

Case Study

Oral Histories and Archive Research – Heritage Volunteer Project

Background

Heathland is one of the many types of land-use in the South Downs National Park (SDNP) and describes lowland ‘barren’ areas that are dominated by colourful heather, gorse and bracken. It is home to a distinctive and diverse range of plants and animals, including a staggering 5,000 species of invertebrates, all six species of UK reptile, including the rare sand lizard, and birds, such as nightjar, stonechat, and the Dartford warbler.

UK heathland habitats and their associated species are currently threatened by a range of factors including: a lack of appropriate site management; habitat loss and fragmentation, perhaps due to new housing developments; air pollution; and recreational disturbance, from cycling, walking and dog walking.

11 organisations led by the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) have joined forces to expand, connect and protect the existing 1% of heathland left in the South Downs National Park (SDNP). The Heathlands Reunited project is funded by partner contributions and a £1.44 million Heritage Lottery Fund grant.

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/care-for/heathland/heathlands-reunited>



Artist Graeme Mitcheson demonstrates stone carving to Heritage Volunteers

The project

The Heathlands Reunited project involves preserving the heritage of the heathlands. 17 heritage volunteers were recruited between October and December 2017 to capture the stories of people who have worked and lived on seven of the heathlands within the South Downs National Park. Stories were captured through audio recordings and archive research.

The project also involves the creation of artwork on seven of the heathlands, by artist, Graeme Mitcheson. The Heritage Volunteers were assigned the task of inspiring Graeme by unearthing interesting human stories around the chosen heaths.

One team of volunteers were keen to conduct interviews with people. A training day was held, led by Gillian Edom, after which volunteers launched into a hectic four month period recording 32 interviews, writing summaries and working as a team to gain knowledge of human life on the heathlands. A second team of volunteers were keen to undertake research in various archives.

After a guided tour around the West Sussex Records Office by Matthew Jones, the archive research team took on one of the seven heathlands each. They independently visited libraries, museums, records offices and Google, delivering a wealth of information about each heath.

Some volunteers worked in both teams. The heritage project was completed by the end of April, when an afternoon event was held, where everyone met Graeme and had a chance to discuss the stories and try their hand at stone carving. All the information was then handed over to Graeme to help inspire his artwork.

“As a professional oral storyteller, knowledge gained regarding Heathlands has impacted on how I now tell some details of traditional tales.”

Janet Goring

The outcome

This heritage volunteer aspect of the Heathlands Reunited project engaged 17 volunteers for six months and provided training in interviewing techniques and research at the records office.

The voices of 33 people who work or live near the heathlands of the South Downs National Park were recorded, providing information and stories that may otherwise have been lost.

These recordings have been sent to the West Sussex Records Office and will be available for public access.

The recordings and the archive research have also been stored on the SDNPA database.

The volunteers involved in the project gained knowledge of the heritage of the heathland and experience in how to conduct interviews. They gained confidence in talking to people and helping them tell their stories, made friendships and worked as a team.

The project enabled people from all walks of life to tell their stories, which have been captured for future generations to enjoy.



Lessons

From this work we learned that interviewing people is time consuming and needs time dedicated to it to make it successful. Volunteers often felt people would benefit from being interviewed more than once to draw out the best stories.

In hindsight, more time would also be beneficial to identify interviewees. It was useful that some interviewees recommended people to interview, but this took longer than anticipated.

The future

To ensure long term sustainability:

- Recordings will be available to future generations at the West Sussex Records Office.
- Stories will be used to create a book for children to engage them with the heathlands and encourage future generations to take ownership and care for this rare habitat.
- This project will lead to significantly more people being engaged with and more knowledgeable about the many heathland sites in the South Downs National Park.

The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP) 2014–19 sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 11 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

Outcome 4 The condition and status of cultural heritage assets and their settings is significantly enhanced, many more have been discovered and they contribute positively to local distinctiveness and sense of place.

southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/SDNP-Partnership-Management-Plan-2014-19.pdf

May 2019