

Friends of the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley - Newsletter  
No.5 February 2017

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## Dear Friends

### WE'RE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

This latest newsletter gives me the chance to thank all our members for the support they have given to Friends over the last year or so. We are going from strength to strength and I know that the interest we show is greatly appreciated by the full time team.

Amazingly for an infant organisation, we had twenty six separate events last year and grateful thanks go to our tireless Events Secretary, Neville, for all his work in this connection. There was a full house at Loggerheads for our first event of 2017 too – a fascinating talk by David Shiel on the Jubilee Tower. There will be plenty more to come as the year enfolds.

Next month Welsh Government will be launching its response to the recent review of protected landscapes in Wales and there will be more about that in the next issue. We have articles from Neville Howell about past events and Mike Skuse about his second favourite charity as well as a new contributor, Val Blair, who tells us about Chris Potter's talk on the North Wales Pilgrims' Way. There's also our first letter to the editor – keep them coming!

One of the perks of being the editor is that I get to write the "Meet the Team" article. I must say it's been a real pleasure to get to know such enthusiastic and

committed people who are also genuinely friendly and great ambassadors for the AONB. This is a series that will be a regular feature and I hope you will all get the chance to meet members of the team on your visits to our special landscape.

Enjoy the newsletter.

John

John Roberts - Editor

## **GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS AND THE AONB**

Friends recently had the rare chance to visit St Beuno's College, the Jesuit retreat near Tremeirchion. Whilst we were there we were privileged to see the corridor devoted to the memory of the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who was a student at the College from 1874 to 1878. It was an extremely important period in Hopkins' relatively short life and reminded me that perhaps we don't make enough of this groundbreaking figure's local connections.



Let me get one thing straight at the outset – I've got no academic base from which to discuss Hopkins apart from studying him at A level more years ago than I care to remember. I only want to draw attention to the poet's sojourn in the AONB and how some of his best and most celebrated work was written whilst he was living at St Beuno's.

The permanent worth of Hopkins as a writer can perhaps be understood at three levels. Firstly he is a powerful and profound religious poet. Secondly, with his introduction of sprung rhythm and other poetic innovations, he is an acknowledged master of original style. Thirdly, and the aspect that concerns us here, he is one of the most celebrated of the nature poets in the English language.

Hopkins was born, the eldest of eight children, to a prosperous middle class family in Essex in 1844. He was an outstanding scholar at Highgate School and Balliol College, Oxford and was received into the Catholic Church in 1866. After achieving a first class degree in Greats, he joined the Society of Jesus in 1868.

Whilst Hopkins had always been interested in poetry – he won the poetry prize at Highgate – he frequently wrestled with his gift. On moving to St Beuno's, he broke a seven year silence in 1875 with his first great poem, "The Wreck of the Deutschland".

This long epic to the memory of five nuns killed in a shipwreck incorporated almost all the elements of his new rhythm and also drew inspiration from elements of Welsh which the poet was struggling to learn.

A number of masterpieces with a natural theme then emerged, including perhaps his most well known poem "Pied Beauty" and his own particular favourite "The Windhover". This Tremeirchion period was really productive and the inspiration provided by the landscape in and around St Beuno's must surely have been the catalyst to this wellspring of creative effort. The "azurous hung hills" referenced in Hopkins' poem "Hurrahing in Harvest", inspired whilst walking back to St Beuno's after a day's fishing on the Elwy is, to my mind, a perfect description of the Clwydian hills. In contrast, his poem "The Sea and the Skylark", in which he compares the lark ascending with a shallow and frail town, was apparently written after a visit to Rhyl!

Hopkins moved away from St Beuno's in 1878, taking up a series of teaching appointments and parish priest duties in various parts of England and then Ireland. He continued to write poetry – none of which was published in his lifetime – but it became increasingly introspective and dark, culminating in the so called "terrible sonnets" where the poet fought against his doubt and despair.

Always in frail health, Hopkins died in Dublin in 1889 aged only forty five. Fortunately, through his friendship with the poet Robert Bridges, his work was safeguarded and eventually published. He was able to take his rightful place as one of the greatest and most innovative poets in the English language. How wonderful that our own AONB was able to play its important part in shaping the inspiration that went into some of his best work.

Whilst he was in Ireland he sometimes stayed with a family in Monasterevin in County Kildare and they now have an annual festival there, both to celebrate the connection and to further the understanding of his literary legacy. Perhaps we too should celebrate our local connection more than we do!

## **VISIT TO ST BEUNO'S JESUIT RETREAT**

The morning proved to be one of those bright autumn mornings with distant mist but sunlight lighting the last un-shed leaves of beach and ash. Low down in the valleys of Clwyd, Elwy and Conwy the mist formed ponds, not so on the peaks of Snowdonia with Tryfan, Glyderau and Yr Wyddfa itself sharply silhouetted against the only slightly clouded sky. 17 and a bit of us gathered in the car park to admire the autumn hues and distant landscapes. The "bit" was a toddling and very well behaved grandchild of 2 of our guest visitors.

On entry, we were met and greeted by Father Dermot O'Connor S.J., the Father Superior, and Father Stan Dye M.Afr. We enjoyed tea, coffee and biscuits and were then invited into the lecture room, having been asked to observe silence wherever

the floor was carpeted to respect some retreat guests on a silent retreat. Fr O'Connor gave us a brief introduction to the Jesuit Order and its history and also to the building in 1848 of the Spirituality Centre that we were in. He also referred to one of St Beuno's more famous residents, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Victorian poet and a Jesuit Priest.

"Away in the loveable west,  
On a pastoral forehead of Wales,  
I was under a roof here, I was at rest...."

*Gerard Manley Hopkins*

We then toured the gardens with its sweeping flight of steps decorated on both sides at this time of year with well-tended borders of cosmos, verbena and penstemon. (I know, 'cos I asked the gardener!). On to the woodlands, where we saw many places for contemplation and the prayer labyrinth and also the cemetery where previous resident Jesuit brothers were buried at 2 to a grave. (Fr Superior added – "whether they liked each other or not".)

A return was then made to the lecture room via the chapel with its hammer beam roof. Fr. Dye gave an insight into what form a "Retreat" might take, bringing out whatever the individual had to offer, prose, poetry, sketching, painting, carving, photography or simply their presence.

Both Frs. O'Connor and Dye answered any questions that we raised, before we left feeling very much more aware of how St Beuno's extends a welcome to all who seek a time of reflection, prayer and peace.

We are very grateful to the 2 Fathers for hosting our visit and also Beth Robshaw, the Retreat Secretary for making the arrangements.





## THE JOHN MUIR TRUST - My Second Favourite Charity

The John Muir Trust is a Scottish Charity named after a Scot who grew up in the USA, where he spent his life working towards the creation of the Great National Parks of America in the Rockies - Yosemite, Sequoia, etc. He died in 1914.

He pioneered the conservation movement in the States, and especially worked towards the concept of *Wild Places* – places where the footprint of man is reduced to nearly nothing.

The Trust was founded in 1983 “to safeguard the future of wild land against development and to promote awareness and recognition of the value of wild places.” It has been remarkably successful over the years – it has over 10,000 members and an annual income of around £2 million.

It owns six mountainous properties in Scotland, including part of Ben Nevis ..... and this is the point of this article..... it seeks to expand its interests into Wales. Whether they would consider any part of our AONB to be “wild” is frankly pretty unlikely, and whether they could buy it is also quite unlikely.....but they are also keen on “re-wilding” and I guess there’s quite a lot of scope for that hereabouts?

As well as their principal work in the management of large tracts of hilly land, they also run the “John Muir Award”, which “encourages people to connect with, enjoy and care for wild places in a spirit of fun, adventure and exploration.” Groups have to

1. *Discover* a wild place (this could be anywhere at all, from a school field to the top of Dinas Bran);
2. *Explore* it (maps and investigations into animal and plant life);
3. *Conserve* it (do something to actually make the place better, perhaps restoring a pond, or repairing footpaths, or planting a hedge); and
4. *Share* their experiences (write it up for local people in an interesting way).

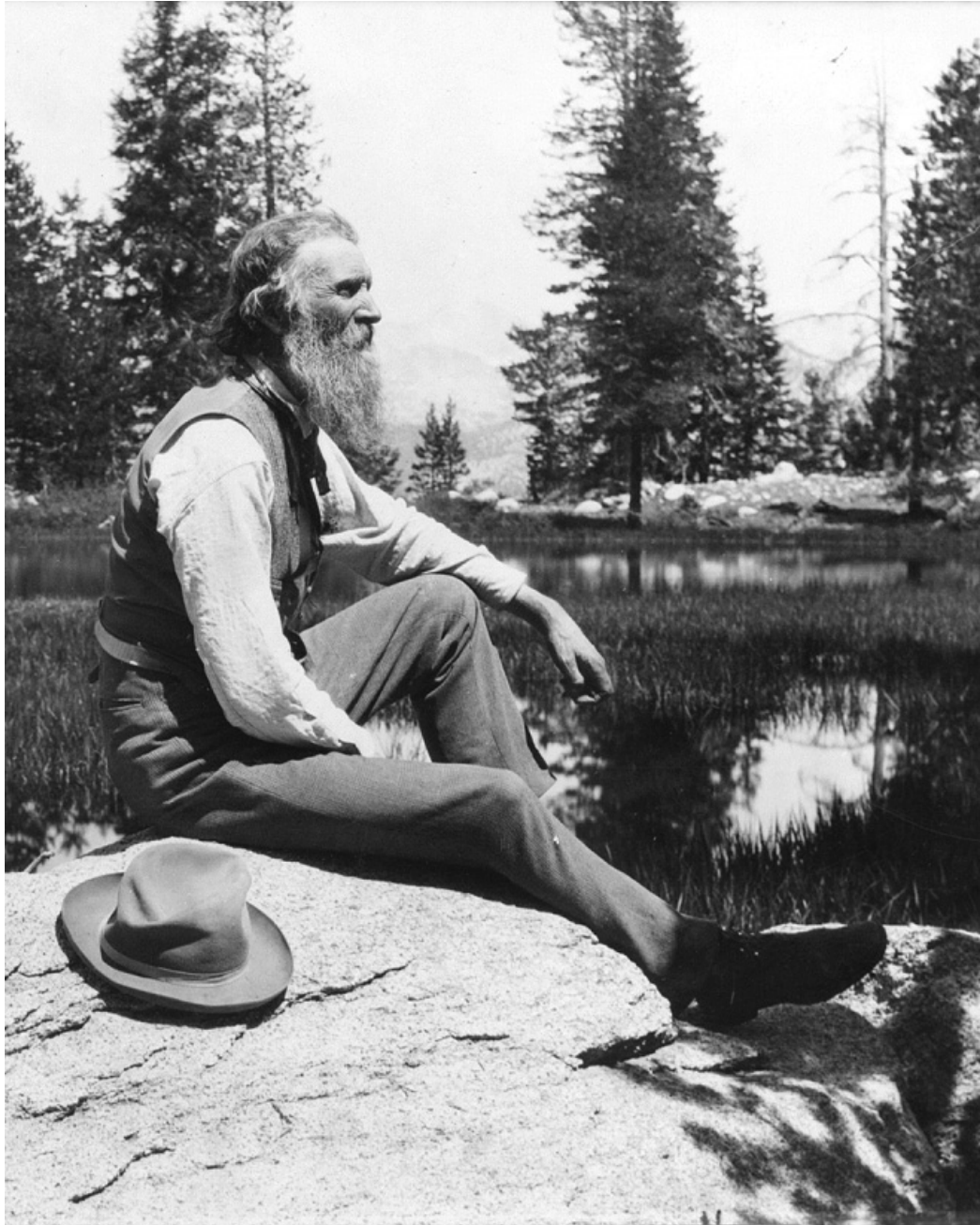
Getting this Award is very prestigious and takes up to a year to achieve success. It would be really great if some “Friends” could get together to find an appropriate place in the AONB and have a go at this. But even if we feel that we are not quite ready for a big challenge like this, I think that we should try to get closer to this superbly-run charity in some way or other. They are, as I said, keen to expand into Wales.

The Trust has a full time staff member in Wales, Phil Stubbington, who I am sure



would be delighted to come and tell us all about it. He knows Howard Sutcliffe and David Shiel, and has worked with them to roll out the Award at several schools in our area.

Their website is [www.johnmuirtrust.org](http://www.johnmuirtrust.org) . Do have a look at it.



## **MEET THE TEAM - JOHN MORRIS, COUNTRYSIDE WARDEN**

Your Friends' Correspondent had arranged to meet John fairly early in the day, but when I arrived he'd already been out to check on some contractors - putting down 20 metres of Yorkshire stone underneath the bridge at Devil's Gorge to

improve access to the cavern entrance. It was an interesting topic with which to start our conversation and, as I'd found with my previous "victims", it was going to turn out to be a real pleasure.

John's from a farming family in Llandyrnog and, after a successful time at Brynhyfryd School in Ruthin, he found his "ace" degree course at Bangor University – that's Agriculture, Conservation and Environment to you and me! Combining John's love of farming with his passion for the countryside it was the perfect fit and he graduated in 2012. He was fortunate enough to quickly find a job suitable for his skills – covering for maternity leave as a warden in the AONB. There was no money to keep John on at the end of his short term contract but he'd made a good impression and, after a period looking after coastal issues in Flintshire, he secured the permanent post he wanted in 2014. Not that he's abandoned his farming ambitions as I'd shortly find out. This is how he responded to my questions:-

Apart from the work at Devil's Gorge what are you up to at the moment?

I work across the whole of the Clwydian Range right down to Prestatyn hillside but, because I'm also covering for Ruth's maternity leave, I'm spending a lot more time in and around Loggerheads at the moment. One of our key tasks is to try and improve the limestone grassland in and around the cliffs. This is tricky, partly because of the steep terrain and partly because of the sheer pressure of people on the more accessible areas. We need to clear the overgrowth but also properly protect the cleared areas to ensure native species thrive. It's a difficult balance.

Any particular species you'd like to tell me about?

Yes, we have been doing a lot of work on an area known as the Butterfly Glades. We've been supported in managing this area by butterfly conservation volunteers and we're trying to create conditions where we'll see the return of the Grizzled Skipper, a butterfly native to the area but which hasn't been recorded for fifteen years. We're optimistic!

I suppose clearing the overgrowth is just down to sheer hard work – do you have any support?

Yes, we have a group of very willing volunteers - and we're fencing off one particularly difficult area and introducing some saddleback pigs on a short term basis to give us a hand! We're also employing specialists who will use ropes to get to some of the otherwise inaccessible spots.

It was really busy here at Christmas and New Year – how difficult was that?

It's always good to see so many people out and enjoying themselves here but it does bring a few problems too. Damage to habitat and thoughtless littering is a

worry, as is the minority – but an increasing minority – who don't know how to control their dogs in the countryside. People do tend to congregate in the same spots and it was a relief that the new car park at Loggerheads was open in time. It's a fine viewpoint too and we're planting 150 metres of new hedge using native species – hazel, hawthorn and maple.

You're from a farming background. Does this help in your work with the AONB?

Certainly – we need to work closely with the farming community in many ways and being a farmer myself gives me a better feel for how to go about things in a way which benefits both the AONB and the person working the land.

What's your own involvement in farming?

I've taken over nearly 70 acres in Llandyrnog that used to be farmed by my Taid. It's difficult to get a start in farming as a young person and I've concentrated to begin with on producing hay, haylage and silage. The bales have sold well and I'm now getting established. It's hard work on top of a full time job and there have been setbacks but I love doing it. In the longer term I hope to run a small herd of pedigree Hereford cattle but that will have to wait for a little while.

Do you have time for any other interests?

Not really! I do like rallying and used to have my own rally car but I'm also fascinated by machinery and this fits in with work on the farm. I've got three tractors of varying vintage and I'd love to own a combine one day.

Do you see your longer term future with the AONB or in farming?

Both – I think I can successfully marry the two and it's so rewarding to be involved in fields which are complementary to one another.

Finally, where's your favourite place in the AONB?

You can't beat Pen y Cloddiau – Moel Famau without the crowds!

It was time to let John get on with his busy day and, in crisp winter sunshine, I set off for my planned walk with an extra spring in my step, having seen again that the AONB is in the best of hands with its committed and enthusiastic staff.





## ANORAK's CORNER

In the last issue we talked about the fifteen Trig Points in the AONB and it started me thinking about other features which might be of interest. Hills are always a talking point and everyone is familiar with Munro's list of Scottish peaks over three thousand feet. By now a number of other lists have been compiled, including the Nuttalls – mountains in England and Wales over 2000 feet high and which rise above their surroundings on all sides by at least 50 feet. The AONB is, of course, the gentle face of north Wales but our highest point, Moel Fferna at 2065 feet, is one of 190 Welsh mountains which qualify for Nuttall status. It's a great viewpoint too and well worth the effort of getting to the summit, though there's no sign of its trig point these days.

A more relevant list is the so called Marilyn's – compiled by Alan Dawson and obviously deriving its name as a play on words with Munros! A Marilyn is any hill in Great Britain with a drop of 150 metres or more on all sides – in other words relatively high compared to its surrounding s and therefore a fine viewpoint. There are 158 on the Welsh list and we have seven in the AONB. Moel Famau, of course, but its neighbours, Moel Fenlli, Moel Gyw and Pen y Cloddiau also qualify. Cyn y Brain and Moel Gamelin in the Llantisilio range are included, the latter being the highest Marilyn in the Area, and the list is completed by Mynydd y Cwm in the northern part of the AONB.

Another list which caught my eye was the Deweys – comprising hills which exceed 500 metres but are below 610 meters (2000 feet) and separated from adjacent tops by at least 30 metres. The AONB has nine representatives in this table out of a

Welsh total of 241. The Llantisilio range is the main contributor with five - Moel Gamelin, Moel y Faen, Moel y Gaer, Moel Morfudd and Cynr y Brain with Eglwyseg Mountain as an outlier. There are two on the south side of the Dee Valley – Vivod Mountain and Bryn y Llus near Liberty Hall – and Moel Famau and Moel Fenlli complete the list.

Remarkably, ten people have now completed all 1556 of the Marilyn's in England, Scotland and Wales! - including the first woman late last year. I don't advocate taking it all that seriously but using these lists can sometimes persuade you to visit areas which might otherwise be neglected and it leads to some great days and pleasant surprises. None of the hills mentioned above are too arduous and they're all splendid panoramas.

Next issue – Humps and Tumps !!



I read with great interest your 'TRIG points in the AONB' piece in the last 'Friends' news letter.

The Trig Points are indeed an integral part of our landscape, it is a strange-but-true fact, many hill walkers actually have great affection for them.

There are avid groups of Trig-Point-Baggers calling themselves 'Trigpointers', we met one of their members last year, he was on a quest to 'bag' every British Trig Point.



I have to admit to being a Trig Point admirer and have great respect for the intrepid engineers who erected them.

Some years ago I adopted the Trig Point on the Worcestershire Beacon, Malvern Hills, Worcestershire and gave it a much needed coat of paint.

During 2017, I propose to visit all 15 AONB Trig Points, or at least their locations as a series of day walks, this I think will be a fantastic way of seeing our wonderful AONB landscape, from north to south, east to west.

If there are other 'Friends' members who would like to join me in this quest and become AONB Trig Pointer - contact: Mike Smart at [hello@treksmart.net](mailto:hello@treksmart.net)

## PILGRIM'S WAY

It was standing room only at Y Caban, Plas Newydd, Llangollen on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2016 when the Venerable Chris Potter, retired Arch Deacon of St Asaph gave a presentation about the North Wales Pilgrims Way.

Chris Potter was inspired to set up The North Wales Pilgrims Way after walking the Camino de Santiago, the pilgrims' way across Northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela. A small team identified a 130 mile route using existing rights of way from Basingwerk Abbey to Bardsey Island, a place of pilgrimage for centuries, passing through places historically inhabited. The route, which goes through the AONB, has been mapped and waymarked and was officially opened in 2014. There is also a web site containing lots of useful information. Since the Pilgrims Way was opened Chris Potter and a group of pilgrims have walked the route annually so any issues can be identified and to ensure it isn't too overgrown. Pilgrims can acquire a passport which can be stamped at various places along the way.

The presentation included details of the many small churches along the route, some of which provide hospitality to pilgrims. The views en-route are stunning. There are also many features, natural and man-made to contemplate.

Chris talked about the various reasons people undertake pilgrimages and some of the challenges along the way such as the British weather. However on each of his pilgrimages the small boat to Bardsey had been able to make the trip without any delays.



## **FRIENDS OF THE CLWYDIAN RANGE AND DEE VALLEY AT RHYDYMWYN - 24/11/2016**

For the 2 days before this event the weather had been very unwelcoming, but this day dawned clear and bright if a little sharp; pleasant enough for walking.

The planned activities had been for the morning walk to take the internal peripheral path designated "The Woodland Walk" by DEFRA and their agents, North East Wales Wildlife. The afternoon session had been designed in partnership with Flintshire Disability Forum, FDF, to be suitable for wheelchairs and those with limited agility.

The morning walk was duly completed with 13 attendees, 5 of which being members of Friends. The foliage was passing its best in Autumnal shades, but pleasant enough. Several of the important wartime buildings were seen and inspected from this circuit.

FDF were not able to join the afternoon event, but 10 people did walk, 5 of which were Friends. This was on well-surfaced traffic-free roads inside the works. We were



fortunate to be accompanied by Sando Citra, part of the contracted Interserve Site Management team. Sando was able to answer many questions about the site's history and wildlife and open the tunnel doors to allow us to peer in at the huge storage areas. We returned to the Visitor Centre where Sando showed us a wartime recruitment film and a more modern one about the transformation of the site to a Nature Reserve.



## **A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ARON RICHARDS, TRAINEE WARDEN**

Day eleven as a Trainee Countryside Warden, and so far I've been involved with traditional skills such as coppicing areas of woodland in order to open up key views and improve its biodiversity, helping the Head Gardener at Plas Newydd, undertaking visitor surveys at Horseshoe Falls, improving a flower rich area of limestone grassland in Llangollen, just some of the small jobs that go into making sure the Dee Valley remains an area esteemed for its outstanding natural beauty.

But as interesting as I'm sure you'll find me harping on about the joys of the leaf blower, or the occupational hazard of falling squirrels (both of which I was introduced to at Plas Newydd), I think the best way to begin this blog is to look at the bigger picture, 390 km<sup>2</sup> of it!

Stretching from Prestatyn Hillside up north down south to the Berwyn Mountains, the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) is a designation that recognises the area's special qualities, its primary purpose being to conserve and enhance natural beauty (including flora, fauna and geological features).

That's our "Mission Statement" in a nutshell, one of proactive preservation, because as picturesque as the Countryside may be, it isn't "just there", unchanging as if some pastoral painting, but rather the result of thousands of years of cultivation as a living and working landscape.



This landscape, the face of the earth, relates its history as might the face of a person, each feature an expression of its character, each mark or scar a trace of a story, stories deeply rooted in our communities whether we recognise them or not.

From hillforts to hedgerows, forests to fields, the landscape bears the legacy of the people who toiled and thrived upon it to form the communities at the heart of what we can appreciate as the Countryside today.

It is a legacy to be adopted, not only remembered, ensuring that a practical relationship with our Countryside continues so that together we can take an active part in its story, whose legacy will run into the coming centuries as sure as does the Dee.

What our legacy will be remains to be seen, but the more people involved with the conservation of the Countryside, the more we safeguard its future, because all the small jobs we do as Countryside Wardens couldn't compare to what we could achieve working with the communities, the people, at the heart of the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB.

And that's why I'm writing this blog, to get in touch with you, to give a small insight into the work we do as part of our service in promoting and conserving our Countryside. So if you want to have your say or to get involved, don't hesitate, our Volunteer Programme for the end of this year up to March 2017 having just come out.

But above all else, wrap up, strap up, lace up and go out and enjoy the Countryside!

You can follow Aron's blog on the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Website <http://www.clwydianrangeanddeevalleyaonb.org.uk/breaking-news/#2896>



## FUTURE EVENTS

Friends have a varied programme of events up and coming over the next few months, ranging from a walk around the Tremeirchion area, a visit to two local scientific businesses, one leading the field in density metrology and the other in cattle breeding, a talk on Farming in the area, a visit to the Aqueduct with guide Sarah Jones, try your hand at bowling at Plas Newydd, a Welsh walk looking at place names in the Llangollen area and a geological walk in the Cwydian Range. Further details are available at our website, <http://friends.cymru/events>

If anyone would like to contribute an event we would be delighted to hear from you, please contact us at [hello@friends.cymru](mailto:hello@friends.cymru), or give our Events Secretary a call on 01244 535173.



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Recommend a Friend to Discover, Enjoy and Protect the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley  
[www.friends.cymru](http://www.friends.cymru)





Friends would like to thank the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Sustainable Development Fund for their support.

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