



Scottish Natural Heritage
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People and nature: learning through doing

Action research programme

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Neilston Development Trust
Cowden Hall Matters!

June 2011

NEILSTON DEVELOPMENT TRUST



People and nature: learning through doing Neilston Development Trust action research report - Cowden Hall Matters!

Executive summary

The Estate of Cowden Hall, tucked away at the edge of the village of Neilston, is a jewel hidden in its landscape. Although the site's former glory fades from view with every harsh winter, its beauty is etched in the memories of many and its wilderness relished by walkers and dogs. The place abounds with legends and stories as well as relics of stone, brick, metal and plant that span the history of Neilston as a place to grow up, a place to work and a place to play.

In 2009, Neilston became Scotland's first Renaissance Town, a community-led programme that empowers local people to lead the regeneration of their place. This process allowed Neilston to develop a 20-year vision for the sustainable regeneration of the town. These proposals are captured in the **Neilston Charter**, a manifesto for the community, which identifies **Cowden Hall Estate** as a latent asset in terms of heritage and natural environment.

The **Neilston Development Trust Cowden Hall Community Action Research Project** is intended to help to take forward aspirations for Cowden Hall Estate by developing a better understanding of its value to the community. Our aim has been to find out more about the ways it matters to the community at present by **asking who uses it now** and by finding out how it mattered in the past, and establishing whether there are **lessons from its past** that can help us think about possibilities for its future. The Cowden Hall Community Action Research Project aims to consider how Cowden Hall Estate might flourish again alongside the community of Neilston.

The focus of enquiry has been to explore the potential for wider use by the community of Neilston of Cowden Hall Estate.

The enquiry has several components:

1. Establishing a baseline profile of how the area is currently used (by whom; how often; and in what way)
2. Exploring how the area was used in the past (by whom; and in what way)
3. Considering how the area might be developed to encourage and support wider, integrated community use and access to the natural environment.

To this effect, a **survey** of 251 members of the community was administered **on site and off site** between October 2010 and March 2011 and an **intergenerational storytelling project** was delivered in early spring 2011. The information gathered has allowed us to build a profile of those that use the site; to learn about the patterns and purpose of their visits as well as their views on its future. As importantly, we have been able to build a profile of those that don't use the site and the reasons why not, as well as what changes, if any, would make them more likely to visit. Conversations and storytelling between older members of the community and children from P7 of Neilston Primary School have inspired ideas for the site's future. These have been captured in art work and stories.



Key findings: Survey

From the information gathered in the surveys, we learned the following:

- Of the 250 that responded, 88 (35%) didn't know where Cowden Hall is.
 - Of the 82 adults, 8 (10%) didn't know where it is
 - Of the 132 under 12s, 77 (58%) didn't know where it is
- Of the 240 that responded, 127 (53%) do visit Cowden Hall.
- Of the 132 that responded to the question on frequency, 85 (64%) visit only occasionally or rarely.
- Of the 132 that responded, 43 (33%) visit Cowden Hall to walk and 36 (27%) to walk their dog.
- Of the 94 adult off-site respondents, only 10 (11%) identified Cowden Hall as their destination for an outdoors trip.
- Most people who didn't visit cited access, difficulty finding way around, and safety concerns as reasons for not going. These points are most evident in the responses from the seniors and the young people of the community.
- Cowden Hall has, however, a number of regular and devoted site users, mostly dog walkers who visit frequently and in all weathers.
- All those surveyed, on and off site, endorsed the idea of basic improvements – these included path maintenance, seating, wildlife areas and bins.
- Of the 115 that responded, 74 (64%) would welcome maintained paths.
- Of the 219 that responded, 119 (91%) would be more likely to visit if improvements were made. This rose to 98% among adults surveyed off site.
- Several expressed the opinion that they wished it be left wild and as it is.
- Of the 89 respondents, 76 (67%) were interested in walks, and 44 (49%) were interested in conservation activities, being organised at Cowden Hall.

In summary, we found that **current use of Cowden Hall** is primarily for dog walking, by a small but regular group (some of whom also come for other reasons including walks, watching nature and exercise). While only 10% of adults surveyed off-site **didn't know where Cowden Hall was**, only 62% ever visit Cowden Hall and less than a quarter would choose it as a destination for an outdoors visit. The main reasons for not visiting were: not knowing the way around, and safety concerns – especially among older and younger respondents. 91% of everyone surveyed said they would be **more likely to visit if improvements were made**.

Key findings: Storytelling

The Cowden Hall community research project uncovered a deep appreciation of the Estate amongst the community of Neilston. This value can be attributed to various factors. For many, it lies in the site's wildness and beauty as a woodland and a place to walk. For others, it is a place rich with memories and personal associations, some of which are tied to the world of work and recreation in the Estate as a mill worker. For others, attachment to the site comes from the privilege and experience of growing up around, and in the shadow of, the Estate and the Mill. For many, its value lies in its unique historic interest, which spans the centuries, leaving the relics of landowners and land uses from the Middle Ages to the present. For the young, it has been the chance to encounter this history and be inspired by stories of freedom, magic, challenges and fun enjoyed by previous generations.



Regardless of familiarity with the site today or knowledge of its meanings to the community in the past, we can conclude that for most, the allure and mystique of Cowden Hall is a force to be reckoned with.

Conclusion: Cowden Hall matters!

The results of this research will be shared with all those who have an interest in and have supported the project. A “Cowden Hall Matters!” Group will be convened to follow up on this research project. This strategy group will develop an action plan taking into account the findings of this research, noting concerns ranging from immediate issues of path maintenance and tree management, to the more strategic concerns of preserving heritage and recreational opportunities and supporting NDT’s conservation, environmental, educational, food production, health and wellbeing interests within a sustainable framework.

To find out more about Neilston Development Trust, the Cowden Hall Estate, and to get a copy of the full report, see our websites www.neilstontrust.co.uk and www.cowdenhall.org.uk



“I really don’t want to change Cowden Hall, but we should tidy it up and add some flowers and that will add more colour.” – Caitlin Cameron”.

Images

Above: from **Top 7 ideas for Cowden Hall** by P7B pupils Neilston Primary School.
Front page: From **Centenary Celebrations: Cowden Hall Community Walk**, 7th November 2010.