

RDP013 – ‘Where the Wild Things Are’ project

Pilot activity – burial grounds as Local Wildlife Sites

Introduction

Burial grounds can be surprisingly rich in wildlife, despite never being set up for that purpose. Burial grounds have largely avoided the agricultural intensification, development and pollution which has destroyed much of the wider countryside. Consistent management practices over a long period of time, has retained much of what has been lost elsewhere. However, burial grounds usually cover only a small area and support a range of different habitats, which makes them a challenge when considering them as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS).

One of the key objectives of the Where the Wild Things Are project was overhauling the existing system by which LWS are assessed and selected (criteria) to ensure that this process is easily workable and fully embedded within the planning system into the future. This presented us with the perfect opportunity to consider burial grounds in the process, something which has not been done in Powys before.

For many people burial grounds are the only locally accessible green space and yet, their heritage value, and even their continuing presence, cannot be taken for granted. They are under threat from development, closure, under-management and mis-management. It is important that these sites are valued and LWS present the perfect opportunity to do this. Burial grounds can also be used as a focal point for local people taking wildlife action and used to raise awareness about LWS more generally.

This is not without its challenges. The LWS system relies on working with landowners; LWS are not selected without permission from the landowner and appropriate management is ultimately at the discretion of the landowner/manager. A good relationship and regular engagement are therefore necessary for the system to work. By their very nature, burial grounds involve the interest of many people, often with conflicting views on how the sites should be managed and a greater level of sensitivity is required, when working with this range of parties. This can create barriers, but it is also an opportunity to make a difference to a whole community.

This pilot sought to test whether burial grounds could be selected as LWS and whether this could have a beneficial impact on the local people, as well as the wildlife.



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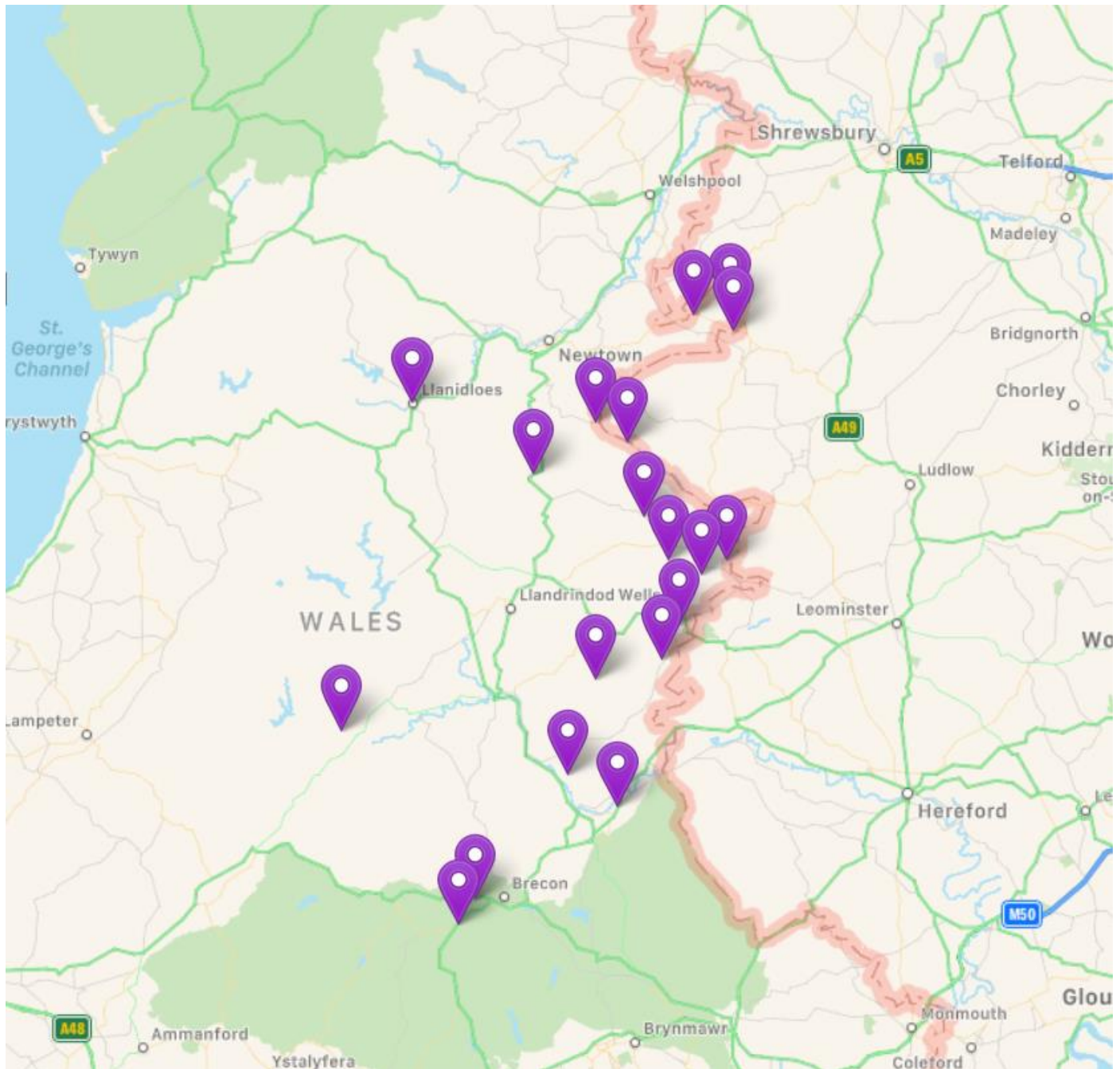
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Actions undertaken

To test this pilot, the three wildlife trusts in Powys (Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust (MWT), Radnorshire Wildlife Trust (RWT) and Wildlife Trust of South & West Wales (WTSWW)) worked with Caring for God's Acre (CfGA). CfGA values churchyards and burial grounds for their importance to people, history and wildlife. Their mission is to champion the conservation of churchyards and burial sites across the British Isles. Neatly coinciding with the Where the Wild Things Are project was CfGA's 'Beautiful Burial Grounds' and 'Biodiversity Hotspots in Mid Wales' projects, allowing the organisations to work in partnership to further the aims and objectives of all projects.

Between 2017 and 2019, a total of 19 burial grounds were surveyed, across Powys, as shown on the map below.

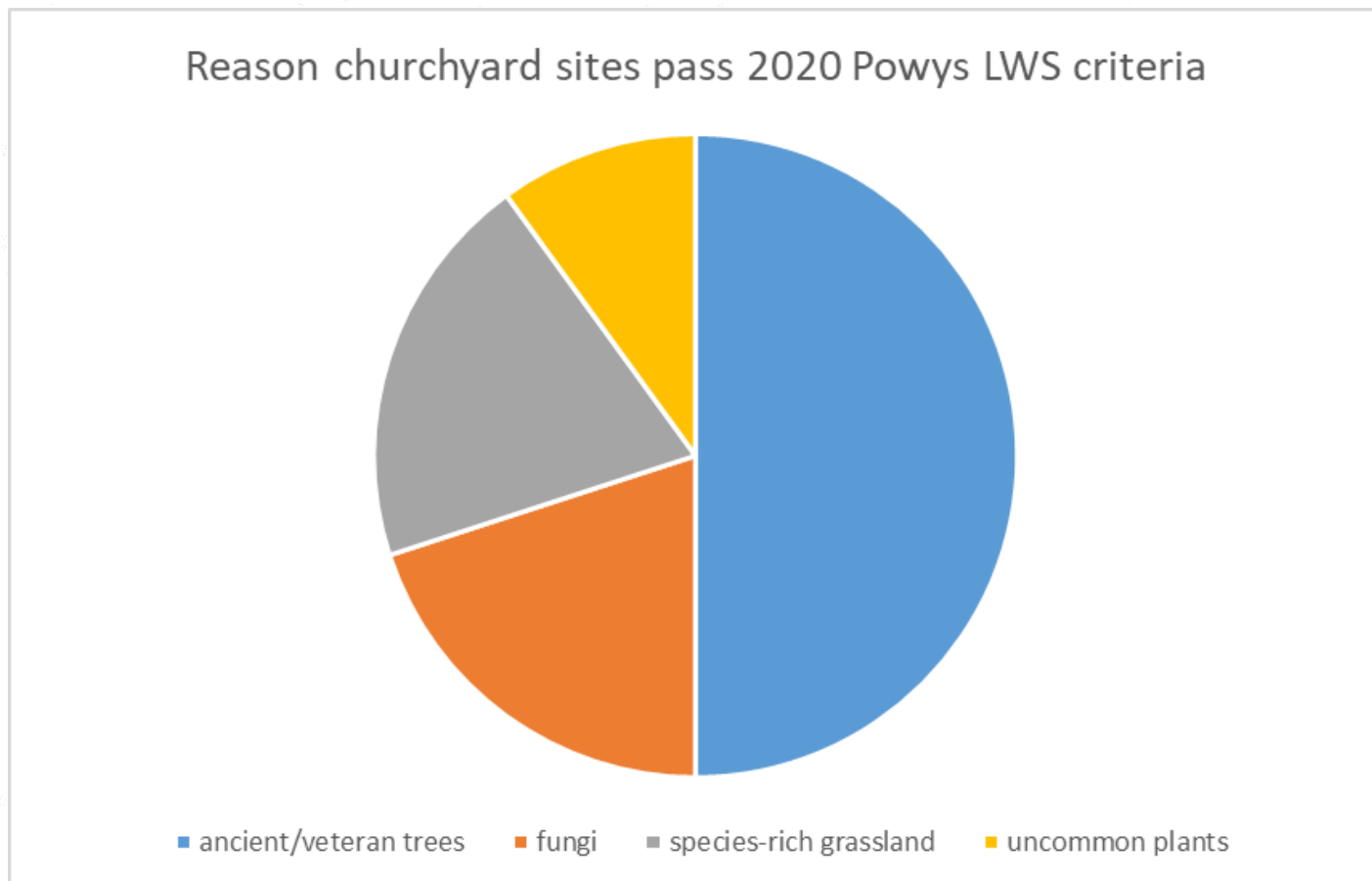


At some sites, events were also run for the local community, which aimed to get people engaged with these sites on their doorstep, as well as highlighting the value for people and wildlife. Training was provided in species identification and practical management skills.

Results



Nine of the churchyards have passed the 2020 Powys LWS criteria. As shown on the pie chart below, half these sites passed due to presence of ancient and/or veteran trees, two sites passed because they support rare or a good diversity of fungi, two are species-rich grassland sites; one of the latter also supports a plant species uncommon in Powys.



Where churchyards lack rare/uncommon wildlife or special trees, their small size and/or lack of species diversity mean that they often fail to reach the threshold required to be considered a Local Wildlife Site. Three sites are borderline; one has two veteran Yew trees, but their relatively small size could mean they are not deemed special enough to qualify; one just passes as lowland dry acid grassland and narrowly misses passing as lowland meadow, so could be considered a mosaic site; one has good diversity, but is below the size threshold required for lowland meadow sites. Sites which are borderline are likely to require further survey before a decision can be taken on whether or not to select them as Local Wildlife Sites.



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Due to the length of time taken to review the selection criteria, no new LWS have yet been selected, so it is too early to assess whether the sites status can have a beneficial effect on local people. However, what can be considered is the impact of the events which were run as part of the three projects.

Events were run at five burial grounds in Powys. These took the form of surveying & ID skills and/or practical management skills. We received positive feedback from all the events; 100% of those filling out the feedback forms from the ID sessions said that they would definitely do it again or they loved it. When asked if they valued the burial grounds more as a result of the session, 100% gave a score of either 4 or 5 (1 being valued less and 5 significantly more valued). Additional sessions to those originally planned were run, to build on the enthusiasm shown by the communities. Here are a few of the positive comments:

- *“people known to be more interested in eating cake, found themselves listening and learning”*
- *“having established a rapport with ..., we shall continue the link with ... and liaise on future projects”*
- *“fascinating session – lots to learn and use”*

At one burial ground, a week after the ID event, the church ran an outdoor thanksgiving service to which the wildlife trust was invited. 62 people were officially recorded as present and this included a number of children. Being present at this event, with bilingual information from the ID session, proved to be a particularly good way of engaging with the local community. We were able to reach people who would not have come to any of our events, helping to spread the message of the value of the site for wildlife. In addition, we made links with other local landowners, leading to further surveys and engagement in the community.



Measuring a veteran oak tree during a burial ground event, 16th July 2018

Conclusion

This pilot has proven that burial grounds can support sufficient wildlife value for them to pass the criteria for selection as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). None of the sites which have passed have been selected yet, but this is due to a lack of a finalised selection process to date, rather than a reflection of any difficulty in selection. It is expected that the sites which pass the criteria will be ratified by the Powys LWS Partnership in due course. Those which don't quite meet the criteria, or are less 'cut and dried', will also be discussed, as there may be a good justification for them to be selected. In some cases, further data would need to be collected before any decision can be taken.

Once sites are ratified by the Powys LWS Partnership, landowner permission would need to be given, before the sites could be selected as LWS. This is likely to be the most challenging part of the selection process, given the number of people involved in these sites and the complexity of that involvement. Unfortunately, we have not been able to test this during this pilot, as the criteria review was not completed in sufficient time. Without landowner permission, sites could be placed on a SINC (Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation) register. Although used widely elsewhere in the UK, including other parts of Wales, Powys does not currently have a formal SINC process, but this is another aspect that the Where the Wild Things Are project has been working on.

We were unable to show that selecting burial grounds as LWS has a beneficial effect on local people, but they have proven to be good locations in which to engage with the local community. We have seen that by running and attending events, we can show people the value of their local burial grounds for wildlife. They are also accessible venues from which to provide training for local people.

One of the Where the Wild Things Are project objectives was supporting enhanced access to existing and future LWS to ensure maximum health and well-being gains for local people. Given the location of burial grounds, usually in the heart of the community, as well as their value for wildlife, they represent a perfect opportunity for achieving this aim. Despite the challenges of working with a broad range of interests, our initial results have been very positive. It is likely that, to really make a lasting impact, we would need to work with each burial ground over a number of years, to help develop new relationships, policies and processes, for managing these sites optimally for nature and engaging local people with those sites.

Report written 19^h March 2020 by Tammy Stretton



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