



Report of the Gower Society Representative

Gower AONB Partnership Steering Group – 30 November 2020

Gower Society Issues

The Gower Society would appreciate discussion and comment from Members on the following matters: -

1) The Case for an Article 4 Direction for The Vile, Rhossili

In this exceptional and difficult year activities on Gower have been chaotic to say the least. The setting up of a temporary catering unit, without any planning application required in the centre of the historical area, known as The Vile, was legal under the *Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 - Part 4 - Temporary Buildings and Uses - Class B* for a total of 28 days in the calendar year. The Gower Society and Rhossili Community Council were greatly concerned that there would be complications and damage to the landscape. No one appreciated that anyone wishing to exercise their rights (with permission from the land owner) could proceed with impunity in such a location in the AONB. As there are a number of land owners in The Vile it is not unforeseeable that there could be various enterprises dotted around the Vile for a full summer in different locations every 28 days. Not only this, but the scale of the facilities could be considerably larger than deployed by Mr Morgan in 2020. For as long as it does not exceed a total of 28 days and is temporary, the type, size, colour and capacity of any structure or use without planning permission is lawful.

The concept and prospect of more conspicuous retail sales (within an area of the AONB) that is designated as being of the highest landscape value in Wales is unthinkable. Indeed the present 2020 arrangement was described as *'being akin to allowing a burger van to establish itself in the centre of Stonehenge'* by a local resident. It is unacceptable but regrettably not preventable, under current rules. The Vile Field System in Rhossili is a Registered Historical Landscape of Outstanding Importance in Wales. It is not only the visual impact but the numbers of visitors drawn to the location by the wide use of social media and the associated fields planted with sunflowers to attract them, created a theme park type attraction that is at odds with the natural landscape. It also caused a number of nuisances in the village adversely impacting on the residents.

The Gower Society maintains that such entrepreneurial development enterprises should stop at the village boundary. A current planning application, to retain for a further 3 years the sales outlet in the National Trust Car Park, is being considered and will be judged and determined by the strict planning regulations.

The Gower Society is actively investigating (with others) the possibility of obtaining an Article 4 Direction to prevent such inappropriate future development. A direction removes such permitted rights but does not deny a developer the right to apply for planning permission in the usual way. Also to establish greater protection that recognises the importance of the area or an extension to the Rhossili Conservation Area to include The Vile. (However, extending the Conservation Area will not suspend or curtail Permitted Development rights; only an Article 4 Direction can do that.) Such an Article 4 Direction was made to prevent 28 day camping in 1979 which had got out of hand in the 1970's and which made a dramatic improvement to the AONB during summer months.

Article 4 protection was also proposed for The Vile in 1987 because it was considered in The Gower Management Plan Consultation Draft although the final Gower Management Plan relied upon an Agreement under Section 39 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to protect the ancient field boundaries being damaged.

As a Society we have seen a number of threats to the Gower landscape over the decades and we have deployed our energies and influence to protect or safeguard it. We have had considerable input to the many documents that are produced and published under the AONB Steering Group and the previous Gower Forum before it. Members recognise that strong actions are often needed and that the current legislation should be strictly enforced where necessary. Delays will only accentuate the position.

Finally we point out that many hundreds of thousands of pounds has been spent to enhance and preserve the landscape and environment over the last 30 years in Rhossili. By the CCS, the NT and others, including the Gower Society. This should not be wasted by allowing such development within the AONB.

Appendix A – Photograph of The Vile.

2) Protection of Trees within the Gower AONB

The Gower Society spent considerable time preparing contributions to the Consultation process for the proposed Supplementary Planning Guidance. The Design Guide, Tree, Hedgerows and Woodlands on Development Sites and development and Biodiversity Consultation Drafts. In general all excellent documents. However at a previous meeting we have drawn to the attention of this Steering Committee the apparent lack of protection to trees within the compass of the AONB and its fringes. There are very few protected woodlands and importantly the random spread of mature trees around the countryside. Within SSSI's and National Nature Reserves protection is afforded although there are very few trees actually given protected by specific Tree Preservation Orders.

The regulations that we have in place are administered by the CCS and NRW and their powers have been proven to be inadequate to prevent random destruction in at least 4 sites over the last 2 years within the AONB. Mature trees have been felled and great damage done in the process to the environment. Both regulatory bodies have been unable to act quickly enough to prevent it. In one case the land owner

carried on clear felling oak woodland on about 25 acres for many months after he was told to stop. The damage was done by the time full legal action was taken. Other infringements have proceeded on a lesser scale but are just as serious.

In our response to the above Trees, Hedgerows and Woodlands on Development Sites Consultation Draft (September 2020) we have pointed out the lack of protection that this gives to the AONB itself. Not just by Developers but by anyone (with a chain saw and a wood burning stove) who has a personal reason to do so. Thousands of trees with Ash Die Back have to be removed legally on Gower in any case and the impact of their loss will soon be all too obvious. All the more important to save and protect the trees that we have left. Felling a 50 year old tree with another 200 years of potential carbon absorption without permission should be an offence but those trees require identification and protection. We are planting only a smattering of new trees that do not start absorbing carbon in any realistic quantity within our lifetime.

The Gower Society has suggested that a complete survey of all trees should be made and suitable protection given wherever appropriate. More trees must also be planted in order to compensate for the losses of ash and help to slow Global Warming. This requires a National effort that we should encourage and support.

Appendix B – Photograph – March 2015

Appendix C – Photograph – September 2020

Gordon Howe
Gower Society Representative