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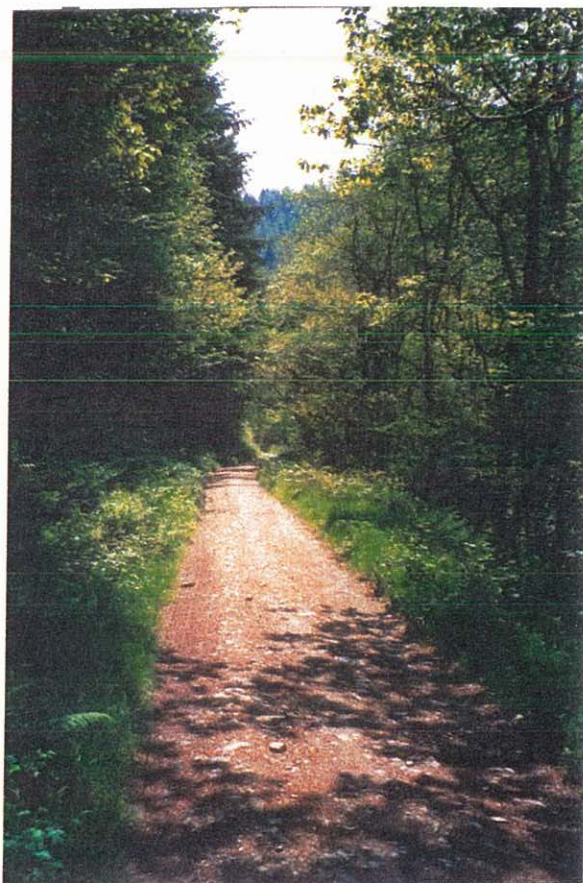
**Report to evaluate the potential and feasibility of creating a
public footpath design
for the communities of Brechfa Forest.**

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By

Zoë Bevans and Richard Jones

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CAMBRIA
ARCHAEOLOGY

Context

Previous Research - Creating a map of Brechfa Forest's Woodland Walks

Within the period May - June 2002, Cambria Archaeology was host to MA student, Mr. David Groom who joined the organisation on a six-week work placement from the University of Lampeter. Mr. Groom set out to produce a contemporary map of the Brechfa Forest area that could be utilised when producing woodland walks and heritage trails etc. Mr. Groom conducted a considerable and intensive desktop and field based survey of all the identified routes. A map was then produced using MapInfo, a Geographical Information System (GIS), with reference to his own research and Ordnance Survey (OS) data. For example the OS first and second ed. maps of 1887 and 1905 respectively, and the earlier tithe maps of the parishes of Brechfa and Llanfihangel Rhos-y-corn, circa 1840's. The maps were used to identify earlier settlement sites and possible rights of way. Mr Groom discovered that the modern Public Rights of Way (ProW) held by Carmarthenshire County Council Highways department, proved to be inaccurate. An example of this was manifested by instances where the PROW ran 'vertically up a rock-face' (*pers. Comm.*). In order to overcome this Mr Groom resorted to the OS Explorer series mapping to obtain right of way data, however it should be noted that some of this data is also erroneous. Despite this, the OS has acted as a 'definitive' point of reference since it's inception in 1791 (ordsvy.gov.uk, 2003). Permissive rights of way were also identified and added to the digitised mapping.

The aim was to produce a concise representation of the area including those rights of way indicated on the OS mapping. In addition the routes were walked and the characteristic of the walk were recorded, i.e. length, difficulty etc.

Feasibility study

BRECHFA FOREST MOUNTAIN BIKE CENTRE:

Carmarthenshire County Council commissioned a full feasibility study in association with Forest Enterprise and Llanfihangel Rhos y Corn/Brechfa Community Association in 2001. This study was undertaken in response to the Wales Tourist Board's (WTB)" Moving Up a Gear" which recognised the potential of Brechfa as a possible niche tourism resource.

The main aims and objectives are to 'create a niche tourism product ...', as recognised by the WTB, '...that would appeal to the youth of Carmarthenshire'. It was also hoped that it would facilitate the '... diversification of current farming enterprises and offer a longer, more sustainable tourist season...' while offering a '... healthy, green tourist and eco-friendly product which would generate spend within a 10 mile radius of the forest'. The project was designed to comply with Carmarthenshire County Councils Health Improvement Strategy - offering a healthy lifestyle

Methodology

In preparation for this project research was first conducted to provide a contextual background. This began with an examination of the first and second edition maps of the district, along with a cursory analysis of the available tithe maps. A 'Delilah' database of the Brechfa area containing Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) data sets, and MapInfo 'Pro-viewer' software was used to provide a spatial representation of the SMR record during this familiarisation process.

This was supported by a literature review that included the study of several articles and reports concerning the forest and its communities. These ranged from historical, landscape and practical viewpoints. These sources included articles such as "The Forest of Glyncothi" and "The Origins of Brechfa Forest" by David Rees from The Carmarthenshire Antiquary (Rees, 1995; 2001). In addition to this research was also conducted into the folklore of the area (Thomas, 1992). Documents such as the Rights of Way Improvement Plans for the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW), and other consultation and feasibility documents relating to previous studies carried out upon the potential appropriateness of proposed cycle and bridle path schemes were also examined.

The main purpose of this was to enable us to familiarise ourselves with the locality itself (Brechfa/Gwernogle), and to investigate the relevant legal frameworks, it also served to provide us with some insight into areas of potential that have previously been investigated. It was also decided that a definitive footpath plan of the area would aid our research considerably, consequently steps were taken to attempt to obtain this data from the relevant body, in this instance Carmarthenshire County Council. Although attempts were made on several occasions to contact the appropriate office, it was several weeks until we were finally able to make contact with the most pertinent individual. We were then advised that the documents held by Carmarthenshire County Council were inaccurate at this time, and were advised to use the Ordnance Survey Explorer Series.

During the initial phase of the project, while awaiting replies for our requests for interviews, it was decided to carry out some recognisance to obtain first hand examples of existing heritage trails and schemes. These sites were chosen to bring different perspectives from a diversity of locations to the interpretation of the project. Three examples were decided upon.

- The Dylan Thomas Walk at Laugharne
- Aberglasney
- Llandovery Town Walk

We also considered personal experience of interpretive material and site design at other heritage attractions such as:

- St Fagan's, Museum of Welsh Life, Cardiff
- The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Llanelli
- The Llanelli Millennium Coastal Park

During this meeting we arranged with Mr Groom to contact him when a provisional route had been decided upon. He subsequently offered to accompany us on our assessment visit and to act as our guide within the remit of the project.

Pobl-y-Fforest

It was during conversation with Mr. Groom that we were able to establish a link with Faye Sharpley a director of PYFf and were finally able arrange a meeting the same day to discuss our ideas and establish their needs as a forest community organisation. The meeting was very positive and informative. Information supplied by representatives of PYFf showed that the existing trails are little used by anyone outside the community, in addition pony trekking trails have been attempted on a number of occasions but had not been popular and therefore economically non viable.

Alternative ideas included both cycle and bridle paths, however both these concepts had been explored elsewhere within the forestry with limited response. The recent feasibility study carried out for the Brechfa Forest Area, as mentioned above, suggests that this would provide a positive outcome for the area in general. However the idea of a footpath or trail was decided upon as this appeared to be the most practical option, as would ensure a duplication of facilities within the immediate area. It was also considered to be the most widely accessible scheme benefiting the broadest cross section of target groups. In addition it also reflects those initiatives set out by the Welsh Assembly Government focusing on health, environment and economic objectives.

Choosing a route/selection criteria

It was during these discussions that the suggestion of the Afon Clydach walk first came into play. The appropriateness of this particular route was discussed by ourselves and members of PYFf, using the criteria outline devised below.

Criteria Outline

- Accessibility-topography, the relative difficulty level of the walk
- Safety
- Form of access (ProW/Permissive Access/FE)
- Car parking facilities/availability
- Length/ structure of walk
- Sites of interest along the route - landscape, geology, settlement and land-use
- Flora and Fauna
- Good views and impressive vistas

The route was then walked by Mr Groom and ourselves. Two members of staff from Trinity College also accompanied the group, to gauge their attitude and comment to the proposed walk. On completion and after discussion it was concluded that it was suitable as the focus for a number of pertinent reasons.

- Geology and the natural environment
- Flora and Fauna
- Settlement and land-use (different landscapes, ritual, agricultural, modern/historic forestation and coppice Oaks for tannins etc.)
- The 'myths and legends' associated with the Brechfa and Gwernogle area

Within the context of these themes, a number of specific sites could be included

Gazetteer of site identified from walk

- 8 Cottage sites along route (to be listed in SMR)
- Mill sites
- Birthplace of Lewis Glyn Cothi a 14th century Welsh poet within Gwernogle
- Gwernogle chapels
- Possible tramways
- Thief's Way - possible medieval sunken road
- Flora and fauna
- Geological formations/ changes in geological landscape

Landscape story

Taking the theme "The ongoing evolution of Brechfa forest, as a sustainable social and economic resource" as an example. It would be possible to illustrate the changes in landscape use from the first time the forest is recognised. For example David Rees writes that the area in the parishes of Brechfa and Llanfihangel Rhos-y-corn were once part of the primeval wooded landscape that extended across Carmarthenshire in the early medieval period (Rees, 1995:49).

We could perhaps emphasis that medieval forests differed from the modern Forestry Commission style planting seen today. For example medieval forests did not consist of dense uninterrupted woodland, but comprised of a landscape that was extensively covered with more sparsely placed deciduous trees, characteristically the Oak (*ibid*). The forest would also have contained open glades and cleared land in addition to expanses of heath and moor. These areas would have been maintained as grazing plots for forest game (*ibid*).

During the invasion of Wales by Norman forces in the 11th century, the forest was seen for its strategic significance, acting as a physical barrier towards the heavily armoured Norman cavalry. The forest continued to play a vital role within medieval politics during the 12th century, proving central to the defence of one of the last remaining Welsh dynasties and acted as the primary stronghold for the rulers of Deheubarth (*ibid*).

When using text within panels or information leaflets, best practice suggests that it should not be overlong with a suggested word count of approximately 150 words. A reading age of 12 to 15 years is also recommended; a number of recognised tests can be implemented to ensure that these criteria are met. It is also important that 'everyday' language should be utilised with the avoidance of too much technical jargon and too many big words. This should be done in order to avoid 'alienating' the audience and discouraging them from reading the text.

Community Involvement/Decision Making

The content will also reflect the importance of site to the local population for example Scottish Heritage, suggest that one should consult the local community to find out what is important to them, as they consider sites and locations to be theirs, and resent outsiders imposing their own perspective on what is important to them. Therefore, we should suggest possible sites for inclusion and persuade the community of their merits, conversely we should consider any sites the local community deem important to include.

It is essential when developing a project such as this that the community is contacted and included within all parts of the decision making process. Interpretation and responsible heritage development is as much about helping people appreciate what they feel, is special about their community, as what we as professionals consider important. It is vital that we as so-called experts do not impose our own perceptions of heritage upon the community. Rather we must work together to create a more holistic approach to both our environment and the past, considering the ideas, and perspectives of those living and experiencing the areas themselves. Heritage must be seen as an expression of a community and not just an imposed narrative with no real connection or reflection of that individual communal spirit.

Conclusions

The Brechfa and Gwernogle area has a rich and vibrant heritage; the area can boast an archaeological, geological and cultural legacy, that is reflected in the landscape and community of the forest today. Its location is ideally suited for visitors from across Wales and indeed the rest of Britain, as access can be obtained via the A40(T) from the west, north and east and the M4/A48(T) from the south. However, it should be noted that car-parking provision is minimal.

The recreational facilities which could potentially be offered will support the aspirations of the Welsh Assembly for a better environment, healthier population and a sustainable economy. This illustrated in documentation such '*Walking and Cycling strategies for Wales*'; '*Promoting health and Wellbeing*' and the Wales Tourist Board (WTB) strategy document '*Achieving our Potential*' supported by '*Moving up a Gear*'.

Initially it is envisaged that the walks will be used predominantly for the benefit and enjoyment of the local community. However it is foreseen that with the development of a local area tourism strategy in conjunction with Carmarthenshire County Council, provision

