



The Wrekin Forest
Draft Outline Landscape Conservation Management Plan



Formal project consultation document July 2007

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The Wrekin Forest – Project Consultation

The Wrekin Forest Draft Landscape Conservation Management Plan

Dear

I am very pleased to be able to send you your copy of the first draft of the Wrekin Forest Landscape Conservation management plan. As you may know the Wrekin Forest project started last July 2006. The project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Wrekin Forest project appointed a dedicated part-time officer, Pete Lambert who is employed by Shropshire Wildlife Trust. The Wrekin Forest project sets out to do two things, firstly through local consultation draw up a landscape conservation management plan for the Wrekin Forest and secondly promote positive involvement and understanding of the Wrekin Forest.

The first project year was spent in broad based informal consultation, pilot projects and project research. We studied the current issues facing the Wrekin Forest and in numerous conversations attempted to pick up clues to the future needs of the Forest area. We needed to develop an understanding of the threats that could compromise the landscape values that make the Wrekin Forest so special. We have also attempted to identify ways in which the local community of residents and landowners could be supported in the face of a range of pressures.

At the close of the informal consultation period we have now completed the first draft outline plan and would like to invite you to contribute to the formal process of producing the final Wrekin Forest Landscape Conservation management plan. We need and welcome your comments, opinions and thoughts on the draft plan. Please be assured your thoughts will have an influence on the final plan and be held in strictest confidence.

The Wrekin Forest Draft landscape Conservation Management outline plan is divided into two parts. Firstly there are a series of discussion notes relating to different aspects of the Wrekin Forest landscape and secondly a set of suggested practical initiatives that seek to address specific conservation needs for the area. All of the suggested initiatives are a result of the informal consultation process and a set of small scale pilot projects. The pilot projects such as the Wrekin Forest Volunteers were set up to gather actual information as to the effectiveness of ideas gathered during previous public consultations. The list of initiatives is not exhaustive and we would welcome any further suggestions to contribute to the final shape of the conservation plan.

Please read the draft plan carefully and as this is the formal part of the consultation could you please send written comments either by e-mail or post to the addresses below:

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The Wrekin Forest – Project Consultation

Draft Landscape Conservation Management Plan

Summary

The Wrekin Forest is dominated by the whale-back ridge of the Wrekin and Ercall Hills. The mosaic of woodland, fields, hedges and ponds rises sharply to a heath-covered summit flanked by conifers. Increasingly surrounded by

urban settlements, this area of ancient Mediaeval hunting forest provides an important link from the green network of Telford to the more rural countryside.

From some of the oldest rocks in England, through the Roman Invasion to the birth of the Industrial Revolution, this landscape has been at the forefront of discovery and invention, its cultural significance embedded in the psyche of the West Midlands.

Our vision for the Wrekin Forest is to have a healthy landscape that is cherished by the community that live and work here, cared for by those who visit it and protected by those who manage it.

With any complex landscape there are issues between those with different calls on the environment. Part of this management plan is to demonstrate how these different needs can be resolved with benefit to all parties through coherent and genuine partnership working throughout the community of the Wrekin Forest.

Together we can identify the key issues that affect the area and community and develop practical initiatives that will tackle these in an effective and sensitive manner.

With a series of initiatives that cover habitat restoration and management, volunteer training and involvement, visitor facilities and access improvements this management plan will deliver real practical solutions to improve the landscape and the lives of the Wrekin Forest community.



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The Vision

- The aim of the landscape conservation management plan is to secure the natural, cultural and economic future of the Wrekin Forest.
- The plan will address wider landscape concerns through a series of practical initiatives.

- The plan will be in accord with regional and national landscape policy for instance the Rural White paper 2000 'Our countryside: the future – a fair deal for rural England' states as it's aims – stronger protection for our most valued landscapes, wildlife and habitats, more access and a better rights of way network and also the continued maintenance of a living working countryside for the benefit of us all, wherever we live.
- The plan will be underpinned by the concept of sustainability that is to live now 'in ways which do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.
- The plan seeks to offer measurable benefits for the conservation of the natural environment, local people and the Wrekin Forest visitor

Draft plan themes

The plan for the Wrekin Forest is to be based on practical initiatives and local support to conserve, protect and enhance the unique natural character of countryside which includes the Wrekin Hill, Little Wenlock Woodlands, the open country to the west and south of the urban centres of Wellington and Telford, north of the River Severn and south-east to meet the Ironbridge Gorge.

Conservation has been defined as the careful management of change. It is about revealing and sharing the significance of places and ensuring that their special qualities are protected, enhanced, understood and enjoyed by present and future generations. As we have explored and begun to understand the unique qualities of the Wrekin Forest, a number of themes began to emerge. Simply put, we need to work together, treat the whole area as one, and look after the people who work, live and play in the Wrekin Forest.

1. Practical Partnerships

The final landscape conservation management plan will be produced in collaboration with the local community via joint pilot projects. To help build genuine consensus we have been meeting formally and informally across a wide a section of people as possible, who live, work and play in the Wrekin Forest. The Wrekin Forest project to date has been working to identify landscape conservation concerns that have a wider community dimension, that are part of the connecting fabric of the high value placed by people on the Wrekin Forest landscape. There are numerous opportunities for individuals, groups and organisations to work together in many ways for the greater good of the landscape we cherish. The formation of practical

partnerships to achieve wider conservation benefit in line with the broader aims of the Plan is key to the success of all of the measures or projects highlighted by the consultation process.

2.Landscape Ecology and Character

For many years nature conservation was limited to species and specific sites. It is clear that a whole landscape approach, a 'Big Area' ecosystem view, is now critical to the future success of any initiative to conserve the land we love. Big Area projects share an understanding that the fragmentation of habitats risks isolation and damage, vulnerability to environmental extremes, such as droughts or severe weather and extinctions due to catastrophic events such as fires.

Instead there is a need to engage in active conservation to protect our wild places by measures such as

- Strengthening existing areas of high quality habitat
- Creating additional habitat
- Establishing corridors to link habitat islands
- Developing stepping stones
- Providing buffers to give protection against external influences

The Wrekin Forest is an area of countryside constrained on two sides by urban development, on the third by the River Severn and bounded on the west by high quality agricultural land. Many opportunities exist to strengthen the natural features that together create the distinctive character of the area and support its ecological value.

It is important to assess how much of the landscape remains intact and to find out the condition of landscape features. Consideration of the visual appeal and scenic quality, though difficult to measure, is easy to see and value. Research into the presence of rare features and elements is important to their future conservation. We could try to assess the elements that make the landscape unique and record the presence of conservation and cultural interests. Part of a landscape's power is the presence of wilderness character, it is vital to preserve this fragile sense. A landscape is defined by its associations with people and events in history. And finally a landscape's store of tranquillity, low levels of built development, traffic, noise and artificial lighting all contribute to landscape quality.

3.People

Any development or measure has to take into account the need to emphasise and reinforce the sense of place created by the Wrekin Forest. Over 2500 people are resident within the Wrekin Forest project area. Local businesses include farms, pubs and a hotel, waste management services, power generation and small home-based enterprises. The local estates also support employment, notably at the Raby Sawmill. The Wrekin Forest provides outdoor recreational opportunities for many thousands of local people. One of the many functions of a beautiful landscape is to work as an antidote to modern living, providing quiet, a slower pace, modest adventure and fresh air. Over 160,000 people live within 5 miles of the Wrekin Forest, a significant number will visit the Wrekin Forest each year [80,000 BTW Estimate]. Visitor impacts can have negative or positive effects on the natural environment. The people dimension has to be taken into consideration in all aspects of the landscape conservation management plan.



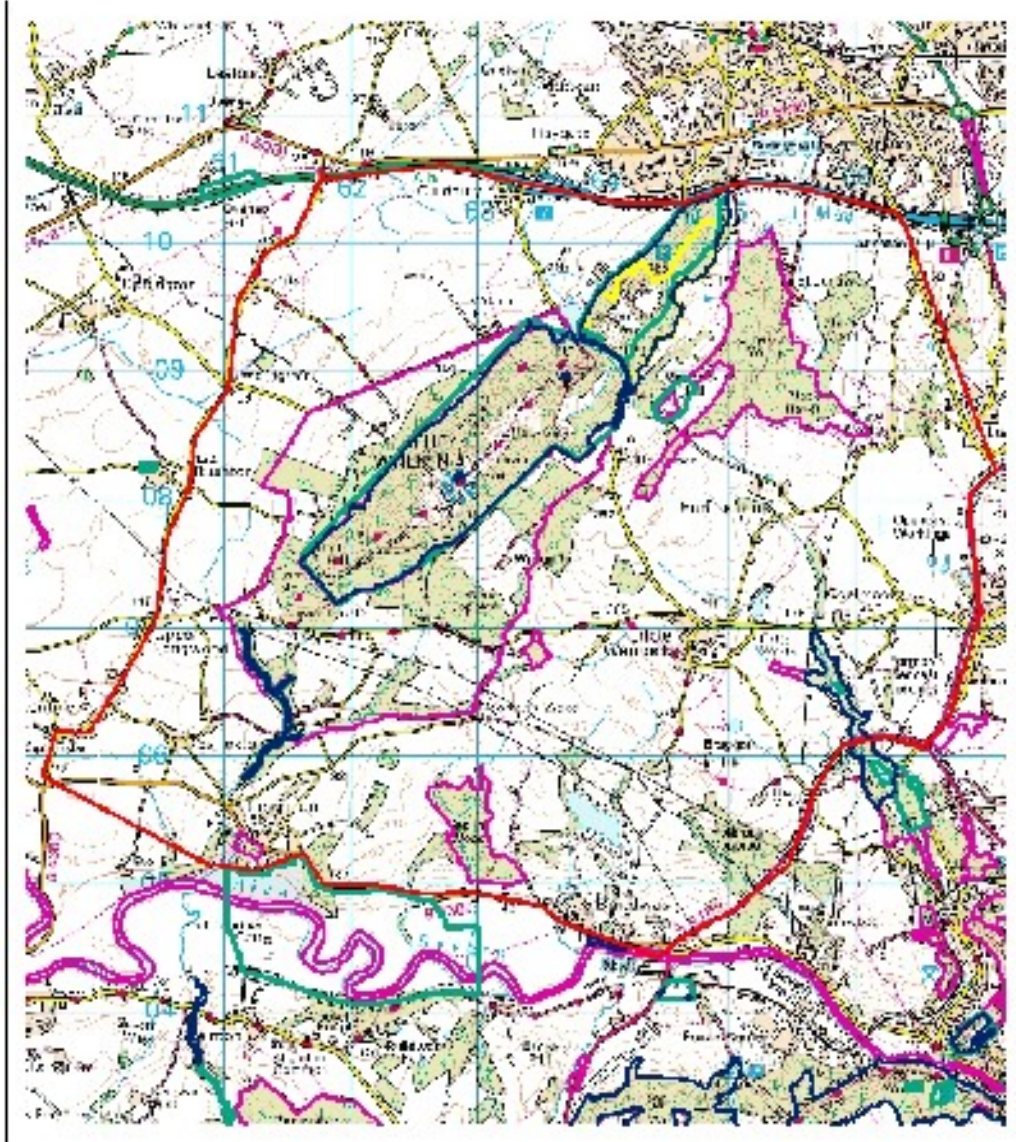
The Wrekin Forest

The Wrekin Hill [407m] is an isolated whaleback of very old volcanic rock. Though never actually a volcano, it rears up powerfully and steeply nevertheless. It has a distinctive ridge-like profile and is part of a South-West to North-east trending series of hills. It is the best known of the Shropshire Hills and as such is a cultural icon for Shropshire. A well known saying refers to going 'all round the Wrekin' to imply a long indirect journey and a local toast offers greetings 'here's to all friends round The Wrekin'. It has a number of creation myths involving giants. Long standing public interest has meant it has, and is, the focus for major celebrations, cultural and sports events. The recent millennium was marked by a lit beacon on the hill and there are annual Wrekin Fell races and a barrel race. In the past the Wrekin Wakes involved a battle between local farm labourers and colliers from the pits, this particular event was stopped by the local clergy because of its rowdiness!

In medieval times The Wrekin Hill stood at the centre of a large area of Royal Forest Law, extending to Albrighton, near Shrewsbury, down towards Bridgnorth and out just beyond Shifnal to the east and north up near Newport. By the 1300s the Royal Forests of Shropshire had been broken up into smaller estates, which remained the pattern of ownership right up to the modern era. The hinterland of the Hill includes numerous pastures and arable fields broken to the south and east by a series of deep incised and wooded dingles, most of which take their respective watercourses to the River Severn. The Wrekin Hill, the Ercall Hill and the eastern Little Wenlock plateau are covered in mixed woodland and distinct open areas which are either small assarts of pasture, quarrying traces and restored open cast areas. The tops of the hills carry small areas of lowland heath, the Wrekin Hill summit being very open and bracken dominated. As well as the bare rock faces left behind by quarrying, natural outcrops occur on the Wrekin itself, these all have evocative names and attached legends. The Needle's Eye, for instance, is a cleft in one of the outcrops, partially blocked by a boulder dislodged by the Bishops Castle earthquake. To pass through the Needle's Eye is part of the initiation to become a true Salopian.

The Wrekin Forest Project area includes part of the Shropshire Hills AONB, though the activities of the AONB team extends beyond the designation boundary as it seeks to address the conservation needs of special individual features and elements in the wider context of a whole landscape. The Wrekin Forest overlaps the boundaries of Shropshire County Council, Telford and Wrekin Council and Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council and Wellington Town Council. The Parish Councils of Little Wenlock, Buildwas, Wroxeter and Uppington, and Leighton and Eaton Constantine also fall wholly or partially within the project boundaries of the Wrekin Forest project. The project lies within the parliamentary constituency of The Wrekin.

The Wrekin Forest Project



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Legend

- area
- site
- wildlife site 2000
- nature reserve

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Scale: 1:40 530

The protected landscape

In the last 50 years the natural beauty and wildlife value of the Wrekin Forest has been officially recognised. A number of statutory protective designations have been used in a continuing effort to conserve either the landscape as a whole, or smaller parts of the mosaic of habitats and features found throughout the Wrekin Forest area. The mix of statutory and voluntary designations covers nearly half of the project area and is a clear measure of how important the Wrekin Forest landscape is to biodiversity and landscape conservation.

The Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty [AONB] was designated in 1958 under the National Parks and Countryside Act 1949 and covers an area of 804 km². That is mostly in the southern part of Shropshire, though a northerly projecting outlier takes in the Wrekin Hill, The Ercall and neighbouring lands and woods. The Shropshire Hills AONB was designated to conserve and enhance natural beauty, Natural Beauty 'is not just about the look of the landscape, but includes landform and geology, plants and animals, landscape features and the rich history of human settlement over the centuries [2]. To meet its aims the AONB team must take into account the needs of agriculture, forestry and other rural industries and promote sustainable forms of social and economic development that contribute to the main aims of the designation.

Within the Wrekin Forest are a number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest [SSSI]. These sites are designated under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and offer statutory protection for land notable for its geology and biodiversity. The SSSI in the Wrekin Forest include the Wrekin Hill and Ercall, Lydebrook Dingle and Chermes Dingle. The Wrekin and Ercall SSSI was notified in 1986 and extends over an area of 283.3 hectares. The designation recognises the geological importance of the area and the natural interest. The SSSI network is administered through Natural England working with landowners to establish sympathetic management regimes.

The Ercall is a Local Nature Reserve [LNR]. Local Nature Reserves are established to recognise the combined conservation and educational value of a natural site. The LNR agreement includes the attachment of bye-laws to help protect the site. Telford and Wrekin Council own the section nearest Wellington and Shropshire Wildlife Trust the rest of the Ercall, Lawrence Hill and the Forest Glen.

Geological sites, valued for their educational role or as important examples of rock type or geological process, are designated as Regionally Important Geological Sites [RIGS]. Shropshire Geological Society identified and designated the Wrekin Hill RIGS: the Ercall Quarry, Forest Glen, Maddocks Hill and Lydebrook Dingle.

Notable archaeological sites are protected by listing in the Ancient Scheduled Monuments [ASM] register, which is administered by English Heritage. The Wrekin Hill Fort, Little Worth Bell pits and land near New Works are all designated as Ancient Scheduled Monuments. These sites should all have management plans and are shown on local authority development plans.

Other sites within the Wrekin Forest have attracted Wildlife Site status due to the quality of their flora and fauna. Wildlife Sites are a non-statutory designation given by county Wildlife Trusts to assist the wider conservation of habitats and landscape. Informal management arrangements are sought with the owners to support sympathetic care of the sites concerned. The Wrekin Forest includes a number of Wildlife Sites including areas outside the statutory designations.

Geology

The geology of the Wrekin Forest is very complex and has resulted in the dramatic landforms we see today. The natural rock exposures and extensive quarrying activity have helped geologists understand the intricate relationships between rock types and ages. The Wrekin

ridge provides the best and most varied exposures of Uriconian [pre-cambrian] rocks in England. As mentioned earlier there are three Regionally Important Geological Sites [RIGS] in the Wrekin Forest and the SSSI sites all also contain geological features of note.

The education potential of the rock exposures is great. Conservation rock faces are maintained at a number of sites to meet the learning needs of the geologists of tomorrow. University groups, schools and colleges are regular visitors. Shropshire Wildlife Trust offers regular guided walks for the general public. The management of the geological resource requires a unique balance between the arresting of natural succession, public safety and access for learning.

In 2004 the Shropshire Geological Society published *The Wrekin Hills: The Ercall Quarries, Forest Glen, Maddocks Hill – Geodiversity Management Plan 2004 -2009*. The plan draws attention to the geo-conservation needs of the rock resource in the Wrekin Forest. It gives useful information and makes helpful suggestions for future action. For the purposes of the Wrekin Forest LCMP, it will be the basis for all geo-conservation projects regarding the local geological interest.

The geology of the region explains the industrial history of the Telford area. Much of the Wrekin Forest has a long and extensive history of mining and mineral exploitation. The quarries, mounds and associated features are distinctive elements in the resulting landscape seen today. The vegetation patterns are in many cases directly influenced by its history of mineral exploitation. The bare, scree soils and open nature of the old quarry workings are ideal sites for the colonisation of rare and interesting plants. The low fertility of the old mineral workings supports a flora and fauna not found elsewhere in our countryside. Endangered butterflies such as the dingy skipper are dependent on these disused industrial sites.

To maintain the geological and biological interest requires intervention, to make the sites safe, maintain a balance between natural succession and holding back vegetation to keep the spaces open and in favourable condition. The geological education resource is highly valuable, the Wrekin Forest having good exposures of many types of rock and rock formations. It is the aim of the Wrekin Forest landscape conservation plan to do what we can to support the work of the Shropshire Geological Society and others to care for and promote public understanding of the unique natural resource on our doorsteps.

Biodiversity in the Wrekin Forest

The Wrekin Forest includes a mix of ecological assets such as ancient woodlands, wooded dingles, the rough new grasslands of the quarry floors and a network of ponds and flushes. The walker can enjoy delightful carpets of spring flowers such as the bluebell and wood anemone. Birds of note include the buzzard, along with its high-speed rival, the peregrine falcon. Open water attracts lapwing, plover and other waterfowl. The open rough grasslands support a range of small mammals like field voles which in turn are the prey of barn owls. The damp woods support interesting collections of mosses and liverworts alongside an array of insects which have adapted to living on decaying wood. The flora reflects the disturbed nature

of the area including as it does many pioneer plants which are excluded from more established swards and stands.

Non-native invasive plants are threatening our native flora, for instance Japanese Knotweed is found in clumps across the Wrekin Forest. Japanese knotweed spreads very quickly and is very difficult to control, excluding native plants and damaging the ecological value of landscape and how we are going to achieve our aims.

The job of co-ordinating the conservation of the natural environment has to involve a process of prioritisation, of understanding what is rare, common or noteworthy and how much it needs protection.

In 2002 the Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan was published by Shropshire County Council and Shropshire Wildlife Trust. It lists key habitats and species of national and international importance found within the county. The Plan established a set of action plans for each habitat. The Wrekin Forest supports a number of these valued elements of our natural heritage. The key habitats are semi-natural broad leaved woodland, field margins, veteran trees, semi-improved rough grassland, hedgerows, rivers, streams and ponds and lowland heathland. Individual species action plans have also been written including the lapwing, great crested newt and white-clawed crayfish.

The Borough of Telford and Wrekin, Shropshire Wildlife Trust and groups such as Butterfly Conservation all carry out ecological surveys on sites throughout the Wrekin Forest. The Wrekin Forest project has organised, in partnership with Heartwoods and the Greenwood Centre, ecological survey training for volunteers and is now assisting in the collection of wildlife data from sites across the area. Recent surveys have included visits to the Devils Dingle, Buildwas, Simpsons Pool and Moreton coppice, Horsehay and the Wrekin Golf Course meadow.

In 1977/9 a landscape scale phase 1 habitat survey was carried out across the whole county. In 2005 volunteers from Little Wenlock completed an updated Phase 1 survey of the parish and over the next 12 months the rest of the project area will also be surveyed.

Overleaf we briefly describe each of the priority habitats according to the Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan objectives:

1. The Woodlands

The woodlands of the Wrekin Forest are divided very roughly into two groups: the Dingle woods of the south and east and the Wrekin and Little Wenlock block. Within these groups many different types of woodland exist, for instance the sessile oak woodlands found on the thin soils of the Ercall, stands of alder in wet hollows and the oak with hazel stands found on the more fertile soils.

Structure varies from plantation groups of conifers and broadleaves, high forest, coppice and secondary woodland types. The woods support a wide range of wildlife, including large numbers of fallow deer, all three species of British woodpecker and woodland specialists such as the pied flycatcher. Recent tree safety works have led to biodiversity bonuses as the important deadwood resource has been topped up.

Past management in the Wrekin Forest has been characterised by coppicing for fuel, either for charcoal or as cord for firewood. Timber was cut locally and there is still a thriving local sawmill, owned and operated by the Raby Estate at Uppington. The woodlands within the Wrekin Forest today are owned by no more than about a dozen organisations, trusts, estates and individuals. The majority of the woods are owned by just six of that group. Woodland management aims vary, from timber production, shooting, public access, biodiversity and coppice crafts.

For a number of reasons some of the woodlands are unmanaged. This is why, in some cases, the woods that have grown up on the old coal and limestone workings pose considerable health and safety challenges. Other woodland areas are being considered for management in the future, possibly inspired by the working woodland demonstration project run by the Heartwoods Project and the Orleton Estate in their woods on the northern end of the Wrekin Hill. The Leighton Estate woodlands are managed on a regular basis by the owner and with the professional assistance of a local cutter, other woodlands like Saplins are managed by contracting companies or in the case of Harris's Coppice, a syndicate of passionate woodland workers.

The Wrekin Forest project has so far identified four development areas to be considered in relation to the woodland component of the landscape these are:

- The formation of a focused, mutually beneficial woodland group for the Forest area
- The setting up of a Deer Management Group to co-ordinate deer control across the Wrekin Forest
- New woodland opportunity mapping to identify areas for new tree planting or natural succession to woodland
- Woodland biodiversity monitoring project to rigorously assess the true value of the Wrekin Forest Woodland

2. Field Margins

Field margins refer to the land between the field boundary feature and crop on arable fields or grasslands. Field margins also include the crop headland, which extends for a limited distance into the crop and supports key farmland species. Also included are farm tracks, unsown cultivated strips with naturally regenerated flora and sterile strips of ground maintained by cultivation or herbicide application.

Field margins have a crucial role to play in supporting invertebrate populations, ground nesting and foraging birds, small mammals, birds of prey and an array of plants. Many field margins have considerable potential for enhancement. Agri-environment schemes which provide grants for wildlife-friendly farming all support the leaving of wide bands of uncultivated land at the field margins. Of the arable farms in Countryside Stewardship within the Wrekin Forest, there are some excellent examples of this simple but effective practice.

The priorities for field margins are to prevent loss, increase their extent, enhance their wildlife value, support research and promote good practice.

3. Veteran Trees

Veteran Trees are large old trees found in wood pasture, hedgerows, parkland and in ancient woodlands. Veteran trees cannot be defined by age or stature alone as each tree species can show considerable variation. Most trees over 3 metres in girth are of interest, but some species such as hawthorn are unlikely to reach this size even if very old. Any tree that is very large or just looks old can be considered a veteran.

Veteran trees are significant elements in the Shropshire landscape. They have great historical and cultural value and are particularly valuable ecologically when found in association with other habitats such as unimproved grassland and wetland areas. They support a wide range

of species, including invertebrates, fungi, bats and birds that depend on them for all or part of their lifecycles.

It is extremely important to prevent further loss of veteran trees, care for existing ancient trees, carry out surveys, research and monitoring and promote understanding of their irreplaceable value .

4.Semi - improved grassland

Species rich grasslands are one of the most threatened and rapidly disappearing habitats in Shropshire. Grasslands are most valuable when they have not been improved by re-seeding, ploughing or the application of fertilisers or herbicides. They encompass traditionally managed hay meadows, old pastures and other undisturbed areas of grasslands such as churchyards, and roadside verges.

Species rich grasslands are found on both neutral and calcareous soils. Unimproved neutral grassland typically contains a range of grasses such as crested dog's tail, sweet vernal grass and meadow foxtail, often with a colourful array of wildflowers such as yellow rattle, oxeye daisy and black knapweed. Calcareous grassland occurs over limestone or other base rich rocks and the soils are typically thin and nutrient poor. Many plants have adapted to these conditions and calcareous grasslands can be extremely rich in species. The sward is composed of a wide range of grasses, including quaking grass, various sedges, many types of orchids, fairy flax , yellowwort and rock- rose.

Both types of grassland can be found in the Wrekin Forest and are threatened by inappropriate management, by under grazing or over grazing, enrichment by fertiliser or loss through damage or development. The priorities for grassland are to prevent further loss, support links between important sites, reinstate appropriate management , improve current knowledge on the distribution of sites and promote the importance of species rich grassland .

5.Hedges

Hedges are living landscape connections. These linear features can be rich in species, thick and sturdy, others can be 'leggy' with gaps , low and species poor . An integral part of the biodiversity value of hedgerows is the vegetation of adjacent banks, ditches, verges and field margins. In less intensively farmed areas, road verges, banks and hedges provide an important refuge for species associated with grassland and open woodland. Many birds rely on hedgerows and associated vegetation for nesting and feeding. Bat's travel alongside hedges and several species roost in large hedgerow trees. Mammals such as dormice use mature hedges as path ways for migration and dispersal, and the tree. Shrubs and flowering plants of hedgerows attract a great variety of invertebrates.

The hedgerows of the Wrekin Forest record mans historical division of the land, they mark ancient boundaries, periods of Enclosure and represent new wildlife opportunities. The comprehensive mapping of the hedgerows of the Wrekin Forest is a mammoth task, but is worth searching out the richest lines, supporting new planting and promoting good hedgerow management. The new agri-environment schemes support hedgerow plans and offer financial aid for hedge laying. The priorities for hedgerows include preventing any further loss, new planting, supporting good management, surveying, monitoring and education .

6.Streams, ponds and wetlands

The waterways, ponds and damp places of the Wrekin Forest are of immense importance in supporting the diversity and creating the forms that characterise the landscape. Open water features support a large diversity of both emergent and floating or submerged plants, including pondweeds and milfoils .Waterfowl such as coot, moorhen and less common species like great crested grebe seek the breeding grounds associated with open water. UK

priority species like the white clawed crayfish, dragonflies and great crested newts are all dependant on high quality ponds and water bodies.

The largest water feature locally, the River Severn meanders can be viewed from the lay-by near Leighton. The deep wooded stream valleys known locally as Dingles are a very distinctive feature of the landscape. Water bodies have been created by the blocking of dingle streams as the result of industrial activity, some are defunct reservoirs [for Wellington for example] and others have formed as landfill caps have subsided. The water quality is critical as a number of the western flowing waterways provide the drinking water supply for the local communities and in the south the rare Telford crane fly [Lipsothrix nigristigmata] breeds in the woody debris found in the Lydebrook Dingle. Historically the supply of water has been very important, at the Kynnersley Arms in Leighton the remains of a corn mill can be viewed, the waterwheel was driven by a stream flowing south from the Wrekin Hill. A second mill, now a private house can be seen further up the same brook. Today new ponds are being created at the Devils Dingle Ash disposal site whilst it is being restored as a nature reserve by E-on the owners.

The Shropshire Biodiversity action plan aims to protect existing water features, seek opportunities to restore or create new water bodies, support appropriate management, promote public understanding and conduct survey work and condition monitoring.

7.Heathland

Lowland heathland is characterised by dwarf shrubs such as heather, cross leaved heath and bilberry, in association with gorse, broom and a number of grasses. It is typically found as part of a mosaic of habitats including scrub, woodland, grassland, bog, open water and bare ground. Lowland heathland tends to be associated with nutrient-poor acidic soils and is generally found below 250 metres in altitude. This habitat is particularly important for a range of birds, reptiles particularly the common lizard and invertebrates, many not found on upland heaths.

Shropshire's lowland heaths are generally small isolated fragments dispersed across the county. The biodiversity action plan seeks to prevent any further loss of heathland, look for opportunities to create and extend existing heathland, encourage sympathetic management and promote understanding of the unique value of heathland for the wildlife of Shropshire.

The Farmed Landscape

Below the flanks of the Wrekin and Ercall ridge lies a network of arable and pastoral fields. Many of the farm holdings draw on the support of government agri-environment schemes. Agri-environment schemes seek to reward management practices which maintain biodiversity, historic features and environmental quality. In the summer of 2006 the last harvest was completed to stock the hoppers at the Allscott sugar factory. Within the space of a few weeks, farm plans were re-written to include fields of oilseed rape, and the view from the Hill changed colour. The farming landscape is prone to rapid change much like anywhere else, it has to be tightly managed to maintain viability and be supported in its role of countryside steward.

Much of the agricultural land around the Wrekin Forest is of marginal quality, being restored grassland following extensive open cast operations. The ground can be only lightly ploughed and is more usually maintained as pasture, the better soils turned over to arable crops where possible. New agri-environment schemes include stronger support for sympathetic management practices, including the writing of hedgerow plans, soil conservation and environmental protection. The future patterns of our working countryside will be shaped by the

effectiveness of the support offered to the farming community to maintain their guardianship and the farming community's ability to successfully diversify and remain competitive.

It is important to understand how effective current agri-environment schemes are in delivering landscape and conservation value. Recent schemes such as the Entry Level Scheme [ELS] and Higher Entry level Scheme [HLS] were preceded by the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, each of which attempts to support sustainable agricultural productivity balanced against environmental benefits. The ELS and in particular the HLS can be utilised to support enhancement and improvements in the condition in the seven Biodiversity Action plan habitats identified earlier.

During the pilot period of the Wrekin Forest project we have begun developing a potential initiative at The Leasowes Farm, Little Wenlock in partnership with the owner, Julia Owen. In a second pilot project, the Natural England Grazing project officer helped a local landowner and a grazer to negotiate a new grazing contract on land un-grazed for a number of years. The Wrekin Forest volunteers offered practical support to help restore fences and erect gates.

The Famed landscape mixture of arable fields, pasture, hedgerows and solitary trees is a critical part of the character of the Wrekin Forest. It is very important that the rural economy remains buoyant, so it has the surplus capacity to support the care and maintenance of the countryside we all cherish.

Industrial landscape heritage

A long history of mineral exploitation has left behind a legacy of disturbed ground, spoil tips, underground workings, track ways and exposed quarry faces. Little Wenlock Coalfields, Little Worth bell pit mounds, Short Woods and Birch Coppice are significant landscape features and contribute greatly to the distinctiveness of the Wrekin Forest. There is a long history of stone quarrying; The Ercall, Maddocks Hill, Buckatree quarries, Simpsons Pool and Moreton Coppice being just a few of the sites carrying the evidence of past endeavour.

The return of wilderness to these areas has brought much beauty and biodiversity interest. The industrial heritage of the Forest is complex, extending back into the late-medieval period, though it is easy to walk through the woods without realising the significance of the humps and bumps all around. The local Industrial Heritage Research group have been investigating and recording the history of the area. It is important not only to record the processes and history of the industrial heritage but also to conserve and interpret the visible evidence. The extensive limestone workings in the Forest include impressive built remains and associated transport links, contributing to the visitor's experience of the area.

Over the last two years a local Industrial Heritage Research Group was formed with the support of the Down to Earth project of the Shropshire Hills AONB office. The group identified five headings which have helped to deepen understanding of the industrial heritage sites found in the Wrekin Forest, extractive industries, manufacturing industries, forms of power, transport systems and social systems. The group will be publishing their findings within the next 12 months which will make a significant contribution to the level of understanding of our industrial past and its impact on the landscape we see today. We have tried to summarise their work below:

1. The Extractive Industries

Maddocks Hill Quarry, The Ercall and Lawrence Hill are open quarries, once valued for their road stone [Camptonite in the case of Maddocks Hill], now for the endangered butterflies and plants colonising the bare rock and screes. In other parts of the Wrekin Forest coal measures are found. Early mining began by driving shallow shafts down to reach the coal beneath, these bell pit mounds are found in the woods and those at Little Worth are listed as an Ancient Scheduled Monument. Other old workings disappeared

when modern open cast techniques removed large areas of rock and soil to reach the coal beneath, though an area of workings, including a good stretch of tramway, is also a Ancient Scheduled Monument at New Works. An outcrop of useful limestone found curving through the Wrekin Forest was also heavily exploited. Old workings exist at the Hatch, Little Wenlock and down through Limekiln Woods . The Steeraway Limestone works in had been a site of limestone working since the 1250's finally ceasing operation in 1900. In the woods the remains of the kilns and the loading area can be seen

2.Manufacturing industries

Local furnaces at Leighton and Lawley took the raw materials won from the Forest quarries to cast iron. The iron in turn was sold far a field but also supported a network of local smithies, approximately eight of which could be found within the Wrekin Forest at some time in the past. There was a pottery at Coal moor and bricks were made locally, in particular Longwood. Even to this day, processing of natural material continues at the Raby sawmill in Uppington.

3.Forms of power

Water mills were known at Leighton and on the Lydebrook, and a steam mill has been recorded at Moreton Coppice. At least one windmill is known at Charlton Hill and today our view east includes the brick red cooling towers of Ironbridge B Power station, producing 1000 mega watts of power, continuously fed into the National Grid.

4.Transport systems

The Wrekin Forest is close to the River Severn, once a major artery of communication and many of the tracks like Buildwas Lane at Braggers Hill lead down to its banks. An old bridge at Leighton led to a working beach. Since the Romans, road improvements have left a legacy of tollbooths, milestones and route adjustments. Watling Street, became the Holyhead Road, then the A5 and now the M54 motorway dominates all.

5.Social Systems

In the local area we can find the old Little Wenlock parish workhouse, workers cottages at New Works and the traces of other dwellings related to the working life of the area lost in the woods or road edges.

The industrial heritage of the Wrekin Forest is widespread, rich and a crucial part of its unique character. The efforts of the Research Group are an important part of understanding and conserving the fabric and story of the industrial age in the Forest. ,it is important to look for further ways to contribute to this positive work to keep alive the past.

Archaeology

The Wrekin Forest is home to a number of important archaeological sites. The area is very close to the important Roman town of Wroxeter and there have been numerous individual finds made locally. A casual exploration of the Wrekin Forest uncovers evidence of lost dwelling, their traces just humps and bumps in the woods, other old houses are still lived in and some ancient buildings such as the churches still play their part in the life of the community .

The Wrekin Forest also has considerable industrial heritage which is dealt with separately elsewhere in the draft plan. In modern times redundant features might be destined to become part of the archaeological resources of the future. The Wrekin Rifle Range is possible one case in point. The range was in use by local militia by the 1870's preparing soldiers for service in the Great War , then later serving the training needs of the local Home Guard , cadets and regulars through to it's last MOD days in the 1980's. The firing pits and target mechanisms are in place and it has been suggested that simple clearance of damaged buildings consolidation of the remains and an appropriate interpretation/memorial feature may form part of a small scale project to incorporate and conserve this unusual historic feature .

Ancient visible remains include the Willowmoor barrows which date from the Bronze age and the Ercall has an enigmatic earthwork which sits on the ridge top . To the north lies the Roman Watling street , disused in parts and now only marked by a hawthorn hedge which butts blindly into the motorway .The largest ancient feature is also the highest , the Wrekin Hill fort. The Hill fort is over 2000 years old and is one of the largest in Shropshire. The Wrekin Hill fort was the tribal capital of the Cornovii the original Celtic group who lived in this area before the Roman invasion. The double ring of earthworks and entrance features are near complete though very worn in places due to visitor pressure. A plan to restore the damaged banks of the hill fort is underway following survey work to assess the extent of the erosion problem and the condition of the vegetation within the encircling earthworks.

In 2005 an archaeological survey of the Wrekin Hill was published by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust. The team conducted a winter walkover of the Hill which followed extensive document research. The survey recorded a number of types of features, settlement, charcoal burners platforms, boundary stones, boundaries, track ways, sawpits, quarries and a number of enigmatic traces. The most revealing yet predictable features were the charcoal burners hearths. Over 126 platforms were found across the hill, indicative of the scale of charcoal production that continued locally into the 1930's. Charcoal burning relies on regular supply of coppiced wood, the implication being that the Wrekin woodlands were in the past managed as a mixed coppice. It would be useful if future archaeological research was carried out in the areas not covered by the Clwyd –Powys team.

The visible traces of our past are slowly fading, lost or worn away. It is important that we do our best to preserve what we can and help others understand the value of the things we are trying to save. Earthworks are fragile simple structures easily damaged or overlooked, their significance not understood, making them vulnerable to accidental damage and neglect. Local concern is high and people are motivated to do something positive to halt the decline in the preservation of our archaeological treasures.

New developments– opportunities or threats?

Telford and Wellington are growing. Telford currently has a population in excess of 160,000 people. New housing is planned and being built, and consequently greater numbers of people will live, work and play within easy reach of the Wrekin Forest. For instance, the Ironstone development in Lawley has been designed to create 3,300 new houses and also new offices, restaurants, bars, a school, parkland and shops. Demands for better infrastructure, such as power lines and communications, can compromise landscape values over wide areas. The radio mast on top of the Wrekin is a good example of the tension between modern styles of living and landscape aesthetics. We like fast, efficient telecommunications, but regret the presence of towers to hold aloft the transmitters which bring us the connections we demand.

Development pressure can result in the permanent loss of valuable open space, knock-on transport difficulties, pollution [whether chemical, light, dust, effluent or other], the spread of irresponsible and inappropriate patterns of personal behaviour, erosion of ephemeral qualities like peace, solitude and quiet and the fragmentation of the whole into lesser weaker islands of green. To take a balanced view though, past quarrying in the Wrekin Forest may be seen as a negative, though in its time it brought employment, provided a local resource to

build prosperity. Today landscape restoration or simply time and nature have brought biodiversity benefits. The future will see continuing difficulties, debates, and mediations.

To the north the M54 usefully marks the boundary between the built-up areas of Wellington and the Forest itself, and is sufficiently permeable to visitor either on foot, bike, horse or car. To the south the River Severn and its floodplain constrain and limit development, and to the west open country is dominated by agriculture. The eastern boundary of the Forest is its most dynamic; prospecting for the remaining coal reserves continues, active landfill sites deal with our never-ending waste and new residential communities begin. The impacts can be offset by gains as old industrial sites are renovated, or restored for the wider benefit of wildlife, , though these bonuses can be dismantled by unforeseen issues such as country rat runs on winding lanes or fly tipping on new grasslands . A sensible response to development pressure is to join with the developers at an early stage, over and above the statutory requirements for environmental impact assessment [EIA] to form open partnerships to mediate for the conservation of the unique values embodied by the Wrekin Forest.

Other similar areas include land around New Works, Candles landfill site and land at Coalmoor, previously a coal processing site. Recent talks with the landowners Veolia Environment have been promising, Shropshire Wildlife Trust have been invited to prepare proposed amendments. to restoration plan at Coalmoor to incorporate a wildlife and a more natural re-colonisation of the disused site –the current restoration plan seeks to return the land to agricultural use. The site is intimately linked to Lydebrook Dingle SSSI and we can see an opportunity to offer greater buffered protection to this valuable Dingle habitat.

The future will see continuing concern over loss of open space through development and there will be actual losses and some gains. Not all losses are inevitable, though many are irreversible, but early intervention is in all cases advisable.

Troubles from the urban fringe

The Wrekin Forest landscape conservation plan must contribute to local aspirations to have a safer and cleaner living environment. People in general behave in responsible, thoughtful ways, a minority fail to behave in a responsible, considerate or lawful way and consequently create pressure on the social and environmental fabric of a local community. Not all pressures are deliberately negative, for instance parking for the visitor is limited and on busy times can lead to dangerous over crowding on the narrow lanes of the area. The negative environmental pressures are difficult to address, can be persistent and demand high levels of time and cost.

The Wrekin Forest sits adjacent to the large populous urban communities of Wellington and Telford and has been experiencing a steady increase in negative pressure for a number of years. Littering is a good example of a small scale nuisance that can grow into a major problem. The quiet lanes, paths, entrance ways and byways of any open countryside near a population centre are vulnerable to unwelcome dumping of one sort or another, though the problems are not exclusive to urban fringe situations. At a number of places around the Wrekin Forest area litter is routinely left behind to blow into hedge lines, stream beds and field corners. The Uppington Estate currently collects enough rubbish to fill at least half a dozen skips each year.

At known places stolen cars are regularly dumped and burnt to remove forensic traces, the same places that are also prone to fly tipping. There is also a long recorded history of vandalism to property and structure. The Wrekin Rifle range, the Forest Glen and other structures having been subject to malicious damage.

Cars are driven at high speed at night, motor bikes, Quads and 4 x 4 vehicles are brought off-road into the woods and nature reserves of the area. Enforcement is difficult, though site

design can be helpful. Community initiatives are well known in this regard, such as Neighbourhood Watch and the local authorities have designated departments to administer and enforce the law regarding the illegal dumping of waste and the Law enforcement community is responsive to community requests for support.

The results of this negative group of activities all detract from the quality of the environment and impact on our sense of well-being and perceived safety. In respect of how the community of the Forest can respond there is certainly space to extend the work of groups such as the Parish Councils and develop a wider partnership group that crosses jurisdictions to develop a landscape wide mutually supportive response to negative social pressures.

The Visitor in the Wrekin Forest

The Wrekin Hill and the surrounding countryside have been attracting visitors for over 2000 years. In the last 150 years leisure time for the individual and the family has changed from a single day of rest into a daily juggle between life and work. The motor car has transformed our mobility and our search for relaxation, distraction and adventure is tireless. We must aim to increase public understanding and raise the quality of the visitor experience to the Wrekin Forest. It would make sense to support the wider use of the Forest area to help diffuse the intensity of visitor use from the usual 'hotspot'. The majority of visitors come only a short distance from their homes in the immediate surrounding area, the Wrekin Forest is not a national tourist attraction but a vital part of the open space network for the local communities of Wellington and Telford.

The Wrekin Forest has two Public Houses the Kynnersley Arms at Leighton, The Huntsman in Little Wenlock, and a hotel and conference centre, the Buckatree Hall Hotel on Ercall Lane. The lower woodlands and open countryside attract many adventurous souls but it is to the Hill that the greatest numbers come. A recent figure estimated that at least 80,000 visits per year are made to the Wrekin Hill. Walkers, cyclists, horse riders, runners and para-gliders are among the throng. The Shropshire Way passes through the Forest connecting the Severn Gorge with the Wrekin summit. Access features need constant maintenance and improvement, work undertaken by the Borough of Telford and Wrekin, and Shropshire County Council Rights of way Team. Permissive paths have been added to the network by local landowners.

For over 100 years visitors to the Wrekin Forest stopped at the Forest Glen Pavilion for refreshments. But by 1979 the Forest Glen Pavilion finally closed its doors, replaced by a small public convenience which was also closed due to cost cutting and continued vandalism by 2004. The Forest Glen site is now owned by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust and was revamped in early 2006 to offer parking for about 70 cars. On a busy sunny Sunday this car park is still insufficient for the number of visitors. A nearby lay-by is used and other informal pull-ins are taken up with vehicles. Routes to get from the official car park to other parts of the Wrekin Forest are unmarked and dangerous. The lack of a toilet is a serious deficiency at a site attempting to cater for thousands of visitors a year.

On a positive note The Halfway House [Wrekin Cottage] on the main track up offers snacks, drinks and visitor information at weekends and holidays. The Wrekin Forest has a reasonable set of rights of way connecting it to the urban centres of Wellington and Telford, the Shropshire Way also firmly connects the Forest to the Ironbridge Gorge. As is noted in the Shropshire Hills AONB Management Plan 2004-9 'Tourism and recreation are vital aspects of the rural economy', is the Wrekin Forest meeting the challenge of making an opportunity from a burden? In other words does tourism pay its way?

The Wrekin Forest project has spent the last year looking informally at the issues relating to access and simply concluded that this complex issue requires proper focussed attention of it's own beyond the current limited resources of the pilot studies. The number of the suggested initiatives in the draft plan concerned with the visitor reflects the scale of the task to develop a sustainable high quality provision for local leisure and recreation in the Forest.

Wrekin Forest landscape initiatives

Introduction

In our earlier discussions we highlighted a set of landscape themes. As these areas of concern have become clear we have looked at ways to tackle, improve, enhance and conserve the landscape values we treasure. The following practical initiatives are being suggested as possible ways we can address the environmental needs of the Wrekin Forest. Each initiative is only a proposal, bar the few such as the Veteran tree project which are underway. We require considerable further work to transform the germs of ideas into actual working projects. Very little costing has been done as it is very important that only initiatives which receive wide public support from residents and users, that have sustainable, realistic futures and contribute positively to the care of the Wrekin Forest, are fully developed. A number of ideas have already fallen by the wayside as they received little support or were untenable within local constraints, expensive arts projects being one. The list of initiatives is not exhaustive, please feel free to suggest further practical works that you may feel we have not considered.

Initiative 1. The Wrekin Forest- Working Woodlands

Well managed woodlands whether for timber, biodiversity, amenity or all of the above are important to our future well being, planning for the wise use of a sustainable and valuable resource is key. The timber market has been a tough one for many years, and until recently the momentum for wood fuel can in parts be too low to justify the investment risk. Regional initiatives such as the Heartwoods Project are demonstrating that the slow gestation period for renewable energy may be at an end and the market demand is sufficiently buoyant to support an increase in supply. Certainly the large block of woodlands that sits within the Wrekin Forest is very close to the largest population centre in Shropshire immediately reducing the damaging sapping effect of transport costs. As in other industries grouped around like products or similar processes such as the Cabbage growers of Kent or Agricultural machinery rings, there could be considerable benefit for the woodland owners and managers of the Wrekin Forest to collaborate either as a mutually supportive but informal group to share information regarding grant schemes such as the English Woodland Grant Scheme or possibly more formally as a certification group under the Forestry Stewardship Council [FSC] in their UK Woodland Assurance Scheme.

Aim - to find ways to support, well managed , wildlife rich woodlands

- to support voluntary initiatives aimed at working together
- explore the possibility of a local UK woodland assurance scheme certification group
- support development of local markets for local timber

- support woodland management for multiple uses – biodiversity, timber production and recreation
- promote public understanding of woodland management and woodland conservation

Initiative 2. Deer in the Forest – Deer Management Group [DMG]

Fallow Deer and Muntjac deer are present in the Wrekin Forest in numbers unknown at present. Browsing evidence is found within the woodlands and other areas. Browsing pressure has reduced natural regeneration significantly in many woods. Recent public trials with deer fencing have demonstrated the need for deer management. In parts of the Wrekin Forest professional stalkers are employed to control deer population as part of plant protection measures. Deer are highly mobile and consequently control of numbers has to be carried out over areas which will be in multiple ownership. The FC recommend the formation of a local Deer Management Group to record and monitor deer populations, co-ordinate control measures, encourage development of launds [Deer grazing areas], and other co-operative actions to bring about a sustainable deer population within the Wrekin Forest area.

Action – Form Deer Management Group

- Aim – to maintain healthy deer population in balance with their environment
- Prevention of deer problems such as over browsing of new woodland
- Co-operation between neighbouring landowners is important to achieve effective management
- Support from the Deer Initiative Liaison Officer

Initiative 3. New woodlands and hedges

The overall impression of the Wrekin Forest is of a wooded district, marked by large continuous blocks of woodland and thick hedgerows.

The woods of the Wrekin Forest in many cases have arisen from the blasted landscapes of mineral exploitation, the pioneer species such as Birch Willow and Alder have quickly populated the spoil tips and bare ruderal soils . The random distribution of the new woody plants mimics deftly the original random patterns of ancient woodlands, this happy accident gives these woodlands a wildwood feel very difficult to achieve with deliberate woodland creation. There is a good case that in looking for new woodland opportunities as well as searching for open ground suitable for planting schemes we also look for opportunities to fence [deer exclosures] and allow land to ‘tumble down’ of it’s own accord to add to the expansive natural resource of wilderness found in the Wrekin Forest . A new woodlands opportunity map could help identify suitable sites for new planted trees and expansion areas for the wild spots of tomorrow.

Over the last 12 months in various discussions and tours we have begun to identify a number of possible places where new woodland or hedge planting might be possible, these include links from Harris Coppice via parts of Lydebrook Farm towards the woodland of Gibbon coppice, corner tree plantings in Little Wenlock and possible extensions to the Lydebrook Dingle . On the open cast areas many of the original hedgerows were lost, since the

restoration these lines have in numerous cases been re-planted, and notably in one case painstakingly in the same location as before the coal extraction.

Aim

To seek opportunities to restore, replant and create new lengths of hedge row and woodland in the Wrekin Forest

Action

- set up mapping exercise to identify new woodland and hedgerow opportunities
- Seek funding to support new planting and restoration
- provide training and education

Initiative 4. Woodland Biodiversity monitoring project

The woods of the Wrekin Forest form together a significant and considerable biodiversity resource. The continuing fragmentation and loss of habitat, development pressure, visitor intensity and other factors lead to a decline in the natural values of woodland. Over browsing by deer for instance leads to setbacks in coppice regrowth, grazing of spring flora, deterioration in optimum conditions for invertebrates and loss of bird diversity. The removal or tidying of deadwood beyond safety considerations leads to the loss of habitat for invertebrate deadwood specialists, some of our rarest species and eventually the decline of some of our best known woodland specialists such as the Great Spotted Woodpecker. A first step to conserving an asset is to record it, understand its value and then work out how to maintain the valued item. Data collection is done simply by firstly a boundary walk, secondly a planned zig-zag route through woodland with regular stops and for Dingle woods a walk along the valley bottom with regular stops to gather data.

Survey work is time consuming, can be specialised, costly but ultimately rewarding, helping us to monitor the impact of our actions, understand the external pressures and respond accordingly.

Aim

- to record and monitor woodland biodiversity in the Wrekin Forest to support woodland management planning, to secure good baseline information which when repeated annually can be a tool to monitor change

Action

- Identify suite of woodlands across Wrekin Forest to set up monitoring project with owners permission and support
 - extend work of the Heartwoods Project
- Identify ancient woodland sites and plants of note
- Provide training for volunteer surveyors
- Publish collected data for land managers and to support biological recording in Shropshire

Initiative 5. Agri-environment scheme case study.

The Leasowes Farm lies on the eastern edge of the Little Wenlock plateau bordering the Lydebrook Dingle SSSI. The Leasowes Farm has just completed 5 years of a 10 year Countryside Stewardship agreement. The hard work is paying off by the quality of the wildflower rich meadows, variety of wildlife and sustainability of the farming enterprise.

Working in partnership the Shropshire Wildlife Trust and the owner Julia Owen are designing a project to measure the ecological and environmental status of the farm holding and use this case study to help assess the real value of agri-environment schemes in the countryside. The study will involve ecological recording, educational farm tours and small scale farm environment enhancement activity. We would also like to look at the economics of low intensity wildlife friendly farming, the compatibility of public access and farming and local opportunities for farm diversification. We intend to publish the findings in the form of a case study.

Aim

- to raise public understanding of modern farming, conservation in the farmed landscape and the effectiveness of agri-environment schemes in delivering conservation benefits.
- Survey and monitor wildlife for comparison with other holdings
- Assess impact of developments such as overhead power lines, public access and market forces.
- Promote public understanding of the links between conservation farming.
- Support others with information and advice who might be considering entering agri-environment schemes in the future.

Initiative 6. Veteran Trees

Veteran trees are our living connection to the past. Ancient oaks, yews, rowans and other species of tree are unique survivals of previous management, reveal old landscape patterns and are usually associated with rare invertebrates. Some veteran trees have names, or feature in their own story. It is very important that veteran trees are found, recorded, and action taken to conserve and protect them. Legislation allows for the protection of single trees, under a Tree Protection Order issued by the Local Authority. Organisations such as the Ancient Tree Forum support the location, measurement and recording of veteran trees. The Wrekin Forest project has begun the process of finding the veteran trees within the bounds of the project area, recording each tree and placing all the data onto a GIS system to aid future monitoring and management.

Aim

Aim to record all veteran and notable trees within the Wrekin Forest project area

Action

- Veteran Tree Hunt project worker Rob McBride has been recruited to lead the hunt
- Recruit volunteer Veteran tree hunters
- Record and verify each tree
- Record on computerised Geographical Information System
- Monitor each tree and establish management prescriptions to conserve health
- Promote the importance Britain's ancient living monuments .

Initiative 7. Steeraway Limestone Workings

From about 1250 until the end of Victorian era limestone was quarried and mined in the Wrekin Forest. A network of tramways and tracks took the stone down to kilns, where it was converted into quicklime to fertilise the fields and then later as a flux in the iron industry. Today the most complete remains of this once vigorous industry are to be found at the Steeraway and in Limekiln wood. The old kilns here are in need of consolidation, considerable research has been done in to the life and times of the Charter masters and the next step is to plan for the conservation of the physical heritage. We have already spoken to some of the site owners and more detailed proposals are now needed.

Visible remains of 4 kilns can be found just near the path. Two of the kilns form a pair and beneath are the entrances to the base of the kilns set in a substantial retaining wall. Tramways pass the top of the kiln and a loading area can be discerned at the base. The kiln

tops are not fenced off, though the kilns have been partially backfilled by BTW at some point in the past. An open adit served by a tramway connects clearly onto the main tramway and would have fed the kilns below. The group of remains require consolidation and offer promising possibilities, though there are clear liability issues to be understood and met.

Aim- To preserve , conserve and promote public understanding of the rich industrial history of the Wrekin Forest .

Actions

- Map tramways
- Safety works – e.g. fence open kiln tops and metal grilles on open adit entrances
- Consolidate visible remains
- Design robust interpretive material
- Support publication of book regarding industrial history of the Wrekin Forest .

Initiative 8. The Wrekin Hill Fort

The Wrekin Hill fort is a large double ringed enclosure over 2000 years old, it was the tribal capital of the Cornovii, the original inhabitants of Shropshire. The earthwork envelopes the summit of the Wrekin Hill and is clothed in parts by the remnants of unique lowland heathland. The thin soils are easily eroded and increasing visitor use is causing deep erosion scars in the banks of the Hill fort. The owners the Raby Estate, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, English Heritage, Shropshire Hills AONB, Natural England and Local Historians and Archaeologists are now working together to draw up a 5 year restoration plan for the hill fort. The plan will include measures to arrest the erosion, restore the natural heathland vegetation and provide visitor information.

Wrekin Hill fort restoration plan progress to date:

- Vegetation survey completed by SWT Volunteers
- Erosion survey carried out
- Extensive research in archives
- Interpretation panel structure commissioned from Raby Sawmill [to be sited at the Halfway House by kind permission of Tom Bolger]
- Display panel content in development.

Initiative 9. The Devils Dingle ash disposal site

Since 1966 pulverised fuel ash from Ironbridge Power Station has been deposited in the Devil's Dingle near Buildwas. The Devils Dingle is now full and the last of the ash is being used to shape the land and create new wildlife opportunities. The site is over 100 acres and will eventually include 3 large ponds making this a very significant plus for nature conservation. E-on the operators of the Power Station have invited Shropshire Wildlife Trust and the Severn Gorge Countryside Trust to join them in a steering group to mutually support the restoration process and build a plan for the future care of the site. The cooperative approach between industry and conservation organisations to the restoration of industrial sites has considerable merit and the experiences of the Devil's Dingle group may be useful elsewhere in the Wrekin Forest.

Devils Dingle restoration project progress to date:

- Civil engineering works to landscape the site and remove industrial structures
- Quarterly Steering Group meetings
- Site preparation to introduce grazing
- Wildlife surveys
- Conservation volunteer action days

- Item on BBC Countryfile

Initiative 10. The Wrekin Café and the Forest Glen

The Forest Glen is the gateway site for the Wrekin Forest. The facilities are minimal considering the daily numbers of visitors to the area. Public consultation revealed a high degree of support for the provision of a public toilet. The 2005/06 visitor survey stated that 86% of autumn /winter visitors would very much like toilets [80% of winters expressed the same preference]. Other visitor facilities such as information boards [65/68%], walk leaflets [40/37%] and less able facilities [61/59%] also received good levels of support. The existing toilet block is closed and of poor quality. There is a long history of vandalism in the area and one of the remedies is to have manned facilities. Initial talks with the landowner, the Borough of Telford and Wrekin and the Shropshire Wildlife Trust have been positive. The idea of combining a manned toilet with a small business offering refreshment and visitor information was looked on favourably and current work is focussed on evaluating this proposal. There are estimated to be 80,000 visits made yearly to the Wrekin Hill itself, is this sufficient to support the setting up of a new, though small commercial enterprise? We are currently tracking down an independent market research company to test the viability of a Café style business at the Forest Glen.

The Wrekin Café

Aim to provide a simple, appropriate visitor structure including toilet facilities, refreshments and visitor information for the benefit of all.

Action

- consultation with landowners, Borough planning department and local residents –
- draft proposal for Wrekin Café to be built on site of existing defunct toilet block
- Research has shown that a stone wall and considerably less tree cover was present at the start of the climb to the summit estimates are being sought to restore the original look of the entrance up the Hill.
- attention to be paid security, durability of structure and appropriateness of design
- independent market research to determine viability and sustainability of development
- Public consultation to determine levels of support for a Wrekin Cafe.
- develop consortium of Local Authority, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Parish and Town Councils and Commercial operatives.

The Forest Glen

The work done so far to clean up the Forest Glen has much improved the site though we still have what appear intractable problems with parking capacity and safety. The constraints are quite obvious in the Forest Glen quarry bay itself, the Donkey Field has been suggested in the past though it is quite clear from Borough Planning guidelines this is unlikely to be allowed to be developed as parking. In the meantime there are small measures that can be taken to improve the appearance and visitor welcome to this popular site.

Aim

-To develop a safe, well maintained public space at the Forest Glen for the benefit of residents and visitors to the Wrekin Forest

Action

- A simple robust Community notice board has been commissioned for the use of the local community, local residents and businesses to be installed in the Forest Glen car park
- Regular litter picking is carried under contract by Telford and Wrekin Council, informally by regular visitors to the hill and recently by the Wrekin Forest volunteers of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust.
- Natural England granted a licence to clean graffiti from the cliffs in the Spring this year.
- We have recently applied for an Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund grant to replace the foot bridge and build steps up to the main path .
- In the new year we will be ordering special Toad crossing signs to help the annual breeding time crossing from Lawrence Hill to Cluddley water.
- West Mercia Police and Telford and Wrekin Council have agreed to assist in development of traffic calming measures and parking controls.
- Blists Hill have offered generous support in any future plans to interpret the history of the Forest Glen
- Look for safe connections from the main parking area to the Ercall Nature Reserve without visitors walking on the road – clear roadside sightlines

Initiative 11. Forest Trails – for Foot , Bike and Horse

Each day the Wrekin Forest welcomes walkers, runners, cyclists and riders, and it is still possible to enjoy long periods of solitude, or relish the family bustle of the busy hill top on a sunny day. Visitor pressure though overall is high and there exists tension between different users. The challenge is to create an integrated network of safe, high quality routes incorporating viewpoints such as Little Hill, the Severn meanders at Leighton or the Ercall ridge, to enhance visitor enjoyment and understanding.

Additions and adjustments to the current network could help spread and diffuse the impact of the 80,000 plus visits made per year and strengthen connections between the Wrekin Forest and Wellington, the Telford Green Network and the Severn Gorge. Access improvements have a tendency to be made piece meal, our opportunity is to work across a whole landscape to attract funding for a comprehensive access network. Recent success in local ventures to improve access networks has been the result of the creation of Parish Paths Partnerships [known as P3's]. Unfortunately the Wrekin Forest occupies an area that encompasses two local authorities and at least four Parishes, but setting political boundaries aside the method remains valid. The paths Partnerships work by a local representative group taking up the task of co-ordinating the development of a functioning, high quality access network, the partnership will survey the existing network, assess its safety and condition, and then with local negotiation seek to develop an ongoing programme of improvement and maintenance.

The Wrekin Forest is carrying greater numbers of visitors on its road and trails, and this daily influx will increase as the surrounding urban areas continue to grow. It is important to work collaboratively to enhance the quality of the access network, improve visitor experience and tackle areas of overuse and abuse. We can also look at measures to reduce car use, support the use of the outdoors for health, and promote understanding of the landscape as a whole.

Aim -To develop an integrated high quality network of trails that supports positive exploration and enjoyment of the Wrekin Forest.

Action - to form a Wrekin Forest Trails Partnership composed of representatives of the user groups, local authority Rights of Way teams and local landowners

- The Trails Partnership will have a number of tasks :
- to survey access network throughout the Wrekin Forest including roads, byways, permissive paths and informal desire lines.
- To assess safety of the access network for residents and visitors

- To analyse the effectiveness of the network, how well it connects town and country, meets the needs of multiple types of users, areas of abuse/ overuse , anomalies, quality of routes, design of access structures [gates, stiles etc] , map viewpoints and pinch points.
- Extend earlier visitor survey work
- Compile works schedule to address safety concerns around the access network
- Through extensive consultation and negotiation write comprehensive access plan for Wrekin Forest area to address the practical need to have a high quality network that can cope with increasing visitor numbers and preserve the landscape value that attracts those self same people.
- Design and promote material such as leaflets to support self guided and responsible exploration of the Wrekin Forest.

Initiative 12. Visitor management - Wrekin Forest Ranger Service

The Country Park system was established to provide open spaces within easy reach of urban centres, the sites provide opportunities for outdoor leisure in its' many forms. The Country park system is normally operated by local authorities who provide facilities and manning. The Wrekin Forest is under pressure to operate in the same way, with individual landowners attempting to informally manage the impact of the visiting public.

Ranger services are provided in the National Parks working as liaison between the visitor and local landowners, welcoming and providing environmental education, being a first line of response in visitor welfare, supporting daily site maintenance and helping with enforcement issues. With the appropriate management and funding structures such a Ranger service may be useful in dealing with the visitor demands found in the Wrekin Forest.

Aim - to support and manage the impact of the visiting public

Action - Recruit Wrekin Forest Countryside Ranger

- Responsible to Joint Management group of local landowners, local representatives and local government agencies.
- Responsible for visitor management concerns – visitor welfare, environmental maintenance, education through a year round programme of events including guided walks, cultural and wildlife events.
- Responsible for supporting the positive involvement of local people in the care of the Wrekin Forest through conservation volunteering, enhancement of the countryside and enforcement of byelaws and regulations in the interest of a high quality landscape
- Responsible for supporting positive effective liaison between landowners, land managers, the farming community and the visiting public.

Initiative 13. Conservation Volunteering

The Wrekin Forest Project since November 2006 has offered a regular programme of conservation volunteering for local people. The group have planted hedges and trees, laid hedges and coppiced for wildlife, joined guided walks, conducted wildlife surveys, been introduced to specialised forms of countryside management such as horse logging and helped care for the wider countryside by litter picking for instance. The activities of the volunteers have helped highlight many of the issues of landscape conservation, and have been well supported by people pleased to make a positive contribution to the landscape they cherish. We intend continuing the volunteer programme and developing the range of projects and accessibility to reach those keen to join in but are engaged in full time employment. Conservation volunteering opportunities are offered by other organisations in the area including groups such as BTCV's Green Gym, the Severn Gorge Countryside Trust and the Greenwood Centre at Coalbrookdale. Each group is well attended and performs useful small

scale tasks across the area. Conservation volunteering is an important way of engaging people in the care for their local green spaces, providing training for those considering a career in conservation and helping in the daily maintenance of wildlife sites and reserves.

Aim

To positively engage and involve the general public in the conservation of the Wrekin Forest

- Seek Funding to maintain conservation volunteering activities in the Wrekin Forest.
- Establish a regular professionally supervised and supported group
- Liaise with Local farmers and land managers to identify appropriate ways to assist in caring for the local natural heritage
- Publicise a programme of practical and other events to care for and celebrate the natural beauty of the Wrekin Forest.

Initiative 14. Wrekin Forest School

Shropshire is one of the lead county's piloting the provision of the Forest School experience for young children. The Forest School idea promotes regular trips out of the classroom throughout the whole year to explore the natural environment, experience the seasons and take part in simple wood craft activities. Forest Schools are established in woodlands close to local schools. We have begun looking for a suitable site within the Wrekin Forest to create a safe location to nurture the next generation's love of the natural world.

Aim

To safely allow young children to explore the natural world

Action

- find appropriate woodland site that meets child protection and safety criteria
- Contact professional Shropshire Forest School co-ordinators
- Forge links with local Primary Schools
- Establish programme of visits

What's next ?

The Wrekin Forest draft landscape conservation plan

I know it has been a long read and thank you for getting this far. To convert this draft outline into a real practical plan we now please need your thoughts, reactions and ideas, It would be best if your could either write to me , or e-mail or even jot notes on your copy of the draft and send it back . Every comment will be taken into account and from them we will prepare the final plan document . The process of informal and formal consultation will help us all to understand the priorities for the future care of the Wrekin Forest . The next stage of formal consultation will include presentations to local government and other decision makers . I look forward to hearing from you , our contact details are below:

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Pete W. Lambert
Wrekin Forest project officer
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