

CONCEPT PAPER' - INTERPRETATION PROJECT

Introduction

The overall aim of Stage One of the Interpretation Trails at Whinlatter is to invite families and children up to the age of 12 to engage with the natural environment in a way that is inclusive whatever their ability on a mountain bike.

Mountain biking is the means by which visitors to Whinlatter can explore the forest trails, but it is the Interpretation Trails that will spark a vital interest in the natural environment and encourage participants to really look at what is around them and set it against the context of preserving the landscape. They will be an invaluable asset to discovering and understanding the heritage of Whinlatter.

The tone of the Interpretation Trails would be entertaining and fun, but at their heart would be a more serious exploration of the heritage of Whinlatter with a programme designed to promote the following themes:-

- to appreciate how mountain-biking offers 'controlled access' to what is a fragile habitat, and that a day at Whinlatter is as much about conserving and enhancing the environment as it is about enjoyment.
- to consider how and why the landscape has changed over time.
- to discover more about natural species and habitats indigenous to Whinlatter.

Whinlatter Heritage Defined

The next stage in developing the Interpretation Trails would be a period of intensive local research. This would establish the detail that we need to move from the concept paper to the actual process of planning and building the Interpretation Trails on site.

This information will then inform our decisions about the design of the resource, the materials used on site, and the ideas for the messages that we explore. At this stage however, it is possible to identify some of the key areas in Whinlatter's heritage that would underpin the Interpretation Trails. Very loosely they are as follows:

- History, Geology and Geography

The name Whinlatter itself has ancient associations with the physical features of the Cumbrian landscape. It is derived from Norse and means 'gorse covered fells or slopes'. The main rock in the forest is Skiddaw Slate which is the oldest rock in the Lake District and there are very good examples of graptolites and small fossils to be found in what is a classic glaciated landscape. There is also evidence of charcoal burning at Whinlatter, although there is little to suggest that there were settlements there. The land was used mainly for grazing, hence the origins of names such as Grizedale Pike which means 'peak above the valley of the pigs'. Another interesting place name (a mix of old Norse and old English) is Hopgill Head which means 'the headland by the narrow ravine at the end of the valley' and this is a perfect description geographically.

Today Whinlatter is a 1500ha coniferous forest made up mainly of Sitka Spruce and European Larch. It forms part of the larger Thornthwaite Forest and it was one of the first areas that The Forestry Commission acquired for the nation in 1919. This was as a direct result of the timber shortages during the First World War, when huge numbers of trees were felled at Whinlatter to supply wood for the war effort.

Much of the land originally belonged to James Radcliffe the third Earl of Derwentwater, but following his execution in 1716 as a result of the Jacobean rebellion, Whinlatter and Thornthwaite were given to the Governors of Greenwich Hospital who began to stock the area with conifers. An old coaching inn was changed into a hospital for diphtheria patients as Greenwich Hospital believed the clean air and natural environment would be important aids to convalescence. They began to stock the area with conifers (mainly Larch). Names such as Hospital Fell reflect the long tenancy of the Greenwich Hospital.

In the 1900s James Marshall, who acquired the estate, began a larger scale planting of Larch and Norway Spruce. But as previously stated, much of these pioneer plantations were put to use and felled for timber, when the nation faced severe timber shortages during the First World War. It was as a direct result of these timber shortages that The Forestry Commission was set up in 1919 to rebuild a strategic reserve of timber.

- Economy and Natural History

Whinlatter still provides timber on a commercial basis today that is used locally for building materials, pulp for paper and chipboard. Over 25ha have been planted in the last four years and on average 15ha are felled each year for commercial use. Broadleaved trees are increasingly being planted around streamsides and in conservation areas.

The other major factor in the economy of Whinlatter is the unique breeding programme of the ospreys. This has added great impetus to existing recreation facilities and has attracted visitors to the Forest Park in their thousands. After a period of 150 years during which there were no ospreys in England, Whinlatter successfully recolonised ospreys and bred four chicks in 2001.

The breeding programme has generated about £1.7m for the local economy, several jobs and last year attracted over 100,000 visitors to the Forest Park. It also earned Whinlatter about £700,000 in funding to support the breeding scheme.

This has meant the rangers have been able to:-

- organise full-time nest protection (from the threat of egg collectors)
- set up a series of viewing points in the park and a live webcam 'nest' link so that visitors to the park can actually watch the nests without disturbing them

The Forest Park is also one of the last natural strongholds of red squirrel in England.

As they all have an impact on each other, it would be important to present a picture of Whinlatter's Heritage that looks at how these key areas intersect and intertwine.

Logistics

Stage One of the proposal for Interpretation will offer two trails:-

- for families
- for children up to the age of twelve

These would start and end at the bikeshed and follow the blue and green routes. It is projected that the Interpretation Trails will be used by young children and family group visitors to Whinlatter.

Over the three-year development of Whinlatter mtb. these trails will form the basis of an Interpretation programme that could extend to teenagers, school groups and eventually to adult groups in an 'open capacity'.

Materials

We have given much consideration to the materials that would be used for the 'props' of the trails i.e signs, clues, maps, drawing implements etc. Wherever appropriate these will reflect the natural environment of the forest and will be constructed from high quality materials that will endure and not be damaged by the elements. For instance, it is intended to use charcoal 'pencils' because of the link to the history of the forest. Good design is also key to the application so that 'props' and signage are clearly understood, easy to use and give a coherence to the whole site. Emphasis will, in particular, be given to the design and construction of signs as it is hoped that the new range of signs developed for Whinlatter could become a national standard for Forest Enterprise. On this matter we intend to work very closely with Forest Enterprise.

Content

At this stage the content of the trails can only be loosely outlined, as much of the detail is dependant on the exact location of Trail Stops. However, our plan is that the trails will take the form of a quest which involves problem solving and gathering clues that have to be 'marked off' to complete the trail. Experience gained from working in museums and art galleries has proved that this is by far the most successful format in engaging and sustaining children's and family group interest.

The trails would begin at the bikeshed where each participant would be given a small cannister or pod that could be attached to the top tube or the bottle cage of their mountain bike. Inside this would be the materials required to take part. This might include:-

- a map with a list of 'clues'
- a blank piece of 'trail paper'
- a charcoal 'pencil'

Each Interpretation Trail would involve approximately ten sites or Trail Stops where clues must be solved and information recorded in order to move on. An accompanying map, and wooden signs marked with symbols on the cycling routes

themselves, would help with orientation along the Trails. It would be important for participants to know before they start that a 5km Interpretation Trail might take up to 90 minutes to complete.

At each Trail Stop there would be three things to do:-

- The first might be to make a 'brass rubbing' with the charcoal pencil from an image fixed to the top of a wooden post. Each rubbing would form part of a picture that will gradually be revealed as each Trail Stop is visited and rubbings carried at each one.
- The second would be tactile - asking participants to touch something to find the answer they need. For instance the clue might prompt them to touch the texture of tree bark, to find a shape marked on a piece of granite or to feel the depth of a local water course.
- The third would be visual - prompting participants to look very closely at the landscape that surrounds them, in a way that they might otherwise miss. For instance the clue might require them to look up at foliage high over their heads, or at the soil beneath their feet, perhaps at the contours of a valley below or at the line of the horizon.

A further idea might be to develop a series of permanent 'interpretation' sculptures, from Cumbrian schoolchildren, that can be located at each site and which represent the prevailing theme of the Trail Stop; e.g charcoal burning, coppicing, local birds and animals, water, trees, etc. It should be emphasised that any artwork would not be created as an end in itself, but as an extension of taking part in the Interpretation Programme.

At the end of the trail, the map would have to be stamped as a sign of verification that the Interpretation Trail was completed in full and all participants would be awarded a Whinlatter Trail Club badge made on site with their name on it and the Whinlatter icon.

What is important is that the trails for Whinlatter combine good, imaginative design with simplicity. Again, past experience strongly affirms that over-elaborate quests with intricate plots and complicated technology actually become overwhelming to all concerned. Signs with dense paragraphs of text don't appeal to younger children, and the trails become dominated by the most literate family members who take great delight in reading them aloud and at great length. Each Trail Stop will have straightforward instructions that make it immediately clear what there is to look for and what are the reasons for stopping to all concerned. Forest Enterprise intends that every point on the Interpretation Trails should be about inclusiveness, therefore the emphasis will be on visual stimulus and observation rather than wordage.

We also consider it important that the Interpretation Trails are kept active rather than passive i.e that participants learn through self-discovery and not by referring to others. Each trail will encourage participants to be vigorous and busy as they move through the forest and look for clues.

Educational Value

The Interpretation Trails would be complementary to the school curriculum, (in particular that experienced by Key Stage 2 children), but they would not be overtly educational. The emphasis would be on enjoyment and fun and this in turn would stimulate an appreciation for the landscape of Whinlatter without being too didactic.

If at a later stage it was felt that Cumbrian schools (or other LEAs) would like a more structured relationship with Whinlatter, Interpretation Trails, and Teachers' Packs could be devised for Key Stage 2 and 3 groups, that intend, very specifically, to look at curricular themes such as conservation and environment. This however, would have to go hand in hand with carefully managed school visits, and consideration given to all the health and safety issues attendant upon whole classes of children attempting the trails at once.

Aims of the Interpretation Programme Stage One as a series of bullet points

- to encourage children and family members, who have differing levels of ability in mountain biking, to really enjoy a day at Whinlatter
- to broaden the appeal of Whinlatter beyond learning and exercising the skills of mountain biking. Speed and technique are irrelevant to the Interpretation programme
- to promote an enjoyment of the forest in a collaborative way; i.e groups of children or family members will be prompted to engage in a dialogue about the landscape around them
- to stimulate participants to more thoroughly explore routes through the forest. The Trails can only be completed by visiting every Trail Stop and gathering all the relevant clues/information/drawings, etc
- to explore the heritage of Whinlatter by a series of visual and tactile clues. Participants will be prompted to both look at and touch what is around them

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