

'Reflections on Year 1 of the Historic Landscape Project'

We've reached the end of Year 1 of the project - Verena McCaig, Historic Landscape Project Officer Southeast (HLPO) reflects on what's been happening and offers some thoughts on what's to come:

It's been quite a year to start up a new project, especially one which has partnership working at its heart. In spite of these uncertain times, I have found that the principle aims of this project have been welcomed across the board: by CGTs in the region, our key partner organisations, and the many local authority officers that I've met.

The region's CGTs turned out in force in January for our first CGT South East Regional Forum – a leap of faith on their part – thanks to all those who supported the event! We romped through the major issues facing CGTs getting involved in the historic landscape conservation and the opportunities opening up as a result of this project: direct links into English Heritage (EH) and Natural England (NE); working to resolve some of the issues which put landscapes at risk; finding out how NE funding can help and how we can prioritise landscapes which could benefit. However, we can't take advantage of any of these conservation opportunities without more members stepping forward to actively join in and get their hands dirty, so we looked at some approaches to tackling this. Research shows that we should probably all be directly asking people we know to do something specific to help – this apparently yields the best results!

As many of you will know, I've been trawling lists of historic parks and gardens and compiling a spreadsheet of over 2500 in the southeast which are likely to have some historic significance. A painstaking process! However, this list will enable us to use data mapping systems to analyse them against all sorts of different historic, landscape and biodiversity features – invaluable for prioritising them for NE funding, amongst other applications. Of course these lists benefit hugely from local knowledge and CGT volunteers have been giving their time to go through developing priority lists and adding substance to the data. I'm hoping that the fuller lists of sites I've compiled will be helpful for CGTs now working to get information on the all-important Historic Environment Records held by local authorities, and identify those that might be eligible for Local Listing. The training planned for early 2012 aims to make sure research can underpin this too.

Talking of Local Lists, Gareth Wilson from EH addressed our Regional Forum meeting just prior to the launch of consultation on the new EH guidance on the subject. At least three CGTs have been inspired to respond to the consultation which hopefully will push historic landscapes more to the fore in the document, and consequently in the minds of local authority officers and others applying the guidance. Just the sort of involvement we need!

As many of you know, our EH Landscape Architects for the southeast, Charlotte McLean and Sally Stradling, left EH earlier in the year. A bit of a blow as we were all getting to know them and finding ways to complement their work. Whilst their post has not as yet been filled, we've still got lots of EH support to draw on from others.

In these straitened times, NE funding for my post will cease in March 2012 so we've been working on ways to make sure we cement our links in the meantime. We're setting up a series of short presentations to the restructured NE teams to talk about the work of CGTs and I am expecting, as a

result, that each county CGT will get a strong link with the NE team covering your county, hence opening up greater possibilities for exchange of information on historic landscapes.

Through working with NE, I've visited a number of parkland landscapes and been getting to grips with the bureaucracy of Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). It really is a funding stream with HUGE potential for historic landscapes. Through this project, NE invites us to identify, for example, parkland under the plough which could revert to pasture; garden structures which need repair or restoration; specimen trees needing successors. I've been involved in several conservation management plan consultations now and this is clearly an area where we can make a difference, offering informed opinions and also picking up smaller discreet research projects outside of consultants' remit such as 'Just what did that eye catcher look like?' There is training planned for early 2012 if this is an area you'd like to get involved in. A recurring theme in the protection of historic landscapes is preventing damage to fabric, character and setting by inappropriate development. In setting up training on responding to planning applications, I've been talking to EH, the GHS and planning officers themselves about how they see CGT input contributing – all see it as valuable, and it doesn't have to be overly complicated. Hopefully we can continue to highlight this area through newsletters and talks this year to complement the July training. The Localism Bill could well mean an even greater emphasis on the views of local people so we need to be ready to participate early on, to put our flag in the ground!

I've been encouraged and stimulated every time I've met with CGTs this year and am buoyed up by your continued energy. Thanks to all of you who have made me welcome in your county! Hopefully we can crack a few more issues this coming year. I hope to see many of you at our next Regional Forum, as detailed below, in the winter, and in the meantime maximise ways in which we can share good practice across the region, discuss experience and open up events.

Verena McCaig

June 2011