
Penllergare – A Paradise Almost Lost

“The real glory of Penllergare consists of its truly magnificent grounds, and its rare and beautiful plants which add a superabundance of attractions to a spot already marked by nature for special favours...For beauty and scenery there is nothing in the whole land of Morganwg to excel the valley of Penllergare”.

West Glamorgan Beauty Spot, *South Wales Daily News*, August 1910

“Years of wonder and delight are the memories of my childhood at Penllergare. It was a magical place”. “Penllergare was my playground of delight, discovery and learning for ten years.” *Penllergare – Echoes from Valley Woods*, Penllergare Trust, 2006.

“We protest in the strongest possible terms at the apparent freedom with which the developer is being permitted to destroy the historic fabric of Penllergare.”

Penllergare Trust to Director of Development, Swansea Council, September 2002

This is the story of how a combination of indifference, bureaucracy, and commercial muscle nearly did for one of the most important picturesque, romantic landscapes in South Wales, with a planning system vainly trying to exercise compliance. It also tells of how the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust had the audacity, energy and wit to call a halt and to prepare the way for the restoration and regeneration of this very special place by the Penllergare Trust.

Penllergare's Heyday

On the north-west fringe of Swansea, in a valley gouged out by melt-water from the last ice age, nestles the private paradise of Penllergare. Its creator was John Dillwyn Llewelyn (1810-1882), a prominent figure in Victorian society, and pioneer of science, horticulture and photography. Perhaps influenced by his contemporary Wordsworth who held that, “*The landscape gardener should work in the spirit of Nature with an invisible hand of art*”, JDL's genius was to realise the dramatic and functional potential of what was already a very pleasing place in a relatively small compass. The craggy confinement of the Upper Valley was re-modeled in the romantic picturesque style, with waterfalls, cascades and exotic plantings, in heightened contrast with the wooded pastures of the former Nydfwch estate to the south. Both contained perfectly contrived lakes on the energetic little River Llan and the whole was unified by the bold sweeps of his new drive with artfully placed views of the newly-created features and the hills beyond. The equatorial observatory and pioneering orchidaceous house were notable initiatives. The outcome combined innovation, domesticity and wilderness, made all the more dramatic given the noisome copper manufactories just a few miles away.



Penllergare House – a 19th-century drawing, artist unknown.

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The estate was a model of enlightened stewardship, philanthropy and the promotion of education. Emma Thomasina was herself a devoted plantswoman (her letters often left family news to an after-thought) and she helped JDL with his photography, perhaps unsurprisingly since Henry Fox Talbot was a cousin. She also took a leading role in the laying out at Knapllwyd of the first park (now Parc Llewelyn) specifically for people in the then newly industrialised Swansea valley below. As David Painting has observed, this was “... *a fruitful partnership between gifted husband and wife which tends to modify the stereotype of the passive Victorian lady of leisure*”.

Commercial Exploitation Looms

As the last unexploited part of the South Wales coalfield was being mined in and around Penllergare Sir John agreed in 1899 to the sinking of a pit on the demesne, provided that none of the buildings were to be visible from the house. By now ties with Swansea had begun to loosen in favour of Llysdinam and Penllergare was effectively abandoned with Sir John's death in 1927, although parts of the estate were subsequently bought back. WWII armies left their mark and eventually the derelict observatory remained as the one up-standing marker of what had been. Then the M4 motorway top-sliced the valley and another dual carriage-way shaved off the left flank, isolating the estate from its village. All the while the landscape became blurred, enveloped and eventually near-impassable by the luxuriant, exotic vegetation. So this focus of intellectual and practical polymathy and centre of local life began to sink out of sight and mind.

But even as the landscape deteriorated a few people retained a proprietorial concern for their remembered Woods. Others, younger and more adventurous, adopted this beautiful, neglected wildscape. Their nicknames were – and still

are - used for special places; 'Kiddies' is the river pool in which children had to stay until their peers were satisfied that they were capable of swimming in the lake. The observatory was 'The Lighthouse' and the waterfall was 'The Hidden'. Others saw the valley as a target for vandalism and destruction.

There was also a darker, commercial agenda. The now-absent landowners saw Valley Woods as a potential commercial investment. The local planners agreed that the valley was suitable for substantial, unobtrusive, mainly recreational usage. However this would not pay its way without housing development and a theme park, but part of the valley (including the waterfall) must be a country park with free walker access and the inherent natural beauty must be retained. A pedestrian link under the M4 would re-establish access to what were now Forestry Commission plantations to the north. There followed a succession of some 30 schemes ranging through wildlife, country and theme parks to a championship golf course and hotel, a leisure complex and housing: all still-born. What was billed as Swansea Bay's answer to Disneyland featured a theme park based on the lake. Upwards of a million visitors per annum were forecast. Planned to open in 1983, this scheme foundered too.

Undeterred, plans for a Royal Fern golf course were launched in 1987, complemented by the now-requisite theme park, country park, a working farm and housing plots. The next scheme was even more ambitious with executive training, fishing, boating, windsurfing, white water canoeing, riding, 'rough' cycling and beginner climbing, all linked by a rubber-wheeled train system. The forecast 300,000 visitors per annum (the National Botanic Garden of Wales hoped for a similar figure but eventually settled for half that) were to have parking for 2,000 vehicles at the so-called woodland centre, a visitor attraction in its own right with a retail arcade, a motel and restaurant. On the western side of the valley, there were to be 400+ housing plots and a hospital cum medical centre on the site of the forgotten walled garden, then classified simply as agricultural land.

Despite the prevailing economic boom there were warnings that this ambitious project faced substantial losses initially. There was another problem: the area was now designated as a Green Wedge and LVBC was minded to refuse the application. At this point the developer mounted a charm offensive, ending with the threat that if the scheme did not go ahead, "... *Protection at all costs will ensure that the area continues its decline into an overgrown, unmanaged wasteland, beset by periodic vandalism and fires and denied to public access*", a statement that came back to haunt both developer and everybody else who loved Penllergare. Planning permission was eventually given in 1991, reinforced by a Section 106 legal agreement that tied residential and commercial development to the provision of the country park for 125 years. Work began briskly enough and the developer's brochure soon invited a visit to 'Swansea's Best Kept Secret', where you could, '*Walk the soil, tread the paths, that only Victorians have walked before*'.

Enter the WHGT

A year earlier, in April 1990, at the conference, "*Welsh Gardens Under Threat*", Hal Moggridge – an eminent landscape architect – had proposed that a garden under threat should be identified and that money should be raised to restore it. The nascent Welsh Historic Gardens Trust (WHGT) soon became the rallying point for the handful of people who remembered the pre-eminence of Penllergare, had familial connections with the place, or were interested in what had been achieved there, notably in photography. The WHGT's Conservation Management Committee moved swiftly and in February 1991 commissioned a preliminary strategy to conserve Penllergare's historic landscape. In so doing the Chairman commented "*it is more likely than any other project except Hafod to gain (the Trust) the maximum of favourable notice*". Landskip & Prospect's report concluded that the Penllergare landscape:

"... contains evidence of a design that was essentially simple, yet highly sophisticated." "It is worthy of conservation/restoration as a single unified design ..."; and, "Through the sensitive use of peripheral land at Penllergare, it may be possible to prove that commercial development and high quality historic landscape may coexist to mutual advantage."

On cue the West Glamorgan Branch was launched that November and took control of the project. The now-confirmed walled kitchen garden was surveyed, the path layout being identified by dowsing. With all the confidence of youth the WHGT then wrote to the Chief Executive of LVBC saying, "*... we are content that (the developer) is capable of carrying out the revitalisation phase. What we now seriously doubt is either its ability or commitment to fund the maintenance, security and interpretation of this fragile artefact. Indeed we question whether a development company is the appropriate custodian for a site of national, historical importance ...*" and the letter concluded with a recommendation for a strategy to, "*... to ensure the conservation of this threatened element of our national heritage for the benefit and quiet enjoyment of visitors and local people alike ...*"

By now boom had turned to bust and there was no sign of the paying facilities that were essential if the books were to balance. The WHGT sensed an opportunity and persuaded the developer to join West Glamorgan County Council, LVBC, Wales Tourist Board, Welsh Development Agency and the Countryside Council in a full appraisal of the historic landscape, the impact of the development and to recommend on future management, with WHGT as project manager.

The ensuing report, ‘*Penllergare Heritage Landscape*’ by John Brown & Company and Landskip & Prospect in February 1993 was unequivocal. In laying blame on both developer and planning authorities for a flawed scheme the consultants redrafted the agenda. Confirming that, *Penllergare is a juxtaposition of opposites – magnificence & rarity – peace & drama – nature & technology*”. *It is a secret and magical place (and) visibly in need of adoption.*”, they opined:

- “*There should be no development in the walled gardens that should be reinstated as a ‘Secret Garden’, with the upper valley as the ‘Romantic Landscape Garden’ and the ‘Outer Park’, this last managed as a wilderness with access on foot as complementary objective.*”
- “*The present conditions of consent are not compatible with the responsible preservation and restoration of an historically important garden and landscape. They also place constraints on the opportunities for commercial developments*”
- “*If the emerging country park, as provided by [the developer], falls some way short of what the (Local Planning Authorities) have been expecting they must blame this [on their failure] to set a clear, unequivocal and detailed specification as part of the conditions of the consent ...*” “*Running loss-making country parks is not in the [the developer’s] normal line of business*”
- Noting that the planners had not protected the historic landscape elements adequately, “*We are all coming in at the last minute to save part of Wales’s garden heritage. We are not too late but the cost will be higher than if it had been properly safeguarded in the first place ...*”
- “*We do not foresee any possibility that the historic gardens and landscape could be restored as a visitor attraction on a commercial basis. It will have to be done as a non-profit project, created and run either by a public authority, or by a charitable body of some kind, with annual subsidy.*”

This was a pivotal moment. Faced with an escalating rent and the costs of upkeep with no foreseeable income the developer retrenched. There then followed a period of what the Trust described as ‘tea cup diplomacy’, “... *though there have been many occasions when we would have smashed the teacups over certain heads and got on with the bottle!*”

Then the developer acted: on the face of it, re-branding one of his companies as a subsidiary of a national house-builder did not seem untoward. But this relatively simple formality detached the 125-year burden of the country park from the profitable housing development, effectively and irrevocably. Unaccountably this manoeuvre was confirmed through a new Section 106 legal agreement and successive planning permissions.

Now on the back foot and also struggling financially the WHGT Committee invited the Branch to set up a separate charitable trust, because, “... *this was a very important project which must not be allowed to die*”. In fact the developer was already offering to transfer the park to the Council, a suggestion endorsed by David Lambert of the Garden History Society whose first visit to Penllergare was punctuated by exploding cars, who commented that. “... *the landscape is simply not functioning ...*”. “*For Swansea Council a huge opportunity is being missed*”. In September 1997 the Branch reported back with more than a hint of bitterness, demonstrating the catalytic function of the WHGT and its limitations.

“*Over the past seven years the Trust has played the roles at Penllergare that it is best at: adviser, enabler and catalyst. In that respect the withdrawal of management time and resources from the central body of the Trust, leaving the Branch to struggle on as best it can without any outside assistance, has been a major set-back, reducing the Trust’s influence on this complex, delicate and long-term project to purely voluntary effort.*”

Fresh Initiatives

Meanwhile a proposal by this writer and others to commission Richard Morris to write up and publish his research on JDL was seen as too big a financial risk for the Branch. The restoration of the walled gardens was also regarded as overly ambitious and unsustainable, though there was agreement on the conservation and management of the picturesque landscape as a public park. An amicable re-alignment became inevitable and the Friends of Penllergare was set up as an informal and independent society in March 1999. Its objects were:

- To protect, conserve, restore and interpret the historic landscape of Penllergare designed by John Dillwyn Llewelyn
- To protect and enhance the diversity of wildlife species and habitats, and
- To promote public knowledge and appreciation of the landscape, its history and biodiversity, as well as free public access on foot.

Richard’s book, *Penllergare: A Victorian Paradise*, was launched at Swansea Museum in October 1999 and almost immediately sold out.

By now the new housing was threatening to encroach on the walled gardens, despite these having been excluded from development by the Branch and Friends campaigning together. Even so the Friends commented, “*There is mounting disquiet that the Council is seemingly intent on ignoring the historical importance of the Walled Gardens and the Valley Woods as a whole, and therefore permitting them – by default – to deteriorate yet further.*” This fell on seemingly deaf ears so the

But on the ground the reality was often dangerous mayhem, as Jennie reported to the developer:

“Last Saturday I led a walk of over 40 people who wanted to see the Penllergare estate and learn about its history. I was appalled at the dereliction and palpable danger, not only to my group but also to other people who were walking, blackberrying and innocently enjoying what should be a safe and beautiful place. I counted 15 wrecked vehicles. A recently abandoned car near the waterfall was torched in front of me by some young children, youths with air rifles were shooting at targets on a public bridge, and joy-riders on motor-cycles and in cars were roaring up and down the drives. Today it has been reported that another two cars have joined the wreck by the waterfall. The situation is fast going out of control. Someone very soon, whether perpetrator or bystander, is going to get seriously hurt”.



Wreck in the river (Photograph: Chris Cray)

In the face of this violent anarchy and impatient with the planning impasse the Trustees commissioned an independent report on the state of the park. In February 2005, from the perspective of the first-time visitor - strangers with an informed eye - Anthony Jellard Associates concluded that:

- *“Penllergare’s appearance is one of continued slow decline, exacerbated by the failure to carry out basic (management). Its relevance to the nearby communities is very limited and its appeal is greatly reduced by the effects of anti-social behaviour, theft and criminal damage and an unsafe atmosphere”* And agreeing with the inspector, *“This is a country park in name only”*,
- *“It is difficult to imagine a site which is supposed to function as a place which actively encourages public access that could be so discouraging” ... “The perception is negative and that nobody is actually looking after this place. To proceed onward into the Park ... might present a perceived risk to personal safety”*

This was the signal for action. Without the funds to rent – let alone buy – Valley Woods, the Trustees got informal permission from the developer to work on the ground. Their objective was straightforward: together with the C2E programme, to halt the decline of Valley Woods and make them a safer and more enjoyable place to visit.

A thorough understanding of the place was essential and more archival research, ecological, geophysical and topographical surveys as well as visitor surveys followed. About 14 km of footpaths were re-opened and three new bridges built over the Llan, including one for vehicles by the local Territorial Army sappers. Robust security measures and ‘boots on the ground’ wardening led to a big drop in vandalism, illegal bikers and cars. So where less than a decade ago Valley Woods was shunned as un-welcoming, more and more people – some returning after decades – were enjoying the quiet beauty of Valley Woods and its wildlife. Many were introduced or re-introduced by children who had taken part in the school programme. A growing mass of historic and contemporary letters and oral statements resulted in the Trust’s second publication, *‘Echoes from Valley Woods’*.

The Big Lottery’s ‘People and Places’ programme provided a huge boost to C2E enabling the expansion of ‘Wild for Woods’ for primary schools, social recreation, the reactivated Friends’ group, walking for health, challenging team activities, accredited training in conservation skills and more opportunities for volunteering. A temporary woodland centre (a portakabin, not a retail arcade) became the base for many of these activities. By the end of 2010 upwards of 10,000 people and 106 organisations had been involved in C2E. The tradition of high-quality management of woodlands at Penllergare was also being revived, thanks to a grant from the Forestry Commission through its *Better Woodlands for Wales* scheme.

Within 23 months the first objective had been achieved. Despite more damage by unsympathetic development, a safer and more enjoyable Valley Woods has become a reality with upwards of 65,000 visitors in 2011, and rising. In most respects Valley Woods had become the specified country park, with the added dimension of a thriving community and education programme. Volunteers are involved in conservation, wardening, education and fund-raising. A forum of users, volunteers and local organisations advise and comment on current operations and proposed plans.

VIPs were beginning to take an interest. The then First Minister, Rhodri Morgan walked and talked the length of Valley Woods to much joshing that if JDL, in his capacity as magistrate, had sentenced the Morgan family to deportation for its part in the Rebecca Riots, history would have had to be rewritten! The Trust’s first decade of achievement was recognised in 2009 in The Lord Mayor of Swansea’s Community Regeneration Awards - for Best Community Environment Scheme and Best Community Information.

The HLF's Vote of Confidence

With its solid basis of research, work on the ground and success with C2E the Trust engaged Nicholas Pearson Associates as consultants and was awarded the first of three grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund's 'Parks for People' programme. In marked contrast to the earlier commercial proposals, the Trust's concepts for Valley Woods now echo those of the WHGT's a decade ago. What is new is that Swansea Council and the Trust will cooperate through a memorandum of understanding, based on achieving common objectives.

But none of this could happen without legal tenure. Fortunately the landowner and developer were appreciating that, in contrast to all that had gone before, the Penllergare Trust really was capable of managing and sustaining Valley Woods. Negotiations began in earnest in December 2009, a decade after first mooted and the assignment to the Trust of the leases for the country park was signed on 25 April 2012, albeit with a not-inconsiderable annual rent.

With the award of an HLF grant of £2.3 million the Trust is now embarking on a programme that will see Valley Woods having its own car-park, refreshment kiosk and an interpretative tour on restored historic pathways with a greater variety of circuits. The long-heralded walkway under the M4 motorway will link with the FCW forest, doubling the size of Valley Woods, as well as providing a 'green' route to Swansea's hinterland.

Informed by his photographs the upper lake will be de-silted to reinstate JDL's design, with its fringing specimen trees and ornamental shrubberies, while preserving historic views. Steps, terraces, the stone-arched Llewelyn Bridge (again JDL's own photographs were almost all the architects had to go on), waterfalls and cascades will be repaired and restored. The equatorial observatory will be repaired and brought back into use. Trustees believe that JDL would approve of a hydro-electric generating plant being embedded in his waterfall to provide sustainable power for the project.

Community involvement will be stepped up and volunteers will manage practically all aspects of the project. There will be mostly charged-for events and other activities, with more emphasis on attracting visitors from further away. With the Friends concentrating on sociable fund-raising there will be a renewed drive to develop sustained revenue, including legacies. It is hoped that this first phase will be followed – finally and at long last - by the acquisition and restoration of the walled gardens, including the orchidaceous house, for horticultural training and as a visitor attraction, with more opportunities for volunteers.

A Paradise Regained?

Over the last half-century Penllergare, despite its special qualities of seclusion, drama and charm, has suffered neglect, damage and a procession of inappropriate developments, all but one still-born. Legal agreements failed to protect the public interest; enforcement proved futile. The Council and potential partners backed away for lack of cash and potential liabilities. Not for the first time charities have stepped in where others have failed to deliver promised public benefit. And it all started with the people who flagged up the plight and importance of Penllergare and the WHGT that highlighted the all-but forgotten significance of Penllergare to the heritage of Wales and why it should be cherished and restored.

In his essay for *Indignation*, in 2000 David Lambert caught the then-prevailing mood in that, "Anyone who has been involved in campaigning knows that it is the personal sense of indignation at a threat to what is cherished which is the fuel that burns within all resistance to what is perceived as harmful change." And, "Conservation is thus often far from a minority academic interest in preserving data about the past, but is on the contrary a deep-rooted, inherently radical, instinct with a strong populist strain".

So a new era has begun and lessons learned. In what may well be an unprecedented period of financial pressures on the public sector, will the Penllergare Trust achieve its aspiration to be a third sector model of how a recreational green space of this size, complexity and heritage importance can be saved and maintained? And how to meet the cost of upkeep without having to resort to commercial razzmatazz? The next half-century will tell.

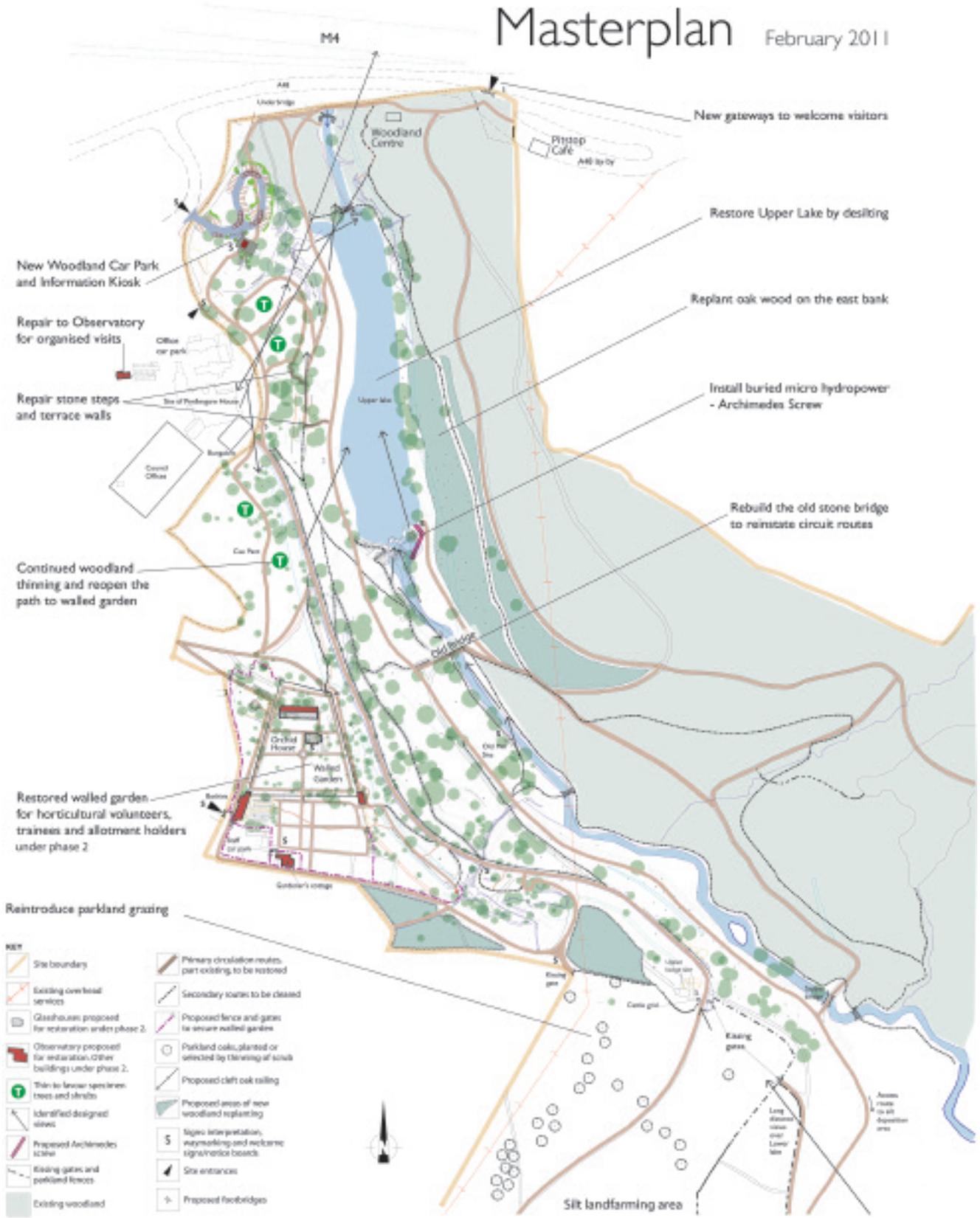
Maybe this volunteer holds the key. "If you value and enjoy Valley Woods, then you must help look after them".
Michael Norman



*The Upper Lake as photographed by John Dillwyn Llewelyn.
(Penllergare Trust)*

For more information about the Valley Woods project and how you could help contact Michael Norman: michael.norman@penllergare.org, Coed Glantawe, Esgairdawe, Llandeilo SA19 7RT

Masterplan February 2011



Penllergare Valley Woods

Ymddiriedolaeth Penllergare • The Penllergare Trust



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