

## **PARTNER AND NATIONAL LANDSCAPE TEAM PROGRESS REPORTS AND UPDATES**

### ***Purpose***

To advise members of activity of the Wye Valley National Landscape Team and other partners.

FOR INFORMATION

Below are update reports on the following National Landscape Team & partner initiatives: -

- a. Management Plan Review Partnership Seminar: 19th March 2025
- b. Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Steering Group
- c. National Grid Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI) projects
- d. Young Adventurers
- e. Wye Valley National Landscape Volunteers
- f. National Grid low voltage powerline undergrounding
- g. Wye Valley Walk 50th Anniversary events & walks
- h. Wye Adapt to Climate Change project
- i. Priority Species Update
- j. Wyescapes Landscape Recovery
- k. Phil Cutter (1945-2025) RIP
- l. Forest of Dean Biosphere Reserve proposal

### **a. Management Plan Review Partnership Seminar: 19th March 2025**

The Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership Seminar was held at the Paddocks Hotel, Symonds Yat West on 19th March 2025, focusing on the Management Plan Review. 30 people attended with a presentation from Andrew Blake, Wye Valley National Landscape Manager, on AONB Management Plans; and their context as statutory documents, with new guidance in Wales & England, and the strengthened 'Duty' on Relevant Authorities for National Landscapes in England, and other legislation. Shropshire Hills National Landscape Manager, Phil Holden, gave a talk on the Shropshire Hills National Landscape Management Plan - Thriving in balance with nature. In the afternoon there were two Breakout sessions, one on 'The current Management Plan - what works, what doesn't, what's worth keeping', and the second on 'The next Management Plan - Items & issues essential for the review of the new Plan'. This has provided valuable feedback for the progression of the Management Plan Review. It is intended that a public consultation draft Management Plan will be published later in the year.

## **b. Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Steering Group**

Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Steering Group is a Sub-group of the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum (LAF), set up to deliver the Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Strategy and Action Plan. The Steering Group held a well-attended site visit in Whitebrook in late March, to look at the Horse Way, an unsealed Unclassified County Road (UCR) with excessive erosion and known user conflict. The group discussed key issues and considered potential solutions.

A contract was let to carry out an audit of approximately 11 km of unsealed UCRs across two areas around Tintern and Whitebrook. The audit focuses on the condition and management of each unsealed UCR, including a habitat survey, along with proposed options for practical interventions to address identified issues, including surface repairs, improved drainage, and restoration of natural and cultural/historical features. The consultant's report is currently being finalised. Once ready it will be presented to the Steering Group and then published.

Meanwhile, new signage is being prepared for the tracks & trails in the two target areas around Tintern and Whitebrook. It is intended that these will clearly mark the status of each track and trail and thus make it easier for users to understand the respective rights of other users. It will also facilitate any enforcement necessary over illegal use or trespass. The format of the new signs is being checked to ensure they are correct and legally compliant.

## **c. Landscape Enhancement Initiative (LEI) projects**

National Grid have approved and offered funding for three LEI projects in the Walford, Goodrich, Marstow and Whitchurch area of the National Landscape, totalling £792,505.

The 'Magnificent Meadows, Tremendous Trees and Wonderful Wetlands' project began in January 2025. Working with 9 landowners, work so far has focused on securing necessary consents for ponds, scrapes and leaky dams, and working with Herefordshire Meadows preparing for meadow restoration work this summer. In addition, the project will see small woodlands and copses planted, and orchard and in-field trees planted. Project work will be delivered over 3 years, with a further 3 years of maintenance.

The 'Marstow and Pencraig Landscape Connections' project and 'Whitchurch to Howle Hill' Landscape Enhancements project were approved for funding by National Grid in January, and we are awaiting the signing off of budgets before commencing work. Focussing on boundary features, these projects will see 5,500m of hedgerows planted, plus standard trees in new and existing hedges, working with 14 landowners. Work will be delivered over 3 years with a further 3 years maintenance.

#### d. Young Adventurers

The monthly Young Adventurers sessions, led by Community Links Officer, Lucinda James, are going really well, with 10-15 children attending most sessions. Many of the children have SEN and it is great to see them gain confidence and be comfortable with us and the activities we are doing. We also have a fantastic volunteer Woody, who been trained up to help with the sessions. Recent activities include: foraging along the saltmarsh at Beachley; whittling candles; making stools; cooking outdoors; building hedgehog houses; touring the Beaver enclosure and lots more!

##### Hedgehog House Building



##### Whittling at Barse Farm



##### Outdoor Cooking

##### Beaver Enclosure with Forestry England



#### e. **Wye Valley National Landscape Volunteers**

The National Landscape Volunteers have been coming out in force, come rain or shine, to help local landowners, partner organisations and local communities conserve and enhance our beautiful landscape. Led by Community Links Officer, Lucinda James, regular groups of between 20-30 volunteers come together each month, always ready to tackle the task of the day. The secret seems to be tea and cake! There are also several other successful volunteer groups including the Hedgehog First Response Unit, Wet Meadow Cattle Checkers and Cleddon and Beacon Hill Cattle Checkers.

Extensive vegetation clearance at St Mary Church, Tintern is an example of a recent task:



#### f. **National Grid low voltage powerline undergrounding**

The National Landscape Team are working with National Grid in both South Wales and the West Midlands region to develop schemes for the undergrounding of 11kv and low voltage powerlines, for visual enhancement of the landscape.



Two schemes have been approved by the South Wales regional steering group and are being progressed in the Monmouthshire part of the National Landscape. National Grid are currently developing detailed plans and working with landowners to secure the necessary approvals. If all necessary consents and permissions are secured, approximately 1km of overhead line will be installed underground.

In the West Midlands region, three schemes are being developed in the Herefordshire part of the National Landscape. Nick Critchley, the National Landscape Development Officer, is working with National Grid to design and cost up proposals, and working with Catherine Laidlaw, the National Landscape Planning Officer, and the regional steering group to work through queries about landscape benefit and network impact.

#### **g. Wye Valley Walk 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary events and walks**

It is more than 50 years since the idea of creating a long distance walk, following the River Wye, was mooted. In 1975 the first 14 mile section of the Wye Valley Walk opened between St Arvans and Monmouth. Over the years stretches were added to reach Chepstow, Ross-on-Wye, Hereford, Hay-on-Wye and Rhayader. The final section was completed in 2002, taking the path within viewing distance of the source of the Wye on Plynlimon, with the walk finishing at Rhyd-y-benwch in Hafren Forest. Over the last 50 years thousands of people have come from all over the UK and around the world, to complete the Walk and proudly claim their badge and certificate.

In the run up to this golden anniversary year the Wye Valley Walk Partnership has launched a new website [www.wyevalleywalk.org](http://www.wyevalleywalk.org) and taken the decision to publish a new Cicerone Official Guide Book describing the route from source to sea, in response to customer requests to walk in this direction. Ruth Waycott, Wye Valley National Landscape Information Officer walked the entire route and worked with Cicerone on the publication of the new Guide - see: <https://www.cicerone.co.uk/the-wye-valley-walk>

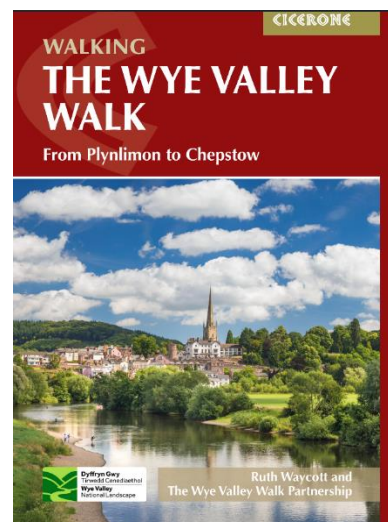
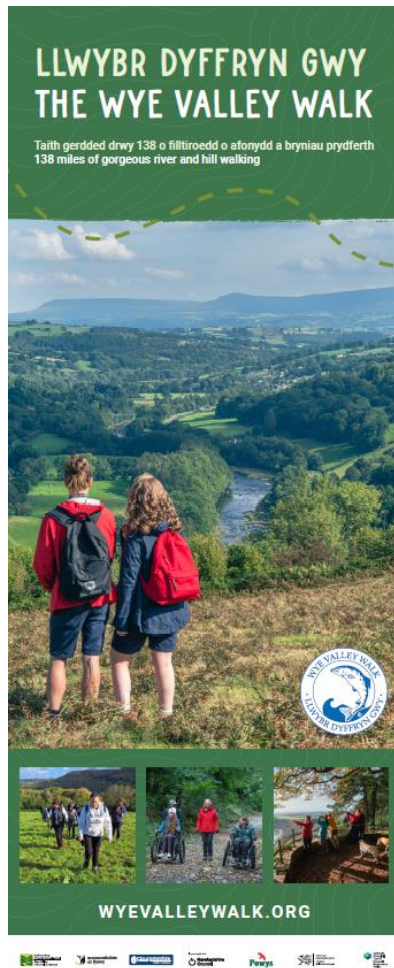
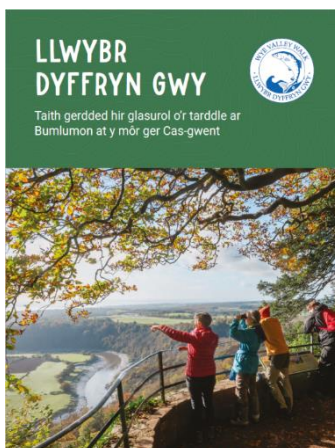
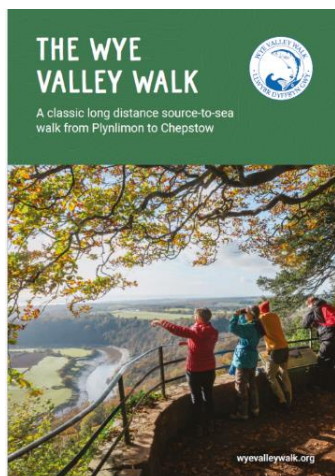
#### **Launch of the Wye Valley Walk 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year**

The new guide and anniversary year was launched on April 2<sup>nd</sup> at a Book Launch and Illustrated Talk by Ruth Waycott, with around 100 people attending. Our partners were Rossiters Books and St Mary's Church, Ross-on-Wye where the launch was held, a fitting location as the Wye Valley Walk passes the church's front door.

New materials to promote the walk have been produced including a leaflet available in English and

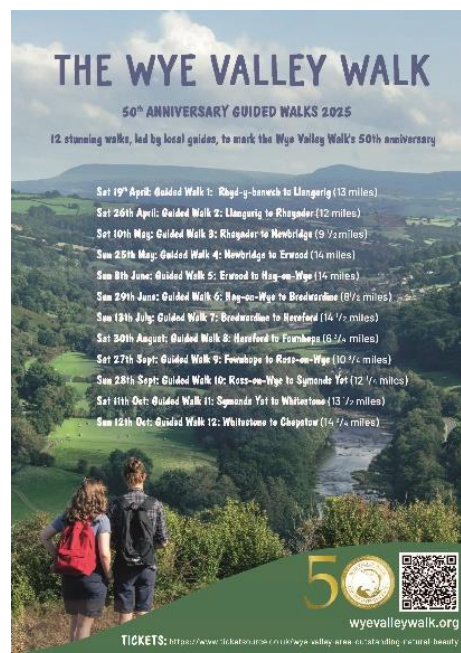


Welsh and a banner stand. A second book launch and talk was held in Chepstow in partnership with Chepstow Bookshop.



## 12 Stunning Walks, led by local guides, to mark the Wye Valley Walk 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2025 we have been running a series of 12 guided walks covering all 138 miles of the Walk from source-to-sea. We've made it nice and easy by arranging transport to the start and taken away the worry of getting lost by having a lovely mix of guides, who share their knowledge and love for the Wye Valley Walk, for nature and wildlife, and for their local area. We are now half way through the anniversary year and half way through the walk. Tickets have sold out quickly with only a handful of tickets remaining for the final weekend of walking in October, as we near the end of the walk at Chepstow.



We have a core group of walkers who have signed up for all 12 walks and will receive their Wye Valley Walk badge and certificate when they reach Chepstow on the final day of walking. We are planning a small celebratory event in Chepstow, possibly including art and poetry featuring the River Wye to mark their achievements and the end of the walk.

Bringing together guides from many different areas and interests has helped to build a community around the Wye Valley Walk and has been very much appreciated by participants. Guides include Nia Lloyd Knott from Wild Trails Wales, Jill Probert from Embark Walking Holidays based in Abergavenny, Holly Williams who is the Wye Adapt to Climate Change Officer with Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, Ruth Waycott from the Wye Valley National Landscape Team (and author of the Cicerone guide to the Wye Valley Walk), Ceri Belli (Rights of Way Officer with Herefordshire Council), Holly Robertson from Celtic Trails walking holidays based in Tintern, Graham Taylor Walk (Leader and Footpath Secretary for Powys Ramblers), Peter Loughran (Pathcare Volunteer from Powys County Council), and Walkers are Welcome Walk Leaders from Ross-on-Wye and Chepstow.

### Other Walking Opportunities

Monlife Countryside have also programmed a series of circular walks featuring the Wye Valley Walk in Monmouthshire and other shorter walks are planned with Ross Walkers are Welcome and the National Landscape Team delivering. We held a very successful Evening Walk with Jim Hepburn from Natural Resources Wales talking about forestry management along the Duchess's Ride section of the Wye Valley Walk and Beacon Hill, where as darkness fell walkers were treated to a wonderful experience by the nightjars who sang as we arrived!

Details of all the walks and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary events can be found below (and will be added to throughout the year):

<https://www.wyevalleywalk.org/celebrating-50-years-of-the-wye-valley-walk>

### Other Activities

We are collaborating with The Outdoors Guide with the Wye Valley Walk being featured and with Waterproofs and Wellies being donated to 10 schools which are located along the Wye Valley Walk to encourage children to walk along their local sections.

#### **CIRCULAR GUIDED WALKS ALONG THE WYE VALLEY WALK IN MONMOUTHSHIRE**

A series of shorter guided walks taking in sections of the Wye Valley Walk in Monmouthshire, with the Monlife Countryside Access Team.



Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> May 2025

**Wye Valley 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Walk - Monmouth to Biblos Bridge**

10.30am (approx. 4.5 hours)

On this 8 mile (13km) walk we will be following the Peregrine Trail from Monmouth north to the Biblos suspension bridge, crossing the River Wye and returning on the Wye Valley Walk back to the start in Monmouth.



Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2025

**Wye Valley 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Walk - Redbrook to Bigsweir Bridge Circular**

10.30am (Approx. 4.5 hours)

On this 7 mile (11.25km) walk we will be following the Offa's Dyke Path south from Redbrook to Bigsweir Bridge and returning via the banks of the Wye and the Wye Valley Walk.



Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2025

**Wye Valley 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Walk - Beacon Hill to Llandogo Circular**

10.30am (Approx 4 hours)

On this 7 mile (11.25km) walk we will be walking from Beacon Hill above Trellech, through woodland and lanes to pick up the Wye Valley Walk at the hamlet of Pen-y-Fan. We follow the Wye Valley Walk south passing above Llandogo before returning along footpaths and country lanes back to the start.



A Wye Valley Walk feature also appeared in Countryside Walking magazine earlier in the year.

New benches along the Wye Valley Walk



Above: new bench at Rhyd-y-Benwch.





Left: new bench at Fownhope, above Caplor

Below: bench at Townsend Farm,



Below: bench at Duchess's Ride



## h. Wye Adapt to Climate Change

### Farm visits

Since the start of the project in October 2023, Holly Williams, Wye Adapt to Climate Change Project Officer has visited over 40 farms and provided advice on Nature Based Solutions to help tackle climate change and biodiversity loss. This includes advice on sustainable farming practices, habitat creation and restoration, and Natural Flood Management. The advice has been well received and so far, £46,010.56 of grants have been awarded to farmers and landholders to carry out projects (from Welsh Government's SLSP and DEFRA Capital budgets).

These projects have included the creation of ponds and scrapes, meadow restoration, leaky dams, herbal ley seeding, fencing to allow rotational grazing and protect meadows, hedge laying, and planting of a shelterbelt. Additionally, two of the farms supported through the project were referred to Herefordshire Meadows for specialist advice on meadow restoration. Both have since secured Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) grants, which will enable the restoration of 25.39 hectares of species-rich grassland this autumn.

### Community work

Through the Wye Adapt project, efforts to form a Climate Action Network are in motion. This Network is open to any individual, organisation, or group interested in climate change, with the aim of sharing ideas and promoting climate action. There have been three meetings since November last year, with a good level of interest (over 30 people at the first meeting). The next goal is to hold a 'Climate Day of Action' in September this year, with Network members taking part and organising their own events to raise awareness of climate change and hopefully engage with local communities. Planning for the Climate Day of Action is currently taking place.

### **i. Priority Species Update**

#### Hedgehogs

A variety of activities have been delivered by Molly Boyce, National Landscape Nature Recovery Officer, to support hedgehog conservation. A particular highlight has been the Hedgehog Education Project at Walford, Trellech, and Whitchurch Primary Schools. Each class took part in a one-hour indoor lesson on hedgehog ecology and care, followed by an outdoor nature session. Nine pupils per school received tracking tunnels and wildlife cameras to monitor hedgehog presence at home for a week, with a tenth set used on school grounds. Hedgehog sightings have been captured on cameras and footprints through tunnels. The project concluded with a celebration assembly featuring young conservationist Dylan Allman and a showcase of footage gathered by the children. Around 300 pupils were engaged through assemblies and outreach, with 90 participating in the full project. Each school was also provided with a hedgehog care package to support ongoing learning and action. Additional community engagement included hedgehog activity events in Ross-on-Wye, a hedgehog house-building workshop, and the organisation of a self-guided hedgehog-themed trail at St Mary's Church.

#### Bumblebee Assemblage

To support bumblebee conservation, a bumblebee training workshop was held, resulting in the creation of a new 'BuzzWatch' volunteer group who will support future monitoring efforts. During the training workshop a Red-shanked Carder bee was recorded, one of the National Landscape Priority species and a new record for the area. Additionally, we have begun eDNA surveying across our LEI (Landscape Enhancement Initiative) meadow restoration sites to detect the presence of key pollinator species, prior to habitat restoration. This baseline data will help

us assess the effectiveness of our restoration work in enhancing habitat for these priority pollinators.

### Noble Chafer

Conservation work for the noble chafer beetle has involved attending several orchard pruning and restoration events to help maintain the veteran and decaying wood habitat this species relies on. An educational talk was delivered at one of our known noble chafer orchard sites to raise awareness and encourage community involvement. Additionally, all existing noble chafer survey boxes were re-checked to ensure they remain securely in place and in good condition, maintaining survey readiness for future monitoring seasons.

### j. **Wyescapes Landscape Recovery**

The Wyescapes project continues to develop ready for submission of plans to DEFRA in January 2026. The project plans and proposals will then be reviewed by DEFRA in a competitive assessment. Meanwhile as the summer progresses the partner organisations, Herefordshire Meadows, Herefordshire Wildlife Trust and the Wye & Usk Foundation, led by Herefordshire Rural Hub, are busy continuing the work supporting landowners along the River Wye and Lugg. The project brings together 49 farms and landholdings covering a total of 5,125ha of project land and 80km of riverbank.

Herefordshire Meadows is working to support those landowners who have a desire to create or restore floodplain meadows as part of the 20 year implementation phase of the project. So far they have engaged with 35 landholdings and collectively there is an ambition to create almost 900ha of species rich floodplain meadow. The Floodplain Meadows Partnership, the national experts on this habitat, are also involved providing their additional skills and expertise at 8 of the landholdings.

### k. **Phil Cutter (1945-2025) RIP**

It was with sadness that we heard of Phillip Cutter's passing. Phil was a Herefords hire Councillor and Ross Town Council member and sat on the JAC for many years. He chaired the Overlooking the Wye Landscape Partnership from 2008-2012, overseeing the distribution of over £3million on heritage conservation in the Wye Valley. He was then JAC Chair from 2013-2019. He will always be remembered for his humour and efficiency as a chairman.

We send our condolences to Phil's family and friends.

Andrew Blake represented the JAC at Phil's funeral on Thursday 22nd May at St Mary's Church, Ross-on-Wye.

### l. **Forest of Dean Biosphere Reserve proposal** (see attached documents)