

Friends of
PENPONT PROJECT



Welcome to our first edition!

from Lily, 16

Hello and welcome to the first instalment of the Friends of Penpont Newsletter! Written by members of the Youth Leadership Group (YLG) - made up of twenty young people passionate about nature and conservation aged between 13 and 18, who help make and inform key decisions within the project - we aim to give you an update on the progress of the project so far.

The Penpont Project is the world's first large-scale youth-led nature recovery project based at Penpont Estate in the Brecon Beacons.

We work in collaboration with key stakeholders - the estate owners Gavin and Davina Hogg, tenant farmers Sally and Gareth Davies, the Brecon Beacons National Park, local businesses, conservationists and scientists - to restore natural processes to the beautiful site, whilst exploring regenerative farming and forestry practices.

We young people are involved in this project because the current biodiversity and climate crisis, spiralling largely unchecked by politicians and industry, is destroying the planet we need to inhabit, and the nature we love.



Images from top to bottom: Penpont Estate house; members of the Youth Leadership Group; the fallen oak tree found on the project site.



Earlier this year Britain decided to leave the European Union. This decision is still hotly debated and it can be very easy to dwell on the negatives and potential risks. But, with this legislative shift comes a huge opportunity - perhaps the dawn of a greener and more prosperous countryside for the UK?

As we leave the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the UK has a chance to put the environment and sustainability at the core of its new subsidy scheme. In order for the new policies to be truly transformational we need more real-life on the ground examples of how conservation, farming and forestry can work together, be viable, and create new synergies. This sets the scene for the Penpont Project.

One of the most distinctive aspects of this project is that from the beginning the aim of the Youth Leadership Group has been not to youthwash it - not for us to be tokenistic members - but for us to be profoundly involved as decision-makers.

Whilst we don't have all the answers - we don't have 20 years of experience in climate science or the accumulated knowledge of a farmer who's worked the land for decades - but we have other skills to bring to the table. As young people, we have the passion, the energy, and the fresh ideas to complement the experience and knowledge of older generations. It's been amazing how, over the course of only a year, we all feel so incredibly happy, excited, and connected to Penpont and our collective aim.

MARCH 2019 - PROJECT CONCEPTION

In March 2019, we - the YLG - first came to Penpont to begin familiarising ourselves with the site and the various stakeholders in the project. It was wonderful to finally see this beautiful land that we had been so excited about throughout the application process with the charity and project partner Action for Conservation.

We learnt about how hugely important it was to be aware and caring about all those influenced by our plans for the project - we spent time discussing how many restoration projects develop into a battle between conservationists and farmers.

One of the many things that sets the Penpont Project apart from other schemes is our aims and actions seek to find that healthy collaboration and compromise between the different land uses. We left the Penpont site buzzing with ideas and motivation and unable to wait until the next site visit!



Top right: Local students survey site; Serena; Esther & Helen are interviewed.

Bottom middle: Khadijah holds a lamb; AFC's Chief Executive Hendrikus, Penpont Estate's Gavin & tenant farmer Sally; summit attendees walk the site.

Bottom left: Students conduct a butterfly survey; students conduct a wild flower survey.

The story so far

from Deep, 16



Images clockwise by section from top left: Project partners walk the project site; Connor & Helen; project partners look at initial map.

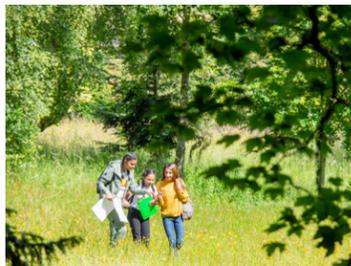
JULY 2019 - MEDIA LAUNCH

The July visit coincided with Penpont's official launch to the general public and local and national press alike. A number of us attended a Public Relations workshop in London with Crest Media to help us develop a communications strategy for Penpont.

During this time we were featured in many media outlets, which are read by different groups of people, all of which received positive comments and encouragement. High profile press coverage includes The Guardian and the BBC.



JULY 2019 - BIOBLITZ



In July 2019, we returned and led a Bioblitz survey at Penpont supported by local and national survey experts and wildlife enthusiasts. We also invited local school groups from Brecon and Newport to come and take part in the Bioblitz.

Whilst these Bioblitz surveys are really just the tip of the iceberg in terms of our baseline surveys, it really helped us to understand the fantastic biodiversity that is already here, and it set the groundwork for long term monitoring and evaluation plans for the site.

Additionally, the surveys were also a fantastic way to involve others and share our passion and knowledge with other local young people.



SEPT 2019 - PARTNER SUMMIT

In September 2019, we hosted a stakeholder summit at Penpont, inviting members of the local community, core project partners, and a range of interest groups, including Brecon Beacons National Park Authority and representatives from pioneering restoration projects across the UK.

We participated in a range of compelling presentations and workshops from an eclectic group of speakers and leaders; case studies from the Pwllpeiran Upland Research Centre in West Wales, Wicken Fen in Cambridgeshire, and Old Lands in Monmouthshire, through to the complexity of reintroducing wild species such as the beaver and the Gaia Foundation's work in the application of Traditional Ecological Knowledge to restore nature with indigenous communities.



Our most recent meeting

from Hana, 15

In February, just following Storm Dennis, we visited the site again for an action packed long weekend to explore the history of the site and understand transformations of the land over time. We stayed in the visitor wing of Penpont for the first time, enabling us to experience life on the estate in full flow, appreciate the importance of all parties involved and the significance of our role. Not to mention, it was lovely accommodation!

On the first evening we went through the final draft of our Memorandum of Understanding which we had all been working on for the last 3 months. The MoU is a formal agreement that outlines the aims, roles, responsibilities and values of the Penpont Project partnership.

We also visited our favourite touchstone, the fallen oak tree, to make some decisions about how we'd approach the weekend.

Friday began with a walk of the entire 322 acre project site, with multiple stops to discuss the history of the land, its key features and its current usage. We were joined by Robert MacDonald, local artist and writer, who has lived here since the 70s.

Robert told us about the historical significance of this landscape and shared his stories about the wildlife he has encountered here.

One harsh winter, for example, Robert welcomed into his house an old blind badger! We also heard about the famous scientist Sir Alfred Russell Wallace and who first began developing his ideas in the hills and valleys around Penpont.



Images clockwise from above: Willow and Hana presenting vision maps for Penpont; original illustrated map of the Penpont Project site by Brighde Penn; Youth Leadership Group with Helen and Robert.



The following day, we started off with a remarkable mapping session led by Hal from the Gaia Foundation, which involved learning about his work with indigenous communities around the world and how we could create some of our own.

We invited Robert along with Anne Gethin Jones and Helen Guichard to the session to learn more from those connected to the site and how the land, wildlife and rural life has changed over the generations.

Creating our own maps with the invitees and current land managers sparked an interesting discussion about some of the changes to rural life and farming over the years, including the impact of various subsidy schemes (sheep quotas for example). We planted 200 oak saplings which was an inspiring activity and our first glimpse at practical work on the site.

We also visited Gareth and Sally's lambing sheds where we were able to handle the young lambs! That evening we had an excellent talk from Giacomo from Bees for Development and local beekeeper Dave about bee conservation and bee keeping, alongside some honey tasting.

Last but not least, Sunday's agenda consisted of gathering feedback from all of the Youth Leadership Group and the other Project Partners and deciding on our next steps for each subcommittee. Reluctantly, we left on Sunday afternoon, already looking forward to our next visit!





Our next steps from Esther, 14

At our last gathering in February, we collectively decided on the following priorities going forwards:

1. Baseline surveys - over the next year, a series of baseline surveys will be delivered in order to get an idea of which species currently live on the Penpont Estate.

After the Bioblitz surveys in July, we saw first hand the challenges of collecting robust scientific data, and so we have decided to get in some professional help for a detailed Phase 1 habitat survey across a much larger area of land.

We have hired ecologist Matt Sutton, from Wyndrush Wild in west Wales, to help us and the surveys kicked off in mid-May. These baselines will enable us to better monitor the life on the estate over the course of a year and different seasons, as we then begin to make changes to how we manage the land, we will be better placed to track nature's recovery.

2. Scoping visits to other sites - while this is going on, the YLG hope to go to other sites and projects in order to see how they've gone about the process of restoring their land.

We had originally hoped that we would visit the groundbreaking rewilding project at Knepp Estate in West Sussex towards the end of May, however due to the coronavirus outbreak, we have had to rearrange it for next spring 2021.

In the meantime, the Action for Conservation team has worked their socks off and managed to get us a Zoom conference with some of the conservationists at Knepp to learn more about their approach which a few of the project partners attended in the first week of May. We are also hoping to visit a pioneering nature project at Old Lands, in Monmouthshire, later on in the year.



Images clockwise from top: The dingle on the Penpont Project site; Youth Leadership Group and Elsa the dog; Lily, Hana and Connor; Serena surveys birds.

3. More local representation - whilst there are Welsh young people on the YLG, we decided at the Winter Weekend that more local representation is critical.

We have therefore decided to recruit two new members onto the Youth Leadership Group from the local area and schools near Penpont. Due to the lockdown, this has had to be delayed a little and may not happen until autumn or early next year.

Thank you for reading and supporting our project!



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