

In Our Element

The Cotswold Water Park

"The Cotswold Water Park is a vast, diverse and fragmented collision of incongruities, paradoxes and strange conjunctions....."¹

The distinctive quality of the contemporary landscape of the Cotswold Water Park comes directly from the mineral extraction that began in the 1950's and is set to continue for the next 20 years. Its 44 square miles, originally rural agricultural land with vast areas of florally rich water meadows, is located across 2 counties in the old flood plain of the River Thames. Swindon, one of the fastest growing conurbations in the UK lies to immediately to the south of the Water Park. By 2050 the Water Park is likely to be one of the largest man-made wetland complexes in Europe.

The Cotswold Water Park (registered as a non profit membership organisation in 1996) was set up by local residents to help restore and return some of this land to the community. The Cotswold Water Park's Biodiversity Action Plan (updated this year - 2016) informs all the work of the Society and is now an integral component of local planning decisions.

Three artist led strategies inform the work of '*In Our Element*' the art programme. They are:

1. '**In Our Element**': In 2003/4, Genius Locii, a group of artists from Somerset, was invited to create an artist led strategy², introducing the arts to the Water Park. The aspiration was to collaborate with others, especially ecologists, to bring a broader imaginative thinking and a cultural contribution to the work of the Society, and the lives of the Water Park communities.

Genius Locii made a number of wide ranging recommendations including the original idea for Viewing Towers over a horizontal landscape, the idea for 'Atlantis' -under water landscapes, and an 'Eden' natural landscape gardens and associated earthworks. They also proposed a Water Festival and Conference across the Cotswold Water Park, and stressed community engagement and access projects integrated with CWPS initiatives. They recommended the appointment of a Water Park arts officer. They were commissioned to produce a series of "Cats-Eyes" integrated cycle path images along the Spine Road.

2. '**Water, Water**': Commissioned³ from Stroud artist Dominic Thomas to evaluate the Water Conference idea, this report suggests that a Water Conference will only be appropriate in a few years time following the development of a body of cultural work. Dominic favoured commissioning artists to work 'in residence' in the Water Park testing various issues to do with the distinctive location and its ecology. He recommends building international connections, particularly since water is a key climate change issue.

¹ Genius Locii

² Funded by Gloucestershire County Council and Cotswold District Council

³ As above

3. '**Topics: The Cotswold Water Park Possible Futures**': Liminal, a Devon based artist group, were invited to work with the Master Planning Team for the Water Park⁴. They emphasise the importance of artists working with biodiversity and underline the opportunities for 'Atlantis and Artifice' grand scale earth and water works. The importance of developing community awareness is stressed, but Liminal also raise a number of 'ambivalences' in the Water Park. These include questions about a rural environment cluttered with signage, tensions between wildlife and development, and the marked compromise to a visually attractive environment and the 'continual barrage of noise generated primarily by the A419, but also from air and water sports'.

Liminal's first commission is for 'Song Pole'⁵. Song Pole is a 4m high oak nesting box, with a listening device for the public to be able to hear nesting birds. The size of the nest is designed for Tree Sparrows, a biodiversity action target species currently in decline. The commission is as much about the absence, as presence, of sound. The work will be evaluated in the spring of 2009 in its first nesting season. Liminal have proposed developing a 'tranquility machine' - a poetic response to the problem of noise from the A419 in particular.

These three strategies inform the arts programme. As a result of Liminal's collaboration with Scott Wilson, the master planners, art has been formally recognised as a key 'supporting driver' for the water park.

'*In Our Element*' is a visual arts programme. It is at its heart a collaborative programme, and in addition to working with our volunteers and communities, ecologists, geologists, hydrologists, historians, academics, and other professionals, we will expect commissioned artists to work with artists from disciplines other than those of the visual arts.

Delivery is at a number of levels.

- It is particularly designed to **support artists** working innovatively with ecologists and other scientists in a way that enables artists to take the lead in projects. One example of this is **RIVER CHURN**, a collaborative research project⁶ between artist Jony Easterby and ecologist Simon Pickering working with water voles. Phase 1 research has been completed with a celebratory film showing in Cirencester Lido; fundraising is underway to support phase 2. See www.riverchurn.org.uk. Another example is the opportunity created for an artist designed bird hide. Designed by Stroud based artist Helen Shackleton, 'Reed Hide'⁷ is built on wholly sustainable principles, with labour and materials sourced locally, and rammed earth walls and woven hazel interiors created by local school children in specially designed workshops. The artist worked closely with Cotswold Water Park Society

⁴ Funded by Arts Council England South West

⁵ Funded by ACE South West and the Aggregates Sustainability Levy Fund through Natural England and others

⁶ Funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Cotswold Strategic Partnership

⁷ See footnote 5

ecologist Gareth Harris to ensure the best possible conditions for bird watching. As a result the hide is popular with local people but feedback confirms it is 'fit for purpose' for professionals. Another example is an ongoing major land restoration project at Cleveland Lakes led by Mick Petts. His concept proposal for an ambitious 'ammonites' land and water form⁸ that will be an iconic attraction for people but fulfill biodiversity action targets has just been granted feasibility development funds.

- It is designed to encourage **local communities become engaged** with the landscape and ecology by working with artists. An example of this is our ongoing work with **WILLOW**, a key indicator species in the Water Park. Each year we add to our 'collection'. Four WILLOW sculptures have been commissioned in the Water Park, including an architectural scale community designed and made willow structure inspired by U.S. artist Patrick Dougherty⁹ who came and worked 'in residence' with the community in the Water Park in May 2007. WILLOW as a programme increasingly attracts the involvement of more people (we have seen numbers grow), has proved of immense benefit to the less advantaged and disability groups with whom we work on these projects, and has sparked other willow weaving projects across the Water Park (for example the Forest School, Lower Mill Residents Association projects and others).
- It is designed to **encourage young people** to have better access to the countryside, and deeper knowledge about their natural world. Education and participation with young people is built into the art projects. One example is the work with Stroud based artists group 'Walking the Land'¹⁰ and nature interpretation workshops summer 2006. Another example is schools involvement in the Bird Hide construction. All the Willow projects involve young people some from invited schools, others from voluntary centres that support young people with disabilities.
- **Research and Learning:** particularly involving and assessing the impact of new technologies, is an integral part of informing 'In Our Element' strategic development. Each stage is informed by artists' research I collaboration with others. Much of this includes encouraging the use of technologies such as film (RIVER CHURN), acoustic (Liminal) and digital media. Ashton Keynes School children designed and created their own website 'Quarry Creations' supported by i2in digital arts team¹¹. An artist led digital interpretation research project was initiated summer 2008 to assess how the use of mobile phone technology could inspire downloadable information, and eradicate signage clutter in the countryside. The collaboration¹² included the Universities of Bath (Faculty of Pervasive Media) and Gloucestershire (Faculty of Art, Media and Communications).

⁸ See footnote 5 and 7

⁹ Funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and Lower Mill Estate

¹⁰ Funded by ACE South West

¹¹ See footnote 5, 7 and 8

¹² Funded by Knowledge West

Our aspirations

We aim to combine the best recommendations from the three artist - led framework strategies, testing ideas with others by walks¹³ and talks. We will pursue the highest and most imaginative standards of land restoration, working with artists to intervene and collaborate at a point between extraction and restoration that facilitates significant and distinctive ecologically appropriate land and water design. We will identify opportunities for a series of artist designed iconic structures, such as bird hides, to raise standards and enhance the quality of the ecological experience for bird watchers and the public. We will work with artists to help fulfill their ideas and aspirations for addressing complex rural issues such as tranquility. We will work with artists to broaden the scope of working with local communities especially involving young people in creative solutions to ecological questions. We will develop research initiatives to explore and evaluate issues, in particular looking at those that consider contemporary technological and digital solutions to rural issues.

In line with Cotswold Water Park Society objectives '*In Our Element*' works with artists to support the restoration and healing of a landscape for people and wildlife.

Programme 2009-10

RIVER CHURN Phase 2: In collaboration with A Vision for Cirencester and their Young People's Committee, commission the artists proposals for installations, events and landforms in the town

WILLOW: Willow Lantern Pageant (February 2009) with new partner Gloucestershire Youth Service and youth groups in disparate communities in the Water Park including Down Ampney, Kempsford, Lechlade, Fairford, South Cerney, Ashton Keynes. The project is designed to raise awareness of the natural world, and help address rural isolation amongst young people in a creative way. It is also a 'test' and 'pilot' for the possible Water Festival / Conference. It will be evaluated with this in mind.

CLEVELAND LAKES RESTORATION: Feasibility study for the Ammonites landform concept in conjunction with development of a new Bird Hide, and Tower project. Note that Cleveland Lakes is a project that combines biodiversity, sport (an Olympic standard rowing course will be in place by 2012) and art.

PUBLIC ACCESS: As funding is raised, artists will be commissioned to support the CWPS's access and interpretation strategies. Learning from our research projects, there will be an emphasis on the use of artist led digital technologies to support access.

ARTISTS' ACCESS: We will continue to advertise opportunities

COLLABORATIONS: '*In Our Element*' will collaborate with others to develop work. Partners include Gloucestershire Youth, Brewery Arts, Sustrans, the aggregates industries, local parish councils and residents associations, and others.

DOCUMENTATION: Enhanced website, catalogue of art projects.

¹³ Artist led walks were, and will continue to be, an important part of RIVER CHURN