

Living the Levels

The quarterly newsletter for the
Living Levels Landscape Partnership



Spring 2020

Levels through a lens
our landscape on TV

All about Saints –
celebrating St Bride and
St David

Meet the Ditch Doctor
and the Mud Professor!



ENJOY THE GWENT LEVELS IN SAFETY

Welcome to the latest edition of 'Living the Levels', bringing you up to date with the work of the National Lottery Heritage funded Living Levels Landscape Partnership for the Gwent Levels.

With the support of you, our many volunteers and partners, the project has achieved a great deal so far in 2020, much of which we are celebrating in this issue.

Before the lockdown, over 100 people were entertained and informed by the likes of Professors Martin Bell and Stephen Rippon, Dr Mark Lewis, Maggie Eno, Rose Hewlett and Alison Starling at the 'Gwent Levels Revealed' event at the iconic Lysaght Institute in Newport. The day culminated in a 'world premier' of an animated depiction of the development of the Gwent Levels, from the end of the Ice Age to the morning of the 1607 Great Flood, which you can find on our fabulous [website](#). This popular event demonstrated a real hunger for heritage locally, so 'Gwent Levels Revealed' will return early next year. So, if you missed it please keep checking the '[What's on](#)' page on our website.

Due to the current restrictions, our events programme has obviously been affected but here's a quick plug for our on-line events on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Every weekday between 8am and 9am, join us and our partners at RSPB Cymru for #BreakfastBirdwatch and send us your photos, videos and drawings. We're not looking for prize-winning images, just what you've been enjoying from the comfort and safety of your own home!

Speaking of prizes, why not tune in for our weekly 'Website Safari' at 9am on a Monday? Answer the question to be in with a chance of winning a fantastic Gwent Levels family experience or a signed copy of one of the many books associated with Living Levels – all to enjoy once things are back to normal.

Finally, we are pleased to announce 'Sound Levels' a series of specially recorded performances from the likes of award-winning poet Ben Ray, Gwent storyteller Christine Watkins, Newport violinist Katie Bachelor and readings by Hannah Lewis. You can enjoy these on our social media and website,

We hope you enjoy this newsletter and wish you all the best in these difficult times - keep safe, keep healthy and keep checking-in!

The Living Levels Team

VIRTUAL TOURS OF THE LIVING LEVELS

The current restrictions brought about by Covid-19 has meant us being a bit more creative with our time indoors. Here, Bob Evans of the Newport Medieval Ship and research volunteer, shares his tips for exploring the outside world from the safety of your own home.

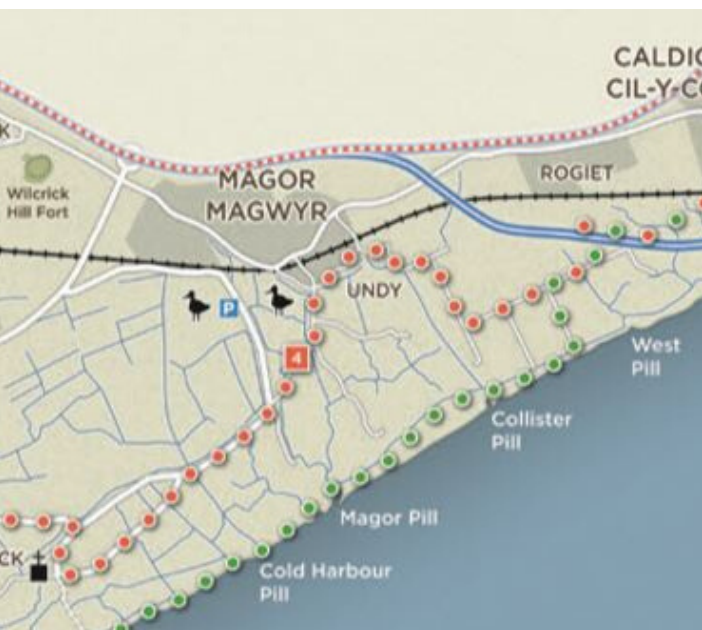
I had finished my analysis of the Census returns for Magor and Undy and was planning a few days driving around the Levels to check my conclusions. Then came the PM's announcement on 23rd March. So that was off. It was online or nothing – Google Earth here we come!

Using it as a research tool has made me realise just how rich a resource it is. It gives you an impression of the lie of the land and the village layout which even Ordnance Survey maps cannot offer. And the detail these days is amazing – you can even see the skeleton of an old boat out on the foreshore off Goldcliff.

Then there is 'Street View' – much more than a navigation aid! You can tour Magor in bright sunshine and loiter outside houses to check their age and layout. You can drive virtually along the B4245 through Undy and spot a house on the right with a bright red door that turns out to be the old Methodist Chapel. You can stop to check the date on the front to see if it was there in 1881 (it wasn't) or go along West End to see a rather scruffy white building on the south side (there's a builder's lorry in front of it on Street View) with unusual iron frame windows that shows it to be the old Temperance Hall. You could even go north past the Wheatsheaf Inn and spot a derelict building on the right, which turns out to be the old Mustard Seed Cottage, probably 17th Century in origin.

There is so much more online. Have you played with the new GIS application on the Living Levels site (www.livinglevelsgis.org.uk) This is a brilliant tool for detailed forensic examination of the past and present landscape. Switch on the 'keyhole views' and you can hover over a site and move between the mid-19th Century maps, the Court of Sewers data and the physical landscape revealed by LIDAR scans. It allowed me to crawl over the old site of Ifton Church and see how it was gradually built over in a way that the present residents would not have permitted! I could also follow the Mill Reen in Magor from start to finish and see how its path has moved the village developed – hardly at all as it happens.

It makes me think – in 150 years our successors will be logging onto the digital equivalent of Gwent Archives to order up the Google Earth images from 2020 to marvel at the old buildings which were still around at the time and to check the layout of our latest construction, just as we pour over enclosure maps today. There are other sites which offer a similar capability. The 1871 Tithe Maps site on places.library.wales for example and the archwilio.org.uk site.



LEVELS THROUGH A LENS

The Living Levels Landscape Partnership has been gaining a great deal of media interest as our jam-packed programme of 24 projects starts to have a real impact on the people, communities, and visitors to the Gwent Levels. Elinor Meloy guides us through the media frenzy...

BBC Countryfile

The Living Levels partnership spent Valentine's day with BBC Countryfile filming an entire episode featuring the landscape, our partners, and some of the work the programme is doing here.

For those who didn't see it, when it aired on St David's Day (spoiler alert), the episode told you all about the programme and the unique landscape of the Gwent Levels from its reclamation from the sea, to the reens, ditches and grips network that keep the land dry and watercourses full of wildlife.

Part of the episode focussed on our work restoring the ditches and filmed our partners Natural Resources Wales using some traditional methods such as 'drashing' in Duffryn. We also got a glimpse of how Professor Martin Bell records the prehistoric foreshore archaeology at Goldcliff, with several remarkable discoveries.

The episode also featured the iconic Black Rock Lave net fisherman with presenter Matt Baker and Ellie Harrison at Gwent Wildlife Trust's Magor Marsh reserve, looking at the water vole reintroduction and volunteer groups that help manage the site.

The episode finished with Matt and Ellie helping to weave our willow 'Brinker' sculpture at Magor Marsh, with artists Sarah Hatton and Mel Bastier, which will form part of our 'People of the Landscape' trail. The Brinker, Lave Net Fisherman, and Engineer sculptures are nearly complete and will be installed very soon for you to visit for yourselves.

Overall the episode was amazing publicity for Living Levels, with our social media gaining lots of new followers and our website visitors increasing by tenfold, from viewers hoping to find out more. For those who missed it you can still view the episode on BBC iPlayer!

ITV Tonight Show

As a result of the amazing results achieved by our 'Black Spots to Bright Spots' fly-tipping project, the producers from the ITV 'Tonight Show' got in touch to film an episode on the Gwent Levels focusing on the hard work the partnership and local law enforcement agencies are doing to tackle this issue. The episode was filmed just before lock-down and should be airing in mid-April.

Discover Gwent Levels destination films

As well as all this external media coverage, Living Levels commissioned local film company Yoke Creative to produce seasonal films of the landscape, showcasing the incredible scenery, nature and communities of the Gwent Levels.

Though this commission is still a work in progress many of Yoke's shots were used in the BBC Countryfile episode and will also feature in the ITV Tonight show when it airs. Keep an eye on our website and social media, as we will be starting to release some of the amazing footage they have captured of the Levels through a lens.



OUTSTANDING SUCCESSES FOR FLY-TIPPING PROJECT

The problem of Fly-tipping was frequently raised during the development phase of Living Levels, so as part of our 'Black Spots to Bright Spots' project our part-time enforcement officer works closely with local authorities and Fly-Tip Action Wales, investigating fly-tipping incidents and taking appropriate action against offenders. Pam Jordan updates us on some recent encouraging results!

We're pleased to report that the 'Black Spots to Bright Spots' project has achieved a number of successful enforcement outcomes over the last few months. Since November, we've prosecuted five individuals, received payment for a £400 Fixed Penalty Notice, and had a simple caution signed following fly-tipping investigations on the Levels.

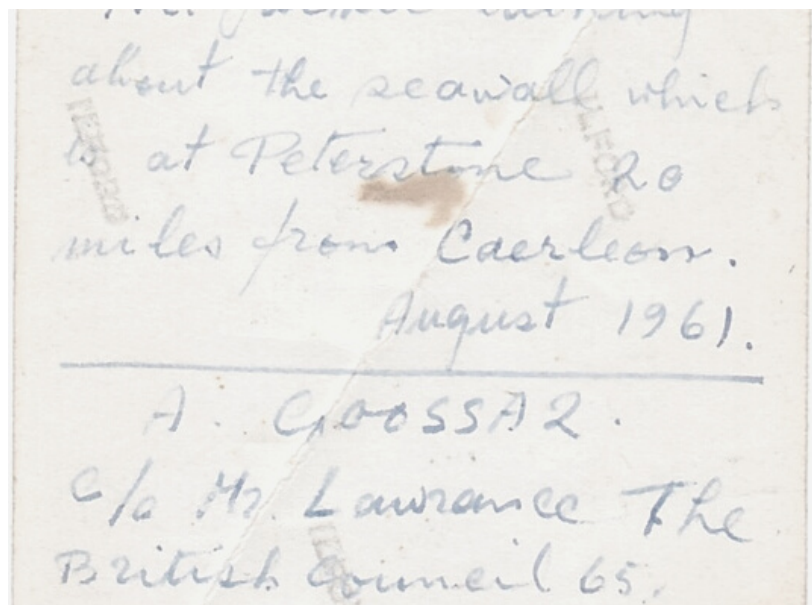
The latest prosecution which took place on the 11th March 2020, resulted in two males pleading guilty to four incidents of fly-tipping that took place in June and July 2019 on Green Lane in Peterstone. These family members were caught on a covert camera dumping household and business waste. The first offender was made subject to a 1-year Community Order with a requirement to complete 100 hours unpaid work and was ordered to contribute £950 towards the total costs. The second offender was due to be sentenced at Crown Court, but this has been postponed due to COVID-19 issues. This prosecution received 13 pieces of coverage across press and social media. The coverage included ITV Wales News Online, Wales Online, South Wales Argus and South Wales Echo.



We still have much work to be done to tackle the fly-tipping on the Levels which may increase in the next few months due to issues caused by COVID-19, including household recycling sites temporarily closing.

In March, Pam Jordan and Elinor Meloy, Living Levels Programme Manager were filmed by ITV for the 'Tonight' programme which is focusing an episode on fly-tipping. The Living Levels Programme and the 'Black Spots to Bright Spots' project will be mentioned, including the recent high-profile fly-tipping prosecution achieved through this project. This was due to be aired in mid-April, but for obvious reasons, the date may change.





THE REAL LIVING LEGACY OF MY FATHER

We were recently contacted by Emma Johnson, who wanted to tell the story of her late father George and his important and undeniable link with the Gwent Levels landscape. Here, Emma shares his fascinating story.

George Jarvie, my father, died earlier this year aged 92. I would ask him, a bit awkwardly, what sort of funeral he wanted. Dad didn't know. Then one day, he said "I was thinking, you could throw my ashes from the Severn Bridge, and it would go where my work is, you know" he chuckled "they'd be caught by the tide and taken to the wall I made." At the time, I thought it a bit undignified landing up in the silt. But it must have made him proud. And then I remembered, and a little research later led me to the Living Levels. Had he known how it has flourished there!

In the early 1950s he told me that The Usk River Board, where he worked as a civil engineer, had to build up the sea wall, from the Severn Bridge and they had to stop the floods.

Over an inch of rain and the whole Usk valley would flood. He draughted the seafront piece by piece, all 30 miles of it - his drawings would be technically excellent being a talented artist. They would evidence the then condition of the wall before its demolition and improvements.

A large reen, originally dug by the monks of Goldcliff Priory, was re-excavated by his foreman and team - it became the "storage pond" for the rain runoff. This runoff came from a 350 square mile watershed area. The excavated clay was then used to raise the sea wall. Dad was used to explosions having been a bombardier in the Royal Artillery, and used Chembond himself to demolish weakened parts of the sea wall to rebuild it. This took ten years.

Finally, he wanted to prevent further silting up of the drainage. He devised a second sea wall in the sea. He commissioned a company to make huge 30 foot by 15 foot concrete boxes, which cost well over £100,000. They were floated out to a position at sea, the end wall pushed inwards and sunk to create a further hidden sea wall to block the silt. It wasn't easy, but it worked.

Now, Dad is safely installed in St Mary's Churchyard, Usk but he would beam like a lighthouse to know his work helped to create the Living Levels. George is survived by his wife, Ann, children Chris, Emma and Sarah and six grandchildren.

DIPPY INTRODUCES THE GWENT LEVELS

Well there's prehistory and then there's Levels prehistory. In the shadow of a 70ft long sauropod-superstar by the name of Dippy, two teams with one goal – to bring the amazing prehistory of the Gwent Levels to the Cardiff masses...

In a joint pile-on prehistory, Living Levels buddied-up with the RSPB Cymru Give Nature a Home Cardiff team and found themselves bringing a taste of Gwent Levels prehistory to the National Museum Cardiff on a sunny Saturday in January.

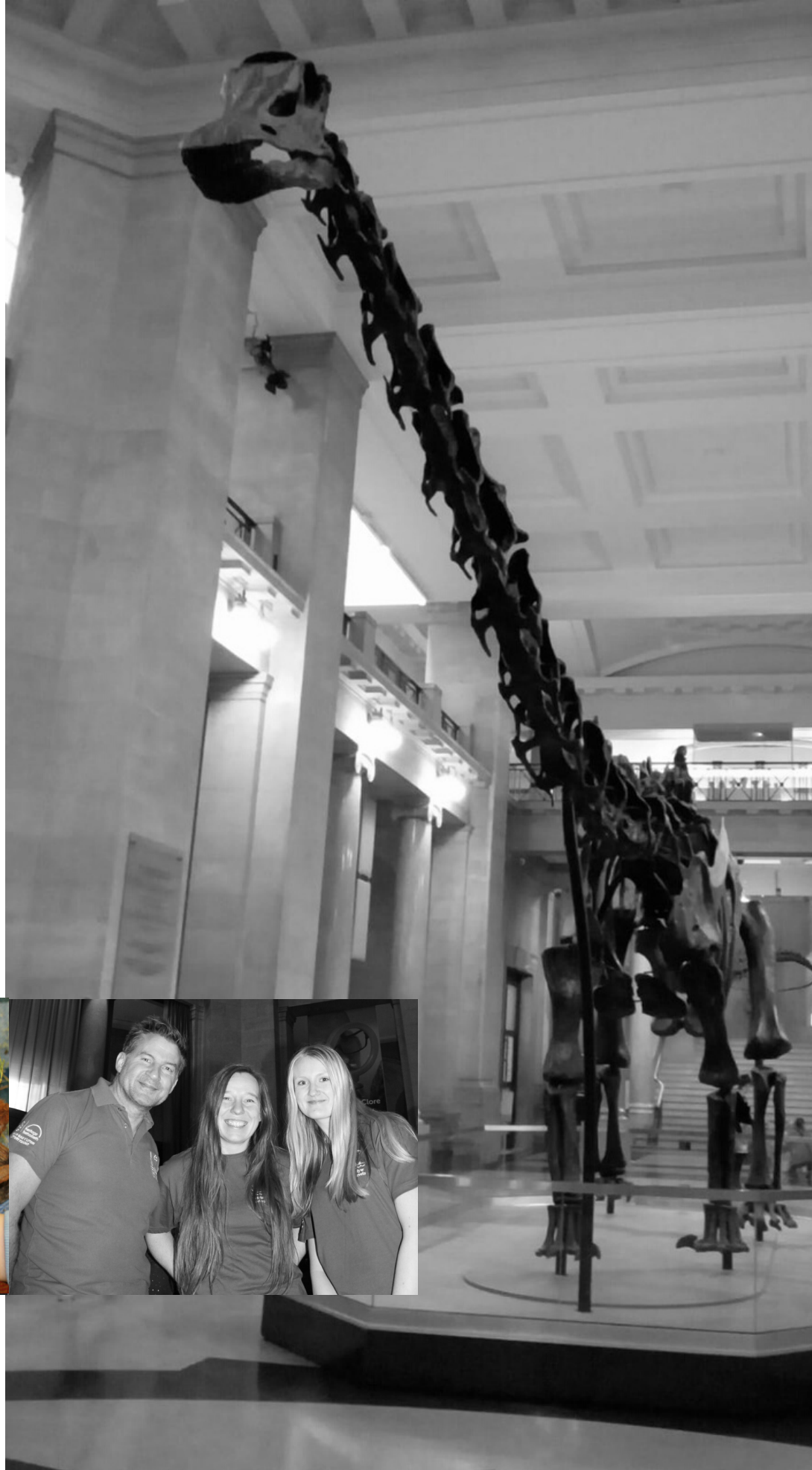
Although Dippy would never have stomped across the Levels, the lure of such a glittering prehistoric presence was too good an opportunity to miss to engage with a captive, interested audience.

Visiting families were encouraged to find out more about the prehistory of the Gwent Levels with activities including walking in the footsteps of our ancestors, habitats, bone booth, clay bowls and amulets, cave painting and unwittingly handling prehistoric poop!



Due to some logistical shuffling we did find ourselves delivering activities amongst the main exhibits in the morning but doing our Mesolithic ancestors proud, we adapted to the challenging conditions and delivered very popular morning and afternoon sessions to nearly 200 people!

Gavin Jones





St David's Day weekend at Tredegar House!

Despite every weather condition under the (occasional) sun being unleashed in true Gwent Levels fashion over the last weekend in February, Living Levels teamed up with Tredegar House to celebrate our patron saint of Wales. Lydia Griffiths of the National Trust tells all - but beware, there be Dragons!

This year, we wanted to celebrate St David's Day at Tredegar House by creating an event that championed the local community, in partnership with Living Levels. The three-day event aimed to showcase Welsh heritage by highlighting the amazing work of people in the local community. Highlights from the weekend included the opportunity to meet committed individuals from local organisations such as Newport Transporter Bridge and Gwent Archives, as well as representatives from a number of local litter picking groups, who strive to create litter free spaces in the community. It was shocking to learn that on an average day out, Newport East Litter Pickers collect 30 – 40 bags of rubbish!

Ebbw Vale Owl Sanctuary's visit was a real hit, with crowds of people coming to see their display in the Lesser Barn, which the day before had hosted the beautiful sound of violinist Katie Bachelor.

The whole event was a great opportunity to utilise the home farm area which contains some unique spaces for hosting stalls, as well as some interesting features such as the old farm machinery. We emptied some of the cow sheds, which had previously been used for storage and hosted crafts people who work in association with Living Levels. Flintknapper, Karl Lee, showcased his unique skills, while Sarah Hatton from Hatton Willow showed visitors her weaving work. Both were a fantastic addition to the weekend and really injected life into these spaces again.

Other great additions to the weekend were Christine Watkins giving families much needed shelter and respite with amazing stories and keeping the mythical theme going was Tin Shed's puppet dragon, which visitors absolutely loved! People stopped in their tracks when he paraded around the Home Farm area as he was quite big and striking. He did scare a few dogs on his route, but nevertheless he was an amazing feature for a St David's Day celebration event.

We really enjoy working with the Living Levels project and are very grateful to their team for supporting these events. Not only do we get to work with some incredible people, but more importantly it gives us new ways of connecting with the local community. We can't wait to host our next event with the Living Levels team.



WHERE HISTORY AND POETRY MEET

We want to bring as much variation as possible to our Living Levels events calendar and securing the services of an award-winning poet has been no exception. In the surrounds of the Gospel Chapel in Rumney, budding poets gathered on a winter's Saturday to weave some magical verse under the guidance of Ben Ray, he explains more.

It is often said that the past is a foreign country: 'they do things differently there.' What does this mean if we are talking about the past of our country, our town, or our family? How do we access this different country nestled secretly within our everyday spaces that make up our lives?

February's workshop with Living Levels tackled just this issue by using poetry to access voices from the Gwent Levels' past. The medium of poetry, with its ability to recreate and channel thoughts and to imbue inanimate objects with life, is extremely suited to the field of local history and allows one to combine knowledge and imagination to create a powerful glimpse into the past.

The history of any society is the history of people, of emotions, of the thousand different day-to-day incidents that still to a large extent form the patchwork of life today. What the past has left behind for us, be they stories, family heirlooms, photographs or texts, are the physical remnants of these events. Poetry allows us to play the role of both historian and creator in forming links between these objects, reviving the worlds in which they operated and allowing them to live once more.

The workshop looked not only at how to use these objects for poetry and as routes to the past, but also at how versatile poetry can be in its expression. From the humour of U.A.Fanthorpe's 'Not my best side', in which a painting by Uccello is explored through the dragon's voice, to the darkness of a provincial hanging in Edwin Stockdale's 'The long drop', to the intimate, familial portrait of Jonathan Edwards' uncle in 'Bamp', the workshop's participants explored how moments from the past could be approached in a wide array of styles and forms to draw out unusual and interesting angles on historical events that could not otherwise be inspected.

However, the materials which provoked the most discussion were transcripts of interviews done with older members of communities across the Gwent Levels, made by oral historian Marsha O'Mahony. Memories of eel-catching, of long, snowed-in winters, of market days and of school terms – these are stories that allow a visceral, direct connection with the past, and which are just begging to be translated into poetry. Sometimes, when you are challenged to use fewer words to describe something, the right combination can spark a sensation or an image that gives a powerful connection that, one could argue, cannot be found elsewhere.

This discussion prompted participants to start bringing up memories of their own, sharing stories and bringing the local area's past back to life in the process. The freedom that poetry allows means that these dusty, half-forgotten recollections could suddenly become new, living, vibrant things. It enables a rich and deeply personal window onto a different time, bringing the reader and writer closer to a certain moment in history if only for a page's length. Perhaps the past, that foreign country, isn't quite so foreign after all.

CREATE MEMORIES AND DISCOVER SEVEN GWENT LEVELS GEMS WITH OUR TREASURE MAPS!

Kathy Barclay



Over the last six months the Levels Learning project team have been busy working with Ed Drewitt and Louisa Aldridge to complete these beautiful outdoor memory treasure maps, for seven sites on the Gwent Levels.

Discover the delights of Tredegar House and Park, Magor Marsh nature reserve, Black Rock picnic site, Rogiet Countryside Park, Parc Tredellerch, Newport Wetlands and Hendre Lake Park.

The maps are suitable for all ages and available in English and Welsh. You can download them from the website page: livinglevels.org.uk/memory-maps.

We think you'll agree these will be a useful resource for family exploration once we can get out and about again!

Teachers may also be interested that they are linked to our Education resource for schools too: livinglevels.org.uk/learning-resources



INTRODUCING OUR 'HERITAGE HEROES'!

One of the key elements of the Gwent Levels landscape is the crucial link between its history, archaeology and the wildlife - that's what makes it so unique.

With this in mind, Living Levels has brought together two youth groups from across the Levels with very different interests, on a landscape that combines the two beautifully. The Wildlife Explorers (WEX) based at Newport Wetlands and the South East Wales branch of the Young Archaeologists Club (YAC) meet on the same day of the month and are on the look-out for new members.

Kevin Hewitt from the WEX group takes up the story "The inspiration for me was attending the Living Levels supported Day School event last summer at Redwick. It was a bit of a 'Eureka!' moment since WEX was going through poorish times and needed a fresh focus, so why not focus locally and link in with the history of the levels?"

At the same time, Living Levels had been discussing potential archaeological activities with Rebecca Eversley-Dawes of the YACs. So, the solution was easy; why not organise joint activities on the Levels looking at both wildlife and archaeology? – let's face it, both groups share key interest elements like being outdoors, handling stuff and getting muddy. So that's what we did, back before we were all told to stay indoors!

Children and adults from the Chepstow, Newport and Cardiff areas came together for the first Living Levels 'Heritage Heroes' activity on the Gwent Levels.

We kicked-off with a mile-long walk across muddy fields from the Newport Wetlands Centre to St Mary's Church in Nash, introducing everyone to the medieval ditch network and the wildlife found in and around the reens.

The group was greeted by Sue Waters of the 3 Parish Heritage Group, who gave a wonderful history of the church, before donning headtorches and braving its medieval tower, from where the ditch network, Severn Estuary and Bridge, Wetlands, hills to the north and former site of Goldcliff Priory could be seen in all their glory! There was also time for building and wildlife surveys around the church before heading back.

This kind of activity is exactly what we are hoping to achieve in terms of legacy; getting as many children and young adults with similar interests to discover the Gwent Levels and to help generate interest in local groups like these. Suffice to say, the day went down very well with all who came along and no doubt there was some deep sleeping that night!

"YAC is 25 years this year and during our many years based in Newport we have come to rely on the Archaeology which surrounds us to teach us more about our ancestors. Any opportunity to learn something new is welcomed and we look forward to working in partnership with the Living levels project and WEX to combine interests in this archaeological landscape." added Rebecca

The next Heritage Heroes event is planned for November looking at Winter bird migrants and the prehistory of the foreshore at Goldcliff.

Gavin Jones

THE DITCH DOCTOR WILL SEE YOU NOW...

With origins dating back to Roman times, the network of reens, ditches and 'grips' that define the Gwent Levels supports a unique diversity of plants and animals and forms a vital flood defence for this precious landscape. Some of these features have become neglected over the years, so the Living Levels Ditch Restoration project is aiming to restore 21km of ditches over three years. Let's meet the Officer tasked with leading this mammoth task...

Thought I'd use this opportunity to introduce myself to everyone on the Gwent Levels – I'm Kate Rodgers #TheDitchDoctor!

You may have thought that all this rain would have put paid to any winter works - mud up to your knees and fields resembling ponds and lakes. However, our partners at Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and specifically The Internal Drainage Board (IDB) didn't let a few drops of rain stop them.

Huge shout out to John Southall and his onsite team that agreed to take on 765m of ditch clearance in Duffryn, producing work of exceptional quality in some of the most difficult and testing conditions I have ever experienced on the Levels.

The time in the office hasn't been wasted though, as I've been working with our local contractors and together we have created a package of training that will create a long-lasting legacy for the ditch restoration project.

Now the sun is finally shining, I'm really looking forward to finishing the second year of ditch works that had to be put on hold and working with you to find the best opportunities for more ditch clearance works this winter – I want to smash the target of '21km ditches cleared'!

#TheDitchDoctor





ST BRIDE AND THE FEBRUARY LANDSCAPE

Storyteller Christine Watkins is a familiar face at many Living Levels events from family day storytelling to folk evenings at the Farmers Arms in Goldcliff. She is also the author of 'Gwent Folk Tales' and here tells of the origins of a familiar Saint on the Wentlooge level and inspiration for her February event.

Saint Bridget gives her name to three churches in Gwent, including the little Norman church in St Brides Wentlooge / Llansanffraid Gwynllŵg. I wanted to share some explorations of the Christian saint and the pre-Christian aspects of Bridghe/Bridie/Ffraid/Bridgid and her connections to the coastal landscape in South Wales, so in early February I and Andy Karran, Senior ecologist with Gwent Wildlife Trust, planned a talk at St Bride's Village Hall followed by a short walk to the shore.

February is the time of the traditional festival of Imbolc, its date given as Feb. 1st, and this is also the date later given to St Bridgid's feast day. It is the time that marks the onset of the end of winter, when ewes start to suckle their lambs.

The church at St Bride's Wentlooge, as well as the one in St Bride's Netherwent and in Skenfrith, and indeed elsewhere throughout Britain, are dedicated to the Irish St Bridgid of Kildare (though there is also a Swedish St Bridget and several other early Christian Holy Bridgets).

Ancient Irish accounts of Bridget show her as having a deep and powerful connection with the land, its plants and creatures.

There are tales of her travelling by miraculous means across the Irish Sea, and many of the churches dedicated to her are along the west coast of Britain. There are also many ruined and disappeared Bridget chapels, as well as Bride wells, Bridewell woods and Bridestones not to mention the huge sweep of St Bride's Bay. The Welsh accounts of Bridget/Ffraid in Wales share some aspects of the Irish stories, and have some of their own. They describe her standing on a piece of turf in Ireland and floating over the sea to Wales. Traditionally she landed either at Porth y Capel in the north, or in the Dyfi estuary.

However, Fred Hando, the journalist-wanderer of the byways of Gwent, imagines that she may well have travelled on her piece of turf up the Bristol Channel and made landfall on the fertile shores of the Levels, where the village of St Bride's Wentlooge now bears her name...

This year Storm Dennis was brewing up strongly on the day of our event and although it was fully booked, people were advised to stay indoors. We decided to run a shortened version of the event, without the walk, for a dozen or so hardy locals. We hope to run the full event again next year...

Keep checking our ['What's on'](#) page on our website for a repeat of this event early in 2021!



FROM BONES TO BEAVERS!

Over two consecutive evenings, people were treated to a series of lectures at Glamorgan Archives and Nash Village Hall, given by Martin Bell, drawing on nearly 30 years of regularly visiting the Levels foreshore where he has excavated Mesolithic to Iron Age sites in the intertidal zone.

A bit of a TV favourite on programmes such as BBC's 'Coast', the iconic Channel Four series 'Time Team' and more recently in the Gwent Levels episode of 'Countryfile', the Professor of Archaeological Science from the University of Reading, is not only an engaging and entertaining guide 'out on the mud' for those lucky enough to see his subject matter up close, but also delivers a mean lecture, always guaranteed to inspire interest in this rich pre-historical landscape.

Despite a squally downpour outside, Glamorgan Archives proved a superb venue for an entertaining overview of 'Archaeological discoveries on the Severn Estuary Levels' with Martin covering the prehistory of the foreshore from glacial retreats, exciting finds including Palaeolithic tools, submerged forests, Mesolithic human footprints and unfortunately for our prehistoric ancestors, evidence of their resident intestinal parasites!

A real crowd pleaser, particularly with younger members of the audience, were the large burnished-brown bones of the extinct wild Auroch cattle and stunning images of not only children's footprints in the mud, but beautiful tracks made by prehistoric cranes – a species recently finding its way back on to the Gwent Levels. Martin happily fielded many questions and even posed for photographs as yet another rain storm lashed outside.

Martin tackled a very different subject for the following evening's lecture at Nash Village Hall; 'Rewilding'. A fascinating and sometimes controversial subject which can take many lessons from archaeology, which funnily enough was the crux of the talk: 'Rewilding: a view from Archaeology'.

It is often the extreme examples of rewilding that get reported when in fact it can take many forms. A key point raised was that grazing, and land management has in the past revealed sites of archaeology, so when land is left to nature are these sites lost?

Martin reminded the audience of the many animals which roamed the Gwent Levels thousands of years ago – some no longer with us but some making a comeback, like Water Vole on the Caldicot Level and beavers as part of the many re-introduction programmes across the UK, including Wales (but not the Levels!). Alas, wolves and Auroch will likely never battle it out in Bishton but some more subtle conservation measures can be seen as a form of 'rewilding' – as Martin illustrated, it takes many forms. The audience were quick to ask some interesting and searching questions, so Martin had certainly got the Tuesday night audience thinking!

Martin has published four monographs on the results of his excavations and has just published 'Making One's Way in the World: the footprints and trackways of prehistoric people'. He will hopefully return later in the year so keep checking our ['What's on'](#) page on the website.

Gavin Jones





MUD, MUD, GLORIOUS MUD

So, what's it like being 'out on the mud' with the good Professor? Let Ceri Meloy share her experiences of four gooey days in Peterstone.

In March last year I saw an intriguing post on twitter, from 'The Living Levels' project, about an opportunity to spend 4 days on an archaeological dig on the Gwent Levels. Now for years I had (probably) bored my family and friends, saying on countless occasions. 'If I had my time again, I'd be an archaeologist', but had never actually done anything about it.

At first, I assumed that as I worked full-time, I wouldn't be able to go, but much to my amazement, when I checked the dates, I was actually free to do it. Apart from sounding interesting, this dig was right there on my doorstep and free, so I signed up straight away.

The dig was really well organised and helpful, in that on the first day we learned some of the basics about what we were going to be doing and the history and archaeology of the area. Our leader was Professor Martin Bell from Reading University. He was really passionate about the area - he has been coming to the Gwent Levels for over 20 years and he made it interesting and easy to understand. There were about 12 of us on the group- lots of retired people, including one person who had retired the previous week!

Days two and three were spent out on the mud flats near Peterstone Village- tides allowing. I had never realised before how many different types of mud there were, including the very slippery, fall on your bottom kind!

Day Four we spent indoors, cleaning and logging all the things (finds) we had found. Once the antler hand tool was clean, we could actually see where a right handed person had held it, wearing it smooth in the process. It was an amazing thought to know that the last person to hold this had lived several thousand years ago.

Since then, my interest in archaeology has gone from strength to strength. I've done two evening courses at Cardiff University (check them out- they do all kinds of courses) and I also did a week's dig in west Wales, as part of the Strata Florida Trust project, which was another great experience, where I learned a lot and met some lovely people.

So, my thoughts are, if you see something that looks interesting- go for it- you never know where it may take you!





BRINGING HISTORIC LLANEDEYRN TO LIFE

The 'Recapturing the Historic Landscape' project is for anybody with an interest in the history of the Gwent Levels and their environs. So, what sort of information have the RATS (Research and Transcription Service) uncovered? Marion Sweeney reveals all about a very urban part of this historical landscape...

Challenging circumstances can sometimes lead to a change in direction, new ideas or different ways of thinking. Certainly, for myself, it was a difficult personal circumstance that led to my involvement in the Living Levels project. My role as a volunteer has given me a new focus, and helped me to understand the landscape from a historical perspective.

One of my areas of research is Llanedeyrn (formerly Llanedarne).

It is an urban area today, with a fascinating history just beyond sight.

On the surface, there are few clues to the past — street names, grave inscriptions, a smattering of old buildings that escaped the bulldozer. I've gradually uncovered more layers by examining historical documents — the Welsh tithe maps and census documents are important sources, and also old newspapers which can give a more personal insight into local characters and the community. A brief account of three such individuals living in late-nineteenth-century Llanedeyrn are given below:

Lewis Jones of Gorswg Farm was a well-known local figure. He was involved in the administration of local taxes, the organisation of sheep-shearing contests and was also on the committee of the South Wales Eisteddfod. He was a prominent campaigner for the Welsh language and was himself an acclaimed bardic poet, winning first prize for his poem 'The Weaver' in 1883.

The headmaster's logbook paints a detailed picture of a rural school struggling with low attendance, especially during poor weather.

At such times impromptu holidays were often called. On 3rd March 1897 he wrote 'Very wet stormy day, only eight children attended' (the average was thirty-two).

Let us not forget the sprightly ninety-two-year-old Samuel Griffiths, who walked the four miles to Cardiff and back, only to discover that while he was out, a burglary had taken place at his home. Some of his clothes had been stolen, but fortunately the culprit was soon identified, as he was wearing one of Mr Griffiths' shirts!

Details such as these can be pieced together to form a picture of the rural community and a way of life that is now gone. This, of course, has an element of poignancy; but it is uplifting to bring these vibrant communities back to life as we 'recapture the historic landscape'.

Many of the resources mentioned are available online, and although outdoor activities are currently severely curtailed, there is much that can be discovered without leaving your own home!

SAVING PRIVATE RECOLLECTIONS

The 'Life on the Levels' project has been working with the communities of Rumney, St Mellons, Wentlooge, Newport, Caldicot and Monmouthshire to record, document and interpret oral histories from those who have lived, worked, and played on the Gwent Levels. These have been conducted by Marsha O'Mahoney and her team. We hear from one of those volunteers, Kate Tolcher.

It's amazing what you can find on the notice board in Tesco, isn't it? Looking for a local yoga class I stumbled across a poster for the Living Levels project, looking for volunteers. Between jobs and wanting something worthwhile to do with my time, I contacted Marsha O'Mahony and found out about a fascinating project to record local voices and stories as part of the overall programme.

Over the last few weeks I have been transcribing recordings for the project. I've been absolutely fascinated by the topics under discussion as the conversations range from butterfly transects to changing school patterns to land draining on the Gwent Levels. Thanks to both the recordings and Google, I can now identify Common Blue and Clouded Yellow butterflies, as well as recognise the location of the old primary school in Nash. Newport born and bred, I'm really glad that these conversations are being recorded as the information is too valuable to be lost. In one recording, an interviewer imagined future primary school children using the recordings to research local flora and fauna! I hope so.

I love to listen as personalities and relationships slowly emerge over the course of the conversations. I've been moved by the cosy companionship of a farmer and his wife as they reflect on the effects of change on both their own family and the local community, each gently reinforcing the other's memories and finishing each other's sentences. I've been inspired by the mutual respect of butterfly enthusiasts, talking with passion and an eagerness to ensure that their knowledge and observations are recorded accurately and completely.

My own memories have been stirred too, with depictions of the Whitsun Fayre I remember attending as a child, in my new white shoes of which I was so proud. The evocative description of a pink sunrise over the Severn Estuary brought back memories of countless sunsets (never a sunrise, to be honest) walks along the sea-wall at Goldcliff... I could go on.

I've been helping out only for a month or so and have already got so much out of it for myself – to say nothing of an enjoyable way to spend a few hours each day during the coronavirus lockdown. Now, mind and emotions stretched and exercised, all I need now is that (on-line) yoga class!



ORCHARD RESTORATION WORK

Thankfully before the present restrictions, our Orchard Restoration project completed a pretty full season of different activities across the Gwent Levels including training, planting, mapping and restoration. Beccy Williams explains all.

The Orchard season has been a busy one, and the weather hasn't helped as old orchards are not the place to be in gale force winds! One of the tasks of the project is to map orchards across the Gwent Levels which has been an ongoing task for a while. We have been looking at the old 1888 maps of the area and comparing them with google maps of today and it appears many orchards have been lost or severely reduced. We have started our next task which is to visit and 'ground-truth' (see for ourselves) them which as you can image is a big task!



I did however find one in a different way; stopping near St Brides to buy eggs, the lady asked if we were still looking for orchards. She revealed an amazing old orchard hidden behind a barn, complete with an old hay rick bird feeder. Her and her husband had tended it for many years but due to circumstances, the orchard was looking very sad and over grown which is a common story across the Levels.

I am seconded from Gwent Wildlife Trust and while running the Tuesday volunteer group, I pinched them and took them to the Orchard! Working tirelessly all day, the volunteers made such a difference, finding all sorts of treasure under the brambles and rescued many trees too.

We have been back again since and the owners are so pleased to see their orchard reappearing. The volunteers particularly like it there as the lovely lady who owns the orchard likes to feed them as a thank you!

DNA tests

In Spring 2019, we collected samples of DNA from the apple and pear trees in the old orchards across the Levels. These were sent off to East Malling Services for testing to establish what varieties are currently growing and if we have any new or unknown varieties. Finally, just after Christmas we had the pear results and then a few weeks later the apple ones.

Initially, it appears that no Welsh specific varieties have been found in the identified varieties. However, we have three unknown pears and three unknown apples, which means we may have discovered varieties specific to the Levels, so the plan moving forward would be to name and register the new trees and hopefully graft from them to create more trees of that variety. We also hope to be working with Aberystwyth University to tap into their expertise and testing.

Fruit tree planting update

This season we have been locating 77 traditional Welsh heritage Cider and Perry trees, temporarily located in Goldcliff, across the Levels for schools, community groups and local people who want to start a new orchard or rejuvenate their old ones.

Children at the Dell school in Chepstow and Bishop Childs School in St Mellons got involved in planting trees in their grounds.

Year 6 at Bishop Childs planted their trees before the Christmas Fayre, at the end of November, with the pupils learning about the Levels and fruit trees and how to plant them. The sign of a good day is when you go home muddy, which in that case the whole of this class had a very good day!

The Dell Primary school in Chepstow was a mixed group of different ages from Reception to year 6 who already maintain the school "farm area" looking after chickens and planting vegetables, so the fruit trees will enhance this area. We hit a few rocks along the way (or were they Dinosaur bones?!) but look forward to going back and seeing how a they are getting on in the Autumn. Chepstow already has an enthusiastic Orchard group and community orchard and wildlife trail, so hopefully the school will link in with them Chepstow.co.uk.

St Cadoc's Church in St Brides heard about the trees we had on offer and asked to plant an orchard in their churchyard, but the area was over grown, so with the help of students from Coleg Gwent's 'Life Skills' course alongside local volunteers, the space was cleared in no time. The plan had been to plant them on the St Brigid's day in February, but the weather had different ideas! The trees eventually did get planted by a group of local volunteers and the hope is other local orchards in the area will join together with St Brides and maybe a local cider and Perry will be produced!



The Woodland Routes to Wellbeing Project in Duffryn, who are working with Keep Wales tidy transforming the woodland area in Duffryn, have also benefited from the project. The group had already planted a few fruit trees but with the help of their volunteer group, we planted more trees to enhance their orchard.

We have more trees to distribute next season including two more schools and other groups and orchards across the levels.

I want to say a big thank you to everyone who has helped so far as I couldn't have done it without your help. I am planning a regular day that volunteers can meet and work in the orchards so if you are interested in joining in please get in touch via our [website!](http://www.chepstow.co.uk)

IN THE ORCHARD

One of the aims of the project is to connect local orchard owners and upskill them so they understand more about their orchard and how to look after it. With this in mind, the Orchard Restoration Project has brought in the services of Herefordshire's Laurence Green to teach pruning, plant and management techniques, as he explains here in his regular feature...

Hi, I'm Laurence, aka "The Orchard Tamer" and over the coming editions of this newsletter I'll be helping you through all things orchardy. Don't worry if you only have a couple of fruit trees, I'll do my best to make the pruning tips relevant, and lots of the ground management can be replicated to help wildlife in gardens.

Spring and early summer can be busy times for the trees, but only if you didn't do any winter pruning. March and April are still fine for pruning apples and pears. You want to encourage lots of growth this year, although the later you leave it the less vigorous the response will be (and you still won't get much fruit.) CHECK FOR NESTING BIRDS BEFORE REMOVING LARGER LIMBS. Please! Stone fruits (and walnuts and mulberries) must only be pruned when it is warm and dry, so unless you're desperate it's probably best to wait until high summer.

Pic 1 Cutting last year's growth will result in strong growth this year from the new end bud, and in the direction it is pointing in.

Pic 2 Cutting into older growth will result in several buds producing multiple strong shoots. Imagine the tree thinking "I need as many leaves out there as I used to have."

This is a critical time of year for pollinators, and fruit blossom is welcome to bees, butterflies and myriad flies (yes, they're under-rated pollinators, the minimum wagers!). On the ground, dandelions are fantastic for bumblebees, so learn to treasure them. They give way to annuals as the grass grows, which is just one reason to mow as little possible. Do cut paths, though, it gives you somewhere to walk even if it's wet, and reptiles appreciate basking spots close to cover. Frogs, toads and newts love long grass, and if you don't have any piles of rocks round the edge of the orchard this is a great time of year to put a few in. Amphibians live in them, helping with slug control for the gardeners, while woodpiles help beetles, also voracious consumers.

Above all this is the time of year to enjoy orchards, smell the blossom, revel in the sudden explosion of wildlife and bathe in the greens of the emerging foliage.

If you have a question do drop us a line and I'll try to answer a couple each time.

Be well, Laurence

TAMER FOR HIRE! Laurence is available for training (for groups or households) pruning, advice on orchard management and wildlife friendly gardening. See www.theorchardtammers.co.uk or email laurence@theorchardtamer.co.uk





EXPLORE THE 1830S WITH THE LIVING LEVELS HISTORIC MAP VIEWER AND HELP US EXPAND IT FURTHER!

Scores of volunteers have been helping DigVentures to create an interactive online map of the Gwent Levels' historic landmarks. Maggie Eno explains how you can add even more to the map – from home!

Last summer, we put out a call for volunteers to join us for a week of archaeology in Redwicks Village. To our delight, over 40 people joined us, helping us to carry out a whole series of excavations and surveys to learn more about the rich history that makes this region so unique.

Since then, we've been working with 'Pushing the Sensors' to create 'The Living Levels Historic Map Viewer' - an interactive online map that brings all of these discoveries together into one place and now, our first historic layer is nearly ready for you to explore!

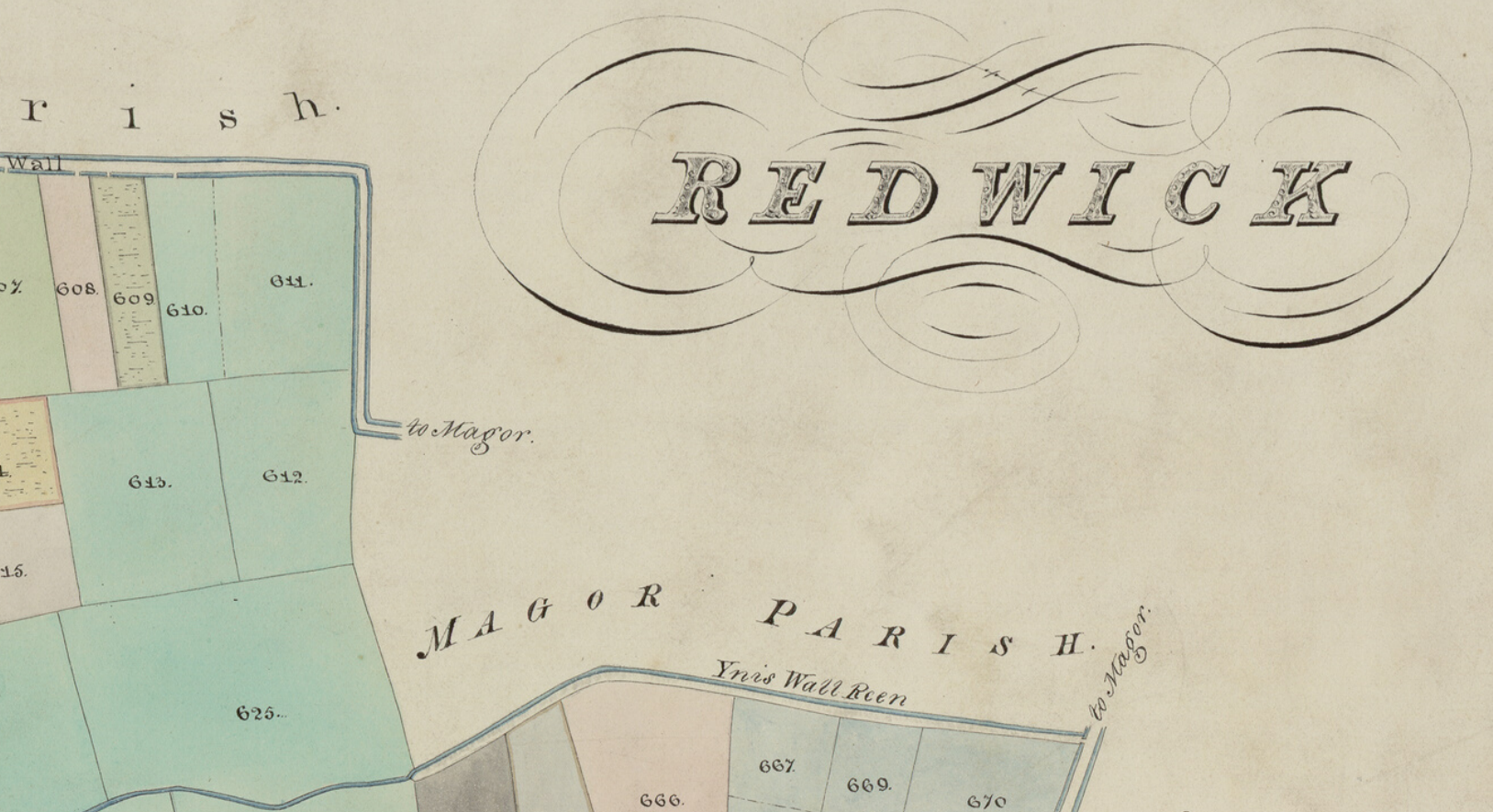
This layer is the result of our first big project 'Map the 1830's Landscape' and, thanks to the RATS volunteers, you will see who owned each field in the Levels in 1830s. In fact, we owe an extra special round of applause to Jeremy and Mike who mapped 99% of the locations! (available to explore later this spring).

Our next big goal is to start looking for new archaeological sites that we can add to the map by searching through the local LiDAR data (topographical maps made by laser scanning). We'll be collecting all this information to complete the first full LiDAR transcription for the Gwent Levels!

The tools we need to do this are all available online and, over the next few months, we'll be looking for more volunteers to help us do it. Never done anything like it before? No problem! We've got all the resources you'll need for learning how to identify potential archaeological sites among the LiDAR data, and an easy-to-use tool for flagging things up when you think you might have found something. And the good news is, you can do it all from home!

Thanks to our amazing volunteers, the Historic Map is already coming to life. But there's loads more that we can add to it. With so many of us currently staying at home, this is the perfect opportunity to join the project and help us search for new archaeology from your sofa.

Whether you want to find out more about volunteering, or just want to see what we've already achieved, just visit livinglevelsgis.org.uk



The 1830's Court of Sewers maps for the Gwent Levels are a fascinating and beautiful collection, the originals of which you can discover at Gwent Archives. Mike Rees brings us the story of the man commissioned to produce these wonderful documents.

Thomas Morris was born about 1790 at Newland, Gloucestershire. He later settled at Stow Hill, Newport, and worked as a civil engineer, land surveyor and land agent. One of his great contributions to the history of the Gwent Levels lies in a series of maps and books of reference commissioned by the Court of Sewers, now online at livinglevelsgis.org.uk

These were created because it was necessary to know who was responsible for maintaining every section of sea wall, ditch and reen, and also the sluices and weirs. The maps and books provide details of every parcel of land on the low-lying Caldicot and Wentlooge Levels. The Court of Sewers minute book (1824–1838), censuses, trade directories and newspaper archives help to tell Morris's story.

At a Court of Sewers held on 3rd January 1828, Morris (then in his late thirties) was directed to proceed in his survey of the Levels. He completed the Caldicot Level in 1830 and the Wentlooge Level the following year, receiving payments totalling £395. Subsequently, he was allowed to charge for copies of the Levels maps at the rate of four pence per acre for every acre not exceeding one hundred, and three pence per acre thereafter.

THE MAN BEHIND THE MAPS

The maps were not only used by the Court of Sewers and its surveyors, but also by Newport Borough Council and in connection with the railways. Morris also produced tithe maps and apportionments (the written details for each parcel of land), with thirty-seven of those for Monmouthshire attributed to him. These are available online at places.library.wales

On 4th November 1839, nearly 10,000 Chartist sympathisers marched down Stow Hill past Morris's house and into Newport. Thomas Morris was called as a witness at the trial of their leader, John Frost, the following year. The Gloucestershire Chronicle reported how a plan of the borough of Newport produced by Morris was used to demonstrate the approach routes of the demonstrators.

On 14 August 1863, the Cardiff & Merthyr Guardian reported Morris's death: 'Aug. 6, at his residence, Stow Hill, Newport, aged 73 years Thomas Morris, Esq, CE. Deceased was an old and much respected inhabitant of that town, and for many years was one of the corporation, and held the office of alderman of the Borough.'

You can discover Thomas's maps from the comfort of your own home by visiting livinglevelsgis.org.uk

WEBSITE SAFARI

This is one site that isn't closed...

WIN A PRIZE!

Explore the glorious GwentLevels from the safety of your home on our Website Safari every Monday at 9am on Facebook and Twitter

@ourlivinglevels

Get the correct answer to a tricky question and be in the draw for a glorious prize to enjoy when we're back to normal!

Visit us at...

www.livinglevels.org.uk



HELP SPREAD THE WORD

If you think of someone, or a group of people, who might be interested in finding out more about Living Levels and getting involved, please do pass this newsletter on or recommend our website www.livinglevels.org.uk

CONTACT US

We'd love to hear from you!

If you've any questions about the programme or getting involved, drop us a line on:

info@livinglevels.org.uk or call us on: 01633 292982

UNSUBSCRIBE

If you don't wish to receive further updates about Living Levels, please let us know to unsubscribe you from this list.

Please e-mail:
info@livinglevels.org.uk

SOCIAL MEDIA

Follow us on social media:
[@ourlivinglevels](#) on [Facebook](#),
[Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

DATA PROTECTION

If you would like to know more about your data protection rights please see our privacy policy (www.livinglevels.org.uk)

