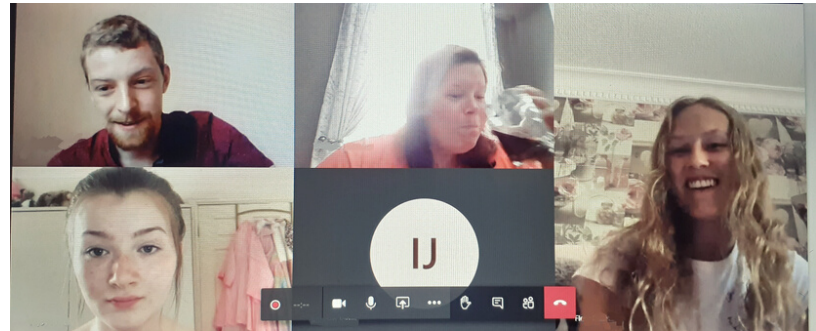
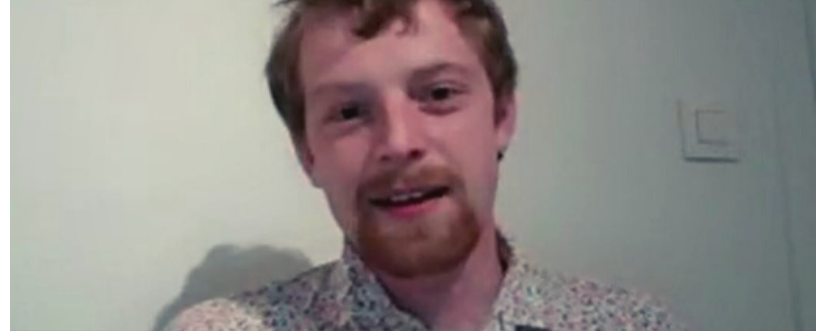
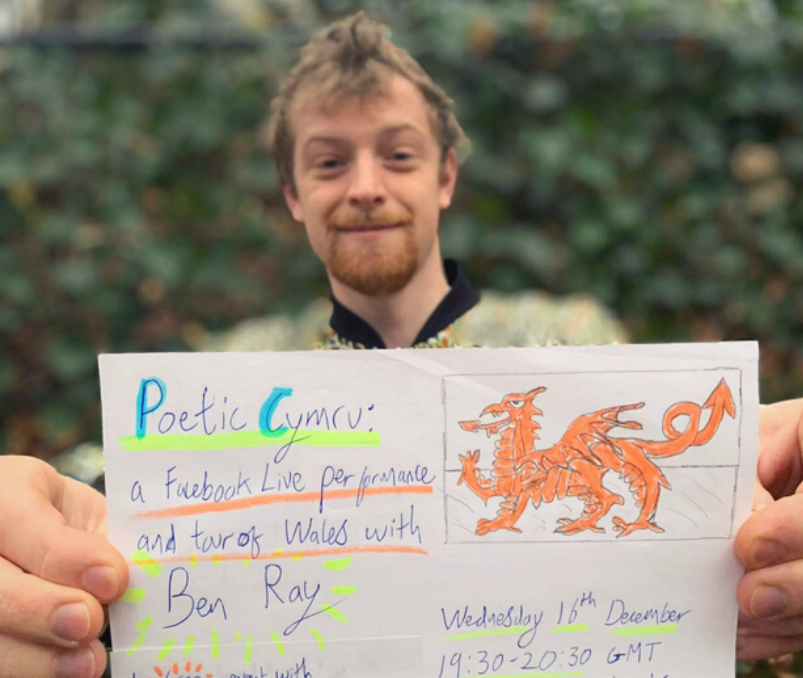
During the past three year's we have developed key resources including a detailed learning resource for schools and Memory Treasure Maps, for sites such as Hendre Lake, Parc Tredelerch and Magor Marsh. We have loved working with you all, whether you have been part of a focus group or helped with facts and tips and would like to say a huge thank you for your involvement.

Most recently we have produced the Gwent Levels Sense of Place Toolkit. This is for all of you who are ambassadors for the Levels, whether you are engaging people in your community, business or as visitors to the area.

A 'sense of place' is an idea that every area has an identity and distinctiveness that makes it different from everywhere else. The toolkit captures this and many of the experiences people have, memories they build, stories they hear and places they explore and is divided into sections which focus on different qualities of the Gwent Levels. You may want to deepen your understanding in one section, or look across a few sections to broaden your knowledge of the area.

There are full and shorter versions of the toolkit available plus videos and six short films to help you find amongst other things, identifying the rare shrill carder bee or finding the putcher ranks at Goldcliff.

To explore all these resources visit [here](#).



POETRY AND THE LIVING LEVELS: A RETROSPECTIVE

Poet Ben Ray has been an amazing champion of our special landscape, particularly during the pandemic. Here our 'Levels Laureate' puts pen to paper and reminisces.

A few days ago, I went to a retrospective exhibition of the artist David Hockney in my home of Brussels. One piece in particular, *Bigger Trees Near Water*, caught my attention. At 480 inches, this massive canvas depicts a bare, wintry coppice of spindly trees against a grey sky in an oddly haunting and beautiful panorama. Standing in front of this rural idyll, I was reminded how far I was from a different kind of home; from the open fields and the bare trees that stand stark against the winter morning; from a landscape where land and sea and sky mix and ebb and flow around one another.

I've been involved with Living Levels for over two years now, running workshops, open mics and even competitions. It all started in 2019, with an in-person poetry workshop in Rumney in a community hall, digging up local voices from the past and breathing life into them. This meeting led to two years of poetry events that not even coronavirus could stop. Our community open mic poetry sessions via Facebook proved particularly popular, bringing people from across Gwent and beyond together online to share their poems.

We even ran creative writing workshops with local writing circles and with Coleg Gwent.

From the confinement of my laptop in a small flat in Belgium I've worked with old and young, locals and not-so-locals, writers and those who've never put pen to paper before, exploring the Levels together through poetry. The pandemic has been an oddly liberating and equalising experience: despite being worlds apart, we could all meet online to wander around the jigsaw of reens and ditches around Rumney, the broad, flat seascapes of the Severn flats and the liminal edgelands of car parks and shopping centres around Newport.

That artwork in the Hockney retrospective left me with a comforting feeling of being brought closer to a space I know and love, despite being so distant from it. This is similar in some ways to the work of the Living Levels project, and to the very fundamentals of poetry.

Despite the pandemic, the Living Levels project has brought us all closer to Gwent's landscape, and has helped us to better know and understand this special place. This alone makes the project a success in my eyes: that we feel more in tune with a space we can call home, however far away we may be.



A LIVING LEVELS AUROCHS HUNT !

Much as our ancestors did 10,000 years ago, Professor Martin Bell and Tom Walker organised a hunt for some enormous Prehistoric beasts out on the Severn mud. Swapping spears for spades, they explain more.

An intrepid party of Living Levels volunteers supported by Gavin Jones and archaeologists from the University of Reading and the University of the Highlands and Islands (Orkney) set off on this previously planned hunt which had been delayed by a year because of Covid.

Conditions on the saltmarsh and mud flats were challenging and this is certainly not a place to venture unguided. We were looking for aurochs bones in a palaeo-channel where they had been found on several previous occasions. The aurochs is an extinct, much larger, ancestor of the domestic cow.

We were rewarded by the discovery of at least 10 aurochs bones, mostly vertebrae. We anticipate that these bones date to the Neolithic; the aurochs became extinct in Britain in the middle Bronze Age. The precise position of each bone was recorded by differential GPS so that they can be related to past and future finds.

Particularly exciting was the discovery of 4 aurochs footprints in an earlier peat deposit which had been cut through by the former channel containing the bones. We were able to make dental alginate casts of two of the footprints and from these we have now made more permanent plaster of Paris casts, one of which will be given to the Newport Wetlands visitor centre for display.

During the visit the history of archaeological discoveries at Uskmouth was outlined; these included the finding by the late Derek Upton of Mesolithic human footprints, and an antler mattock, and areas covered by deer and bird footprints. The Living Levels visit contributed to a developing picture of the archaeology of Uskmouth which has been gradually built up since Derek Upton's pioneering discoveries of the mid 1980s.

Whilst the team was busy on the foreshore Dr Jennifer Foster held a pop-up display on the Wales Coastal path nearby on the Wetland Reserve explaining to about 50 visitors to the reserve what we were doing and showing some of the aurochs bones from Uskmouth and plaster casts of human and bird footprints from our previous work at Goldcliff.



THE RATS IN STATS!

Our Research and Transcription Service (RATS) volunteers have been amazing contributors to Living Levels with their tireless research and entertaining mini-talks. Co-ordinator Rose Hewlett gives us their success in numbers!

Over the last 35 months, a total of 39 volunteers have researched the historic landscape of the Living Levels project area. The RATS (Research And Transcription Service) have clocked up more than 9,000 hours and worked on over 65 topics.

We've kept in touch via 49 newsletters, around 7,500 emails, Zoom, personal visits and by telephone. Our 30 sessions (in person and online) have included skills training, sharing our research, outside speakers, joint meetings with other project groups and liaising with Living Levels staff. We've even discussed how the historic record can inform the future of the Gwent Levels in the light of global warming.

Transcription and analysis of the 1881 census involved 12 RATS and 11,043 entries. Another 3 RATS transcribed 6,380 records from the 1830s to enhance our understanding of field ownership and occupancy. We created 29 display posters for several events and have presented around 20 talks and mini talks in person or online to the public.

You will find our work on the Living Levels and GIS websites, in newsletters, Gwent Local History and other publications. Some of it will be deposited as a legacy collection at Gwent Archives.

I have thoroughly enjoyed supervising the RATS. Thank you for all your hard work, dedication and enthusiasm.

MAPPING LEVELS STORIES

The RATS and other volunteers have been vital sources of information to help inform, amongst other things, how we interpret the Gwent Levels landscape. Rebecca Bennett tells the story.

Over the past 18 months, volunteers - including several of our RATS amongst others - have been hard at work on volunteer projects centred around uncovering and mapping historic heritage and features of the Levels.

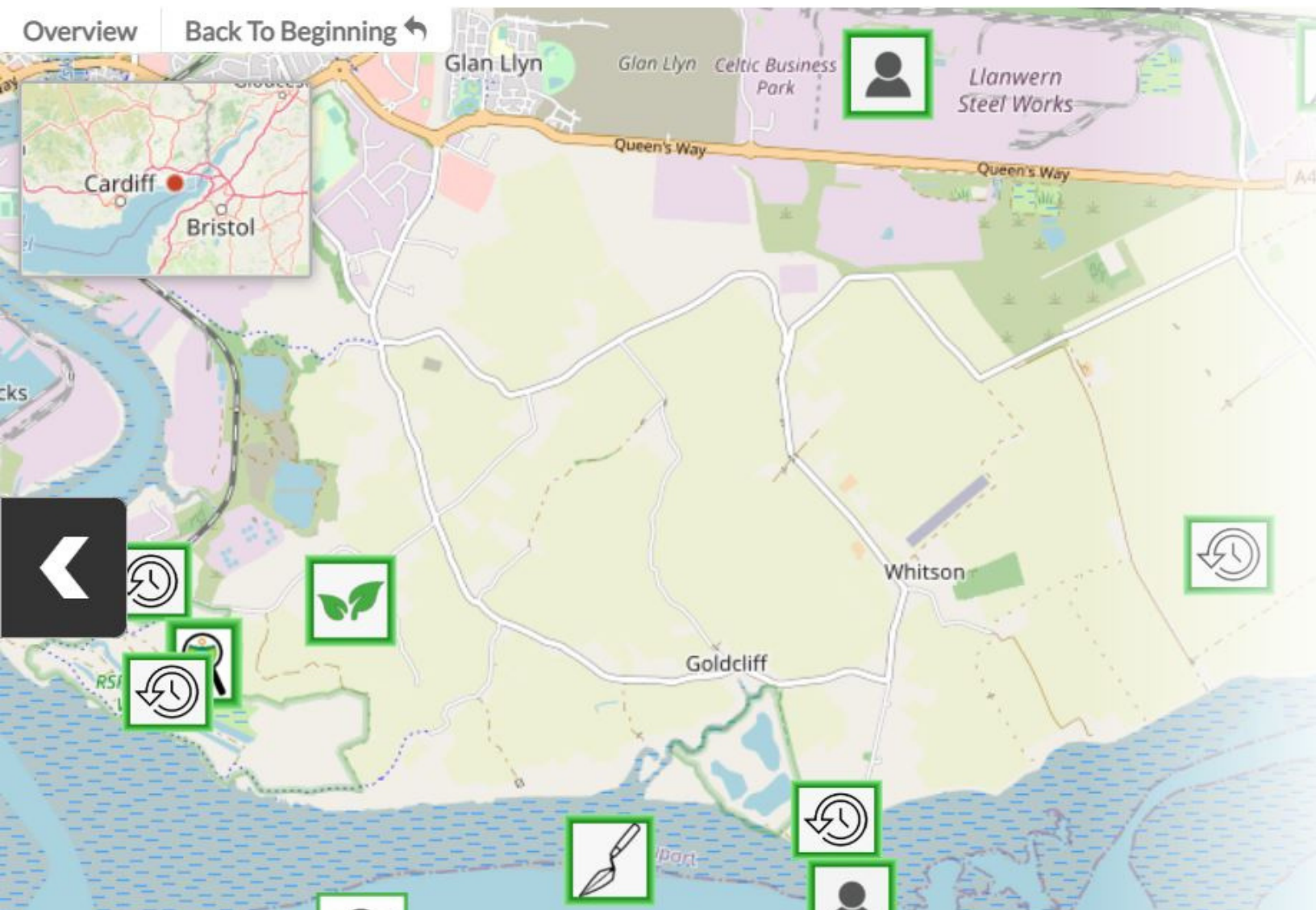
This includes studying LiDAR records, 1881 census data, the Monmouthshire Court of Sewers records, and various individual research projects – all of which have helped to unearth various stories and map them to physical locations throughout the Levels.

This information adds a richness to our understanding of past forces which have shaped the present day landscape.

We are so grateful to all the volunteers who have contributed to the GIS projects over the past couple of years.

A new map called the [Gwent Levels Story Map](#) has just been launched which showcases some of this research as well as key stories from the Living Levels.

If you haven't already visited, the historic map viewer (which uses GIS software) is well worth a look!





JOY FOR MAGNIFICENT MARSHFIELD MAGPIES!

It's certainly been a joy for one of our Gwent Levels communities as Fly Tipping Action Wales Project Manager Tito Lopez reveals!

Congratulations to Marshfield Magpies, the winners of our Bright Spots competition! Their successful proposal was a wildflower garden, which was created in October with the help of local Guide and Brownie groups.

An interpretation sign is also planned for the site, with plant identification tips and information on how to correctly dispose of waste and report fly-tipping incidents.

The success of Black Spots to Bright Spots over the last three years in convicting and fining offenders has also allowed us to develop a different sort of sign – this one a deterrent.

Signs will be placed that publicise the numbers of fly-tippers caught and will be updated as this number increases, including once the current backlog of court cases eases.

We will be analysing the benefits of our work through an economic appraisal. Please help us with this, and influence how fly-tipping is tackled in the future by completing this [survey](#). It's a short one we promise!

Finally, some reflections from the Black Spots to Bright Spots Project team...although the project has often been challenging, we are proud of what's been achieved and are grateful to the community for their support and the praise they've given. Thank you!



AMONG THE FIELDWORK OF GOLDCLIFF

Four Living Levels volunteers joined a small band of archaeologists including Martin Bell and Tom Walker, to record of a new area of submerged forest exposed on the foreshore at Goldcliff. Professor Bell and Mr Walker describe four intrepid days.

The Goldcliff site was of particular interest because the new area was at a higher level than previously investigated submerged forests and is thought to be Neolithic; one of the objectives was to get samples for dating. Samples of 4 large oak trees were taken for tree ring dating and we will also be dating peat samples along with samples of peat for pollen and seed analysis, to reconstruct the vegetation history. Dr David Smith from the University of Birmingham also took samples for beetle analysis.

The newly revealed peat was cleaned of mud and sand and a detailed plan was made of the trees to map the composition of the woodland, making it possible to establish the precise character of this ancient woodland and perhaps find evidence for the influence of Neolithic communities on the environment.

Cleaning and small scale excavation revealed Mesolithic stone artefacts buried by the peat; these included a fine microlith which probably served as the tip of a spear, found by one of the Living Levels volunteers.

A visit to the low foreshore during one low tide revealed a very well preserved set of bird footprints and within the last year, Adam Turner, a PhD student at Reading University, found a broken Mesolithic axe of volcanic tuff and a stone scraper, probably used in cleaning hides.

Meanwhile on dryland Dr Jennifer Foster was recording the finds and explaining to members of the public walking what the team busy in the mud down below were doing!





David Swidenbank



David Swidenbank



MARSHFIELD'S WAR GRAVES

The picturesque setting of St Mary's Church in Marshfield, contains two official Commonwealth war graves from the First and Second World Wars.

Volunteer and author Andrew Hemmings tells their stories.

The first is a private memorial to Frederick Cawley who died in 1918 ; the second is a Portland headstone to John James Owen Walters who died in 1944. It is not surprising that a significant proportion of the war graves scattered across Britain commemorate RAF personnel. The hazards of flying and of aerial combat are embedded in our collective memory and popular culture.

Frederick Cawley , son of Alfred and Agnes E Cawley, lived at Cae Garw, St Mellons , Cardiff . He joined the 35th Training Station RFC at Filton, Bristol on 1st February 1917. He was promoted to Second Lieutenant on 1st April 1918 , the founding date of the Royal Air Force. Sadly he was killed, aged 20 years old, on 13th October 1918 as the " result of an Air Accident".

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records state that he " died of accidental injuries".

John James Owen Walters , Sergeant Air Bomber RAF (VR) of 17th Operational Training Unit (OTU) has the traditional CWGC headstone. The son of James and Eleanor Walters of Church Farm Cottage Marshfield, John ' Jim' or 'Jimmie' Walters was killed in a training accident on 17th March 1944. RAF records tell that he was a member of the crew of Wellington III BK 352. The aircraft overshot the runway at Turweston Airfield in Buckinghamshire, crashed and caught fire. John aged 20 died along with the rest of the crew. His parents paid for the inscription of his headstone "They shall not grow old ".

This was newly cleaned for War Graves Week. Obituary notices for John Walters in the local paper brought tributes from his siblings and from the community of Marshfield " where the family are well known and have been in the district for many years".



LOOKING BACK AT OUR ORCHARDS

Heritage Orchard Officer Beccy Williams gets to the core of how the project is enabling orchards once again to blossom across the Gwent Levels

I've been busy out and about from day one, meeting people from the local communities to track down old orchards.

Using maps from the 1800's we identified that the Levels had 519 plus orchards in its heyday, using aerial maps and ground truthing we have identified that 287 have been lost, 59 are still functioning orchards with many more that still need to be investigated.

To establish which varieties of fruit trees grow in these orchards we have gathered DNA samples and sent them to Aberystwyth University to be analysed. To date almost 300 trees have been DNA tested, some of these are very old and rare varieties.

The project has engaged with many orchard owners and volunteers who have been vital when it came to clearing and restoring the orchards.

Training in orchard management and pruning has been carried out, entomological surveys have been undertaken over 3 years and in excess of 150 new heritage fruit trees have been distributed and planted amongst orchards, schools and community groups.

More Pruning courses are planned for January/February 2022. If you are interested in being involved, or finding out more about what the Orchard restoration project entails, please feel free to contact me: rwilliams@gwentwildlife.org



LIVING LEVELS ACHIEVEMENTS - A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Programme Manager and Living Levels original, Alison Offord, reflects on six years of celebrating the glorious Gwent Levels.

As Living Levels draws nearer to the end point next March and I prepare to go on maternity leave to have my second child in late January, I wanted to sit back and reflect on the main achievements of the Living Levels over the past six years of my involvement.

Some of the successes can be neatly captured in numbers, charts and infographics. For example, the kilometres of field ditches which have been lovingly restored by local contractors to good ecological condition (28km). Or the hectares of new habitat for shrill carder bee which have been added by the actions of our network of both public and private landowners (30ha).

These physical outputs are also more visible in the landscape itself as can be seen from the transformation of dry ditches into watery homes for wildlife and the bursts of colour from the wildflowers that bloom in the spring and summer (see some images and stats opposite).

Other successes are more elusive and difficult to quantify in this way – including the way that many who have attended or participated in our events and activities have been inspired to take an interest in their local environment, to find out more and to pass that learning and enthusiasm on to others. We get a sense of this from our post-event survey data as well as the kind feedback we have received from many individuals that have contributed to Living Levels.

However, I think this is mostly evident from the large numbers of people who have enthusiastically volunteered, and repeat volunteered, to help in their communities – whether by distributing flyers about events through their neighbours' letterboxes, turning out to pick up litter from their local area, campaigning for their local area, or signing up for ambassador training or to learn a new skill.

Across a breadth of audiences from residents, landowners and farmers, visitors, business owners, volunteers, to politicians with influence over important policy decisions affecting the Levels, we have been amazed by the outpouring of love for the Levels which we have seen grow over the last six years. This has translated into real and sustained pressure for policy change which is beginning to lead to a change in the way the Levels are being valued, managed and protected, fulfilling the key objective and purpose the partnership set out to achieve. Our once 'forgotten landscape' feels like a landscape revived.

Evidence for that change lies in recent political decisions and announcements, significantly by Climate Minister Julie James MS and decisions to call in some large developments that were planned in the Levels. These are ground-breaking developments in many ways and they lay the foundation for a suite of policy initiatives which have the potential to bring much needed protection and funding to the Levels to safeguard its natural and historical heritage for future generations.

This is a truly exciting time for the future of the Levels – it is a time for great hope and optimism and each and every person who has taken an active part in Living Levels is part of that movement for change. It is a proud legacy and one I hope that all who read this feel part of because this would not have been possible without the support and participation of the many who have joined us in Living Levels.

Thank you all and enjoy this success – it is your success.



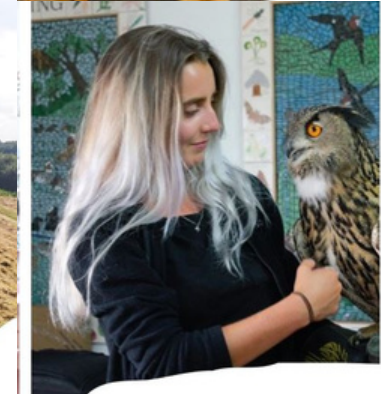
28km of open field ditch habitat restored
 45 orchards restored/restocked
 12 new orchards created
 185 new fruit trees planted
 30ha of new wildflower habitat added for
 shrill carder and other pollinators
 Enhanced data and mapping of historic assets
 like orchards



2000 primary school children engaged
 180 College students have completed
 assignments
 5 new learning resources created for
 schools and learning settings



30+ fly-tipping cases investigated with 8
 prosecutions so far
 3 Community gardens created in former
 'black spots'
 Rapid response protocols developed to
 manage invasive non-native species
 Over 100 Wild Watch volunteers
 & 27 Bee Walk volunteers trained



12,000+ people have attended 125 events
 750 people trained with new skills
 500+ volunteers have given 18000+ hours



People of the Levels sculptures
 planned in 6 locations across the
 Levels



New exhibitions at Newport Museum
 and National Roman Legion
 Museum, Caerleon



52 oral histories recorded across the
 breadth of the Levels and archived
 for the public record

8 walking routes upgraded with new
 route guidance produced
 3 cycling routes & 2 equestrian routes
 upgraded

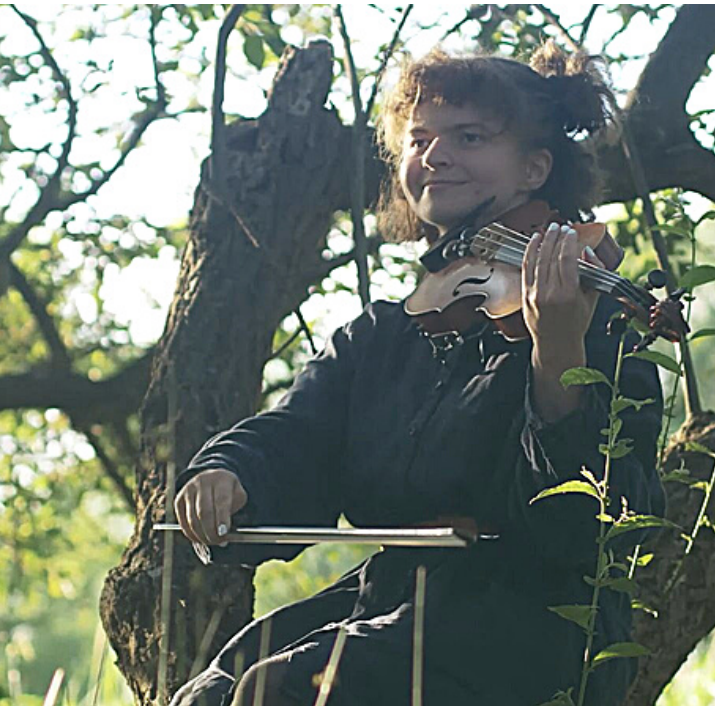




A NOTEWORTHY YEAR WITH LIVING LEVELS!

Folk violinist Katie Batchelor has supported us by putting on several amazing Facebook Live gigs during the pandemic, most recently combining her passion for history and music in an online talk. She looks back on a busy year.

This year has been a combination of online and live events as we move out of lockdown. My first event of the year was a Facebook live event for St David's day back in the spring, where I played some fun Welsh tunes and decorated the entire room with daffodils!



This summer, I had an amazing opportunity to film some traditional regional music 'on location' at Magor Marsh – a beautiful venue in it's own right. It's extremely satisfying as a performer to perform a piece of music in the place it's named after.

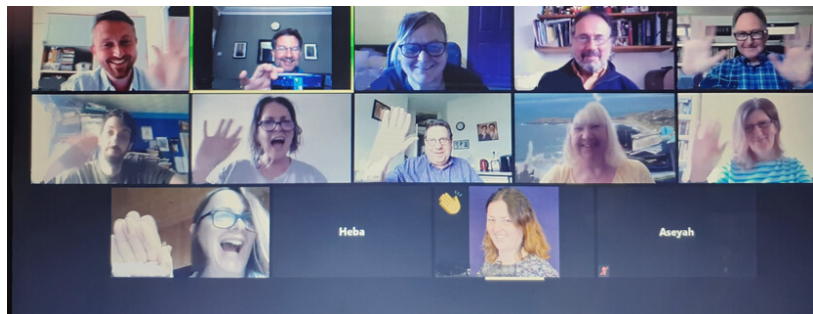
Preparing for this event was what sparked an interest in research to try and find more folk music with specific connections to the landscape.

After spending time going through online archive documents available on the National Library of Wales site, and attending Welsh traditional music 'sessions', this November I did a Zoom 'talk and performance' on Gwent folk music, where I got to go into depth of some regional tunes and their histories. (The link is still available online if you missed it!)



It's been amazing to work in collaboration with this partnership, with the opportunity to connect music with history and stories behind it to the landscape and people.

Now, I am looking forward to playing for the project's celebration event (now scheduled for March 2022). The event is planned to be held at Tredegar House, where I played my first performance for Living Levels!



ENGAGING ON EVERY LEVEL

Community Engagement Officer Gavin Jones looks back on six years of bringing the Gwent Levels into halls, homes and hearts!

The time has flown by for me personally, and I'm really proud of what we have achieved. From the outset, engagement has been key and in the early days, I toured the Levels meeting with Community and Town Councils, community groups and organisations of every size and demographic. I visited village halls, the Mission to Seafarers on Newport docks and spent weekends in Tesco with an eclectic display of the Gwent Levels' past, present and future. Who knew I would bump into community councillors, landowners and even Lave Net Fishermen at the checkout!

Organising activities and events has been key to enabling our engagement work and I'm very proud of the way our programme has brought so much variety across the landscape. From walks and talks and creative workshops, to larger events such as history days and Big Skies - over 12,000 people have attended 125 live events plus 75 online.

We've attended a range of marvellous and varied community events from bringing 'Battle of the Bees' to Nash fete to competing with hardcore rap at St Mellons summer fete.

Despite the pandemic, we've seen a marked increase in engagement.

We moved our programme online to enable our events to continue. This boosted our ever-growing local audience and we were thrilled to be joined by people from across the world. The wonders of digital technology meant we could still involve those unable to join us in person. Thank you to everyone who joined us online.

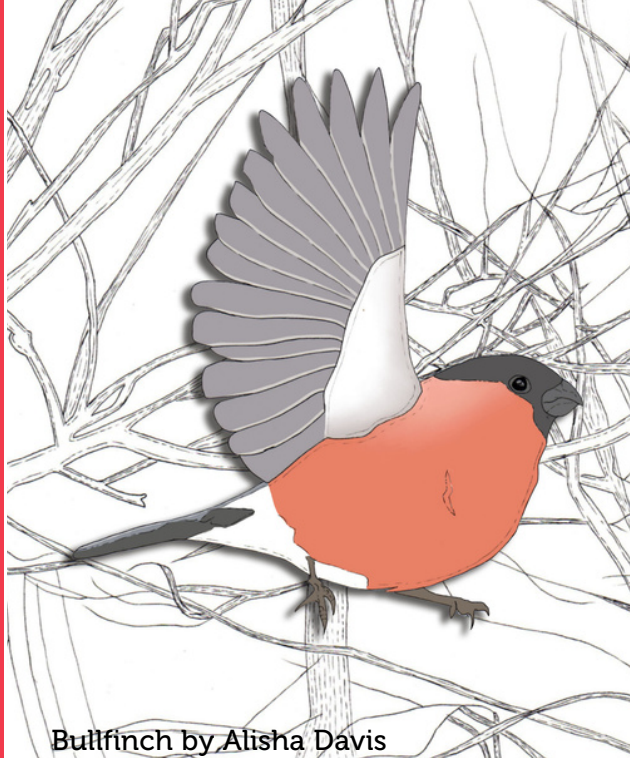
Bringing together such an interesting and varied programme to help entertain you during this time was such a highlight for me and I hope it helped you stay connected. Thanks also to everyone who supports us on social media. From humble beginnings we are now close to hitting the 2000 follower's mark! I have also had the honour of editing and producing this publication and if you look at past editions on our website, it certainly has evolved – as has Living Levels.

Throughout my time I've had the privilege of being part of the incredible Living Levels team and partnership and have met with some truly wonderful people. I'll be saying farewell to the project at the end of this year but I won't be far away. I've joined the Newport Transporter Bridge project as community engagement officer, arguably keeping both the Wentlooge and Caldicot sides happy at the same time! So as one Levels community member recently put to me, I'll be 'within shouting distance' of you all!

Feel free to stay in touch:
transporter.bridge@newport.gov.uk



Bullfinch by Angelina Barnett



Bullfinch by Alisha Davis

HELP SPREAD THE WORD

If you think of someone, or a group of people, who might be interested in finding out more about Living Levels and getting involved, please do pass this newsletter on or recommend our website livinglevels.org.uk

CONTACT US

We'd love to hear from you!

If you've any questions about the programme or getting involved, drop us a line on:
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