

WYE VALLEY RIVER FESTIVAL 2020 RE-IMAGINED: INITIAL EVALUATION

Purpose

To inform members of the achievements and the initial evaluation of the fourth Wye Valley River Festival, re-imagined due to the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Recommendations

That the JAC welcomes the successful accomplishments of the Wye Valley River Festival 2020

Key Issues

- The fourth Wye Valley River Festival had to be completely re-imagined because of the Coronavirus Pandemic, and postponed from an outdoor art & environment festival on 2nd - 17th May to an on-line festival on 21st - 27th September 2020.
- The theme of 'Time' was retained, celebrating nature, culture, landscape and life along the Wye Valley; past, present and future.
- As with previous Wye Valley River Festivals, this fourth Festival was organised by the Wye Valley AONB Unit and the professional Festival Management team with an overall budget of £200,000 working in collaboration with arts professionals, conservationists and local communities.
- The re-imagined Festival evolved to an on-line, web-based series of live and pre-recorded creations and events that proved both challenging and rewarding for many artists and participants.
- The Festival presented over 90 hours of content, involving 188 paid artists and contributors and 121 new products and commissions.
- Funding for the Festival primarily came from the AONB Sustainable Development Fund (SDF), Arts Council England, Visit Wales, Arts Council of Wales, Welsh Government, Forestry Commission, Foresters' Forest Landscape Partnership, Environment Agency, Ross Town Council and in-kind support from the AONB Unit.
- A full evaluation of the Festival is being undertaken to appraise lessons learned as well as a review of the on-line data analytics.
- Once the evaluation is complete future prospects for any further Wye Valley River Festivals will need to be determined.
- The (pre-Covid) Business Plan aimed to establish an autonomous body to adopt the Festival and there is on-going interest in pursuing this.

Reasons

In normal times the Wye Valley River Festival is a biennial outdoor arts and environment festival which takes place over 2 weeks in early May. Due to Covid-19 it was decided to

postponed the Festival and move it predominantly online focused in one week; 21st -27th September. The theme of 'Time' remained pertinent, if not more so, alongside the core objective of inspiring people to engage positively with the landscape of the Wye Valley. The creative partnership between the Wye Valley AONB Unit and the Festival Team, the Artistic Directors; Desperate Men and Festival Director; Phillippa Haynes and production team worked over the summer to re-imagine and develop the revised programme.

Implications

The Wye Valley River Festival website www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk was the main platform for the Festival, hosting a broad range of shows, performances, talks, podcasts, music and workshops for all ages. In total 5416.5 minutes or 90.3hours of content was created, commissioned, produced or coordinated, including by 188 paid artists and contributors, giving 813.5 days of employment, as well as a range of local community volunteers. A diversity of artists and environmental & scientific experts prepared and presented material inspiring us to change the way we think about the Wye Valley and Time in all its many facets. As much of the programme as possible was made accessible with British Sign Language, captions and audio descriptions. The website remains live for a couple more weeks so do explore and enjoy. A few highlights that may be of specific interest include:

- <https://www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk/cuckoo-time/> Cuckoo Time: the episodic Ensemble performance of a Game Show 1000 years in the future with 5 contestants sent back to the Wye Valley in 2020 to fight for their survival to win their return to 3020.
- <https://www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk/nature-recovery-in-the-wye-valley/> Nature recovery and species re-introductions: with The Beavers of Lydbrook film followed by discussion between; Andrew Blake, Wye Valley AONB Manager; Gemma Bode, Head of Conservation at Gwent Wildlife Trust; Andrew Nixon, Senior Conservation Manager at Herefordshire Wildlife Trust; and Kevin Stannard, Deputy Surveyor for the Forest of Dean and Forestry England Director of the West England Forest District.
- <https://www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk/dallas-2/> Distorted Waves: three short films of aerial cinematic explorations of the Wye and Severn tidal region by Simon Presto.
- <https://www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk/tributary-to-the-wye/> Tribut(ary)e to the River Wye: a tribute to the river Wye, Monnow and their tributaries – part poem, part performance, part lecture with music by bilingual poet Rhys Trimble.
- <https://www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk/creative-landscapes-future-generations/> discussion between; Rosie Strang, Co-Director of Articulture; Phil George, Chair of Arts Council of Wales; and Clare Pillman, Chief Executive of Natural Resources Wales about cross sector collaborations between culture and environment in Wales.
- <https://www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk/free-country-a-bardic-tale/> Intrepid-ation: join Ruth Pitter as she recounts her intrepid journey into the Wye Valley from Bristol.
- Plus music <https://www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk/podcasts/music/> by Lydbrook Band, Mike Simmons, Justin Nichols, and a host of short films by locals extolling their particular passion <https://www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk/films-of-the-forest-and-valley/> for the Wye Valley & Forest of Dean.

Generally the consensus and anecdotal feedback is that the Festival was a success, given the challenges everybody faced. It managed to spread an inspiring and entertaining message about the importance and complexity of Time and the Wye Valley landscape. With the majority of the material viewable on a screen there were still innovative and creative opportunities to experience the landscape through art outdoors, not least chasing a couple of wolves around the Wye Valley and Forest of Dean <https://www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk/wolves/> .

The overall budget was about £212,000 which accommodates the complete switch from an almost ready outdoor Festival planned for early May, inevitably pulled following lockdown in late March, to the on-line Festival presented in late September. This necessitated cancelling several performances, although most artists were able to re-imagine their output, not hiring site facilities such as marquees, concessions, toilets & security, and instead tendering and commissioning for digital platform hosting and livestreaming, camera crews for filming in August and a lot of learning new skills (or dusting off rusty ones). The Festival website www.wyevalleyriverfestival.co.uk was central to this although there were issues with it on a number of occasions. SimpliWifi, from Kington, provided the digital platform and brought a vast amount knowledge and expertise. Working Word, from Cardiff, helped Ruth Waycott, AONB Information Officer, co-ordinate the marketing and social media promotion.

The rescheduling of the Festival has had an impact on the work programme of some of the AONB Unit, who had originally anticipated having wrapped up the Festival by about late June or early July. Instead that is still on-going. However, there have also been many other distractions and divergences over the past 6 months. Delivering the Festival at all has been a significant achievement under the circumstances.

A full evaluation of the Wye Valley River Festival 2020 is underway. This will be presented to the JAC at the next meeting in March 2021. The report will also consider the options and opportunities for the Wye Valley River Festival in the future against the original objectives of the (pre-Covid) 3-Festival Business Plan 2019-2024.

Background

Wye Valley River Festival is a Wye Valley AONB Partnership project, led by the Wye Valley AONB Unit, Desperate Men and Phillippa Haynes in a unique and creative collaboration between arts and environment professionals, who develop, produce and deliver the Festival with stakeholders and the communities in and around the Wye Valley AONB.

The Festival is supported and funded by the Wye Valley AONB Partnership, Arts Council England, the Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) from Welsh Government, Arts Council of Wales, Visit Wales, Forestry England, Foresters' Forest Landscape Partnership supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Environment Agency & Ross Town Council with in-kind support from numerous volunteers & local communities.