

Abberley and Malvern Hills Geopark

Annual Report November 2024

Introduction

The Geopark Forum has 24 members and short reports from some of these organisations are shown below. Two new organisations joined during the year - Worcester Art Gallery and Museum; and Hartlebury Castle. The full list of members can be seen on the Geopark's website under 'About Us'.

Funding for the Geopark was again generously provided by donations from Merlin Energy and Oracle Environmental Experts.

GeoFest ran over June, July and August with plenty of events and activities, all drawn from the summer programmes of members, enabling a very comprehensive GeoFest programme to be delivered. As usual the public was able to participate in the stories and events delivered by Forum members across the 800 square miles of the Geopark.

Throughout the year there were wide ranging programmes of events and activities provided by the Geopark members covering geology, landscape, wildlife, archaeology, heritage, science and art.



Abberley & Malvern Hills Geopark

Explore beneath the surface; 700 million years of Earth history in one spectacular destination. The rocks tell a fascinating story of continental collisions, shallow tropical seas, hot deserts, tropical swamps, coastal lagoons, ice sheets and polar deserts.

Did you know: The Earth is 4600 million years old

From imposing Iron Age hill forts to the remains of 20th century coal mining, throughout the Geopark you will find evidence of how human activity has shaped our landscape. The unique landscapes in the Geopark have inspired artists and composers of past and present. Hills and valleys provide the backdrop for past and contemporary cultural events. The Geopark is a place where a range of passions from art to social history may be indulged.

Did you know: Most coal found in Britain is over 300 million years old.

Geology and ecology are inextricably linked. The often intimate relationship between geology and flora is an important factor in understanding the ecology of the Geopark. To enjoy this rich biodiversity, why not visit one of the many national and local nature reserves to take a peaceful walk through diverse natural landscapes.

Did you know: The first plants appeared on the Earth's surface 400 million years ago.

The many visitor and information centres within the Geopark are shown on the map over page. More information at www.geopark.org.uk

Land of the Living Dinosaurs

A Geopark information leaflet is available to members for public distribution.

From the President - Chris Darmon

Once again it has been an absolute pleasure for me to serve as your President. I sometimes have to pinch myself at the sheer volume of output in terms of events that are put on in the name of the Geopark. To the outsider it seems like the well oiled professional machine is run by resident staff, yet I know that it's all down to a small band of dedicated volunteers.

Geofest goes from strength to strength and 2024 must be the best yet. Congratulations to all concerned in such a magnificent effort. The Abberley and Malvern Hills Geopark is communicating the geology, landscape and associated heritage of the area to thousands of people and it's all thanks to your efforts. Thank you!



Chris (right) takes a look at the stone plinth of the recently erected statue of Stanley Baldwin in Bewdley

The Geopark Way in 2024 - Sue Knox

In place since 2008, the Geopark Way has now been in existence for 16 years and is still going strong. Overseen by Herefordshire and Worcestershire Earth Heritage Trust, they have employed a Geopark Way Officer for a day or so per month since 2016 to coordinate the work of the 20 Geopark Way Wardens who perform their biannual checks of the entire 109 mile stretch in Spring and Autumn. The Geopark Way Officer also publicises the rocks, landscape and heritage of the walking trail which has been recognised by Ordnance Survey and included on their digital mapping as a permanent footpath since 2018 and the Geopark itself as an area of outstanding geological interest.

The 2024 Autumn checks are currently in progress, weather permitting with the usual reports of fallen waymark posts, broken stiles, missing steps, fallen trees and landslips from the incredible amount of rain we have had to contend with this year. The Geopark Way Wardens are a robust and dedicated bunch and they make sure the issues are noted and reported back to the Geopark Way Officer who, in turn, informs the Public Rights of Way Officers in the 4 counties which the trail runs through: Shropshire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire.

Each Geopark Way Warden is allotted one of the 17 sections of the Geopark Way and has a toolkit to go out with, including 4 kinds of waymarker, depending on the kind of post it will be attached to, nails, hammer and pincers to remove and replace old nails and waymarkers, and secateurs to cut back any errant foliage obscuring directional marking. Despite persistent issues sometimes taking a while to be rectified, the ongoing checking and reporting by Geopark Way Wardens certainly keeps the footpaths in the best possible condition with the help and support of county PROW Officers and local PCCs. The Trust is immensely grateful to everyone involved in the upkeep of the footpaths, bridleways and permissive paths which make up this unique trail as an ongoing concern.



Reports from Forum Members

Malvern Hills GeoCentre - Adrian Burden

The Malvern Hills GeoCentre has continued to operate throughout the year alongside Cafe H2O. The centre has wall maps, iPad information, fossil samples, rock samples and the video wall showing information about the local and regional geology, geography and history. Fossil samples courtesy of local palaeontologist Dr Mark O'Dell are on show alongside an example School Fossil Box provided by the Earth Heritage Trust. The centre has continued to operate a Trampler for hire in collaboration with Countryside Mobility to enable those unable to walk up the Malvern Hills an opportunity to enjoy the scenery up to the summit. Malvern Rotary Club has also hosted days with Land Rover Experience Eastnor from our carpark, using the centre as a base, to enable those with more significant disabilities to also enjoy a trip up the hills. The hidden geocache at the site remains popular, attracting treasure hunters as they explore the area. We've also had the AMHG dinosaur colouring sheets available at an activities desk. The small shop area continues to sell souvenirs, books and guides, including the popular geology series that accompanies sections of the Geopark Way.



Children's workstation at the Malvern Hills GeoCentre

Bewdley Museum – Liz Cowley

Our visitor figures have remained consistent in spite of poor summer weather and major flood defence works restricting access to the town.



Children's arts and craft activities ran throughout the summer holidays and we ran many free events throughout the year including Bands in the Park, Medieval enactment from the Wythe Retinue and our annual Cherry Fair. Thank you to the Geologists in the Geopark who provided an 'Ask the Experts' session in July which was well received by our visitors.

We also held a series of ticketed events throughout the summer including a Murder Mystery Evening, various theatre productions, ghost walks, cinema and an Abba tribute band.

Oracle Environmental Experts - Jon Burton

It's been a busy year for Oracle Environmental Experts and one in which we held our 10-year anniversary. A key focus of ours over the last 12 months has been the design and operation of water treatment systems for clients across the country and we've been working on sites from Kent to Dundee. The system shown in the photograph below was installed on a housing development in the Midlands to help the building contractors manage shallow groundwater on the site during the development.



Oracle Environmental Experts water treatment system installed on a housing development in the Midlands

After humble beginnings at the hot desk zone of the Wyche Innovation Centre in August 2014, we held our 10 year anniversary this year at our head office in Hanley Swan, and we now have 7 regional offices across the UK and over 40 staff. It was a great opportunity to let our hair down and celebrate what we've achieved over the last 10 years and we're looking forward to the next 10 years now!

Hartlebury Castle - Sarah Davey

At Hartlebury Castle, we were delighted to once again become a member of the Geopark Forum partway through the last year. We've enjoyed a busy twelve months at the Castle with exciting developments including receiving a grant from Natural Networks, a project is funded by the UK government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. This is helping us to make access easier and increase biodiversity in our Old Moat Coppice area – through coppicing overgrown trees, clearing and de-silting the pond, installing bat and bird boxes, and improving paths.

We also welcomed back a beautifully restored 1788 Gainsborough portrait of Bishop Hurd (Bishop of Worcester here from 1781 to 1808) to the much-loved Hurd Library. The specialist treatment was taken on by Howells Conservation, whose work ranged from

painstakingly removing layers of old varnish to stabilising the stunning painting. Bishop John (the then Bishop of Worcester) even unveiled it for us, making it a truly special occasion.

We held a whole host of successful events too - featuring returning favourites like the Easter Eggstravaganza, wreath making with our gardening volunteers and historical fun with The Sealed Knot, as well as new ventures like the Belgian Beer Bash drawing in visitors from far and wide. During GeoFest, our events comprised two sold out Beer and Bat Walks, plus summer crafts to entertain families and two fantastically attended Outdoor Theatre performances. It was also a pleasure to host Dig Hartlebury for another archaeological dig in our grounds which uncovered more about the Castle's lost Civil War defences.

The team all look forward to working more with the Geopark Forum in the future and highlighting the wonderful geology on our doorstep.



The entrance to the Old Moat Coppice (Picnic Area & Nature Reserve) at Hartlebury Castle.

National Trust at Croome - Chantelle Williams

At Croome we have had another successful year which included opening the Panorama Tower on a monthly basis alongside a popular guided walk to the tower which is building momentum. Visitors are able to admire the fantastic views of the Malverns and north towards Abberley. We use the interpretation posters that 'Geologists in the Geopark' produced for us, to help explain what we're seeing, and visitors always find it fascinating. We also hosted the wonderful Georgia and team for a nature craft day during May half term, inspired by the launch of our Pages from Nature exhibition where visitors were encouraged to make a greeting card or bookmark using leaf shape stencils and stamps.



The Panorama Tower at Croome Estate

BrooksDesigns - Mike Brooks

This year BrooksDesigns has added new walks to the GeoparkWay app, released last year. Two of these are not walks as such, but audio stories told as you travel on the Severn Valley Railway between Kidderminster and Bridgnorth, or vice-versa.

Once you have downloaded one into the GeoparkWay app, set it running, plug-in your headphones or ear pods and sit back and listen to the information unfold as the train moves forward. You will pass over rocks that at the time of their formation hundreds of million years ago were home to giant ‘dragonflies’ and reptiles; and environments of



A few sample screens from the SVR audio story running in the GeoparkWay app

massive deserts and tropical forests. Find out about the last ice age and also more recent mining and quarrying along the route. thanks to 'Geologists in the Geopark' for initially suggesting the idea and kindly arranging with Severn Valley Railway for me to travel in the cab of one of the trains, to carry out reconnaissance of the visible geology and obtain photographs. Also thanks to Severn Valley Country Park for allowing inclusion of audio stories of miners from the Highley collieries - and kindly hosting a poster about the app.

Geologists in the Geopark – Peter Oliver

Another successful year for Geologists in the Geopark with plenty of 'geology' supplied to fellow Forum members especially in GeoFest. The main activities that we delivered this year



Preparing rock, fossil and mineral specimens for the geology collections freely available to children in GeoFest

were Ask the Expert sessions, Geo-craft and textile sessions and workshop, specimen displays, start your own geology collection sessions, dinosaur colouring sheets, specimen information leaflets and table top displays. The highlight of the year has been the development of a new activity - make your own geology collection. This involved finding sustainable supplies of some 12 different rocks, minerals and fossils. Fairly easily achieved as our geologists have lots of contacts! Also with the permission of the University of Keele's School of Geography, Geology and Environment we produced an updated version of their Geological Time Scale card using the latest dates from the International Stratigraphical Commission. 500 copies were printed.

We also organised a locomotive ride on the Severn Valley Railway for Mike Brooks (BrooksDesign) who has now developed an app dealing with the geology, landscape and palaeo-environment of the route the railway takes. The app is now available to the public. We developed a poster display for the Severn Valley Railway - The Geology of the Railway - which is now a permanent display in the visitor information coach at Kidderminster station.

Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Services – Carol Wood

It has been a busy year and here is a taster of some of our events:

We have run a full programme of workshops and tours that have proved very popular. A series of blogs, followed by an in person talk at the Hive, on 'The Body on the Bromyard Line' really caught the public's imagination. The archaeological evidence discovered, and the following scientific analysis were explored to provide a possible story of this skeleton found buried in the embankment of the railway line. All blogs are still available to access via our website: <https://www.explorethepast.co.uk/blog/>

History in The Making has proved a very successful project drawing people, who have never used the archives before, to use our documents as creative inspiration for their artwork and creative writing. The project culminated with a well-received exhibition in The Hive and an anthology of work. We have received some funding for sessions to continue and are open to new participants.

For three weeks in the summer there was an exhibition about the Abberley and Malvern Hills Geopark at The Hive. Visitors to level 2 enjoyed reading the boards and taking away the flyers. We are sure that, despite the weather, this will have resulted in more and better-informed visitors to the area.

To encourage the archaeologists of the future we held some careers insight sessions and a training dig at Hartlebury for post 16 students. We were inundated with applications and feedback from participants was immensely positive. Following an archaeological dig in Broadway, that uncovered evidence of 8,000 years of human history, an open day for residents was held recently. Over 700 visitors attended the event and got to explore some of the finds and take a tour of the site.

Writing this we are looking forward to our annual Worcestershire Archaeology Day. There will be a series of talks by guest speakers celebrating and sharing recent investigations in Worcestershire. You can attend in person or access remotely after the event. Please see our website for more details: <https://www.explorethepast.co.uk/events/> Lastly please be aware that the opening hours for Worcestershire Archives have changed: <https://www.explorethepast.co.uk/contact-us/> and, whilst there is still no access to original records on Mondays, a member of staff will be available on this day to offer expert help and advice.



Part of the exhibition of the artwork created by the History in The Making project.

Worcester Cathedral - Darren Steele

Worcester Cathedral's stonemasonry team is committed to ensuring that the beautiful architecture is preserved and that the health of the building is secured for worshippers and visitors to enjoy now and in the future. With over 900 years of historical stonework to look after, the team is kept incredibly busy! It is vitally important that we have stone masons with the skills to restore, conserve and respect the stonework, and it is key that we retain all the characteristics and architectural styles so future generations will be able to enjoy the beauty



of the Cathedral and explore its history. To ensure we can do this, we have had a stonemasonry apprenticeship programme for the last 35 years and we have trained many new masons. They have learned their trade here; some have stayed and worked on the Cathedral, and some have moved on to use their skills across the country, and even globally, in the heritage sector.

Forestry England at Wyre - Richard Wilkinson

We Hosted an NNR (National Nature Reserve) week festival day with Natural England. This was very popular, and we had stalls and talks on different things through the NNR festival week with a main day over one of the weekends where we had out main talks meet the machines and some activities.

We had a Wyre Forest Dog Day where we hosted lots of Dog related local companies and businesses and out on some events as well as having stalls all dog related. This event was also really successful and brought in some good numbers.

Our Geopark event was well attended and there was good engagement from visitors. Wyre Forest has been doing well with visitors over the past year. The quarry area and the area round by the Wyre Office has been recently cleared making the areas more accessible for visitors or people who may be interested in the displays.



The Discovery Centre at Wyre

Severn Valley Country Park - Susie Comaish

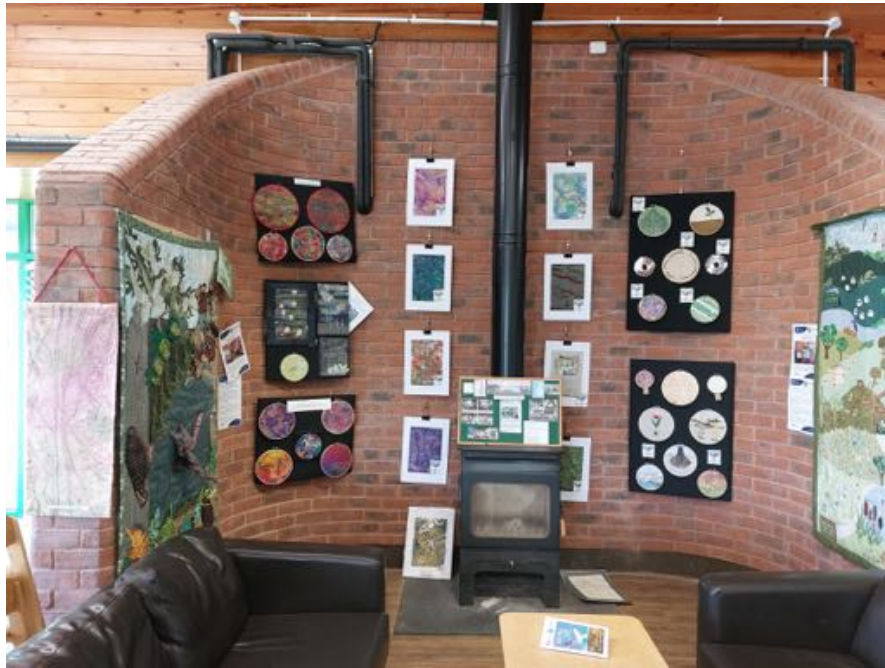
At Severn Valley Country Park, our rock and fossil hunts continue to be well attended during the school holidays. This year, with the support of Geologists in the Geopark, we developed the event and created a rock and fossil hunt where the children could create a rock collection they could take home with them.

We have focused some of our Wild Toddler sessions (for our visitors aged 4 and under) around Geological themes. This has included searching for buried treasure (gemstones) and learning about volcanoes.

Our geologically themed textile art workshops continue to be popular. Once again, we were able to hold a summer exhibition on the visitor centre from the works completed by the ladies who take part in the workshops. This year's theme was 'Through the Surface'. We would like to thank Georgia Jacobs from Geologists in the Geopark for leading these enjoyable sessions and for co-ordinating the summer exhibition. Georgia also leads drop in geology themed craft sessions at Severn Valley Country Park which allow our younger visitors to take a keepsake home with them.

Our river themed and rock and fossil themed school activities have continued to be popular. Between April and September 2024, we welcomed 1062 school children and a number of the schools have already booked for next year.

We are looking to add to the offer at the park and create a Geopark Visitor Information Point. We have applied for funding from the Tomlinson Brown Trust to install an



Textile display in the visitor centre

interpretation panel featuring the Geopark, as well as a hand-on visitor display with relevant rock samples. It has been another successful year working closely with the Geologists in the Geopark and being part of the Abberley and Malvern Hills Geopark. And we are happy to continue liaising with Forum members and drawing together the GeoFest programme each year.

Other news from members

Our long term sponsor Merlin Energy Resources has some great cutting edge geotechnical stories and information on its website - www.merlinenergy.co.uk

Hereford Museum is undergoing a major refurbishment. It will open again to the public next year. Other great museums are Worcester, Hartlebury and the Lapworth at the University of Birmingham. Centres offering inspiring outdoor experiences for visitors are the National Trust at Dudmaston, Severn Valley Country Park, Cob House Countryside Park and Arley Arboretum.

A large part of Paul Olver's vast geology collection was donated to Bewdley School. Over a few days in the summer and with help from Geologists in the Geopark and the Lapworth Museum the specimens were sorted into teaching sets for use in the School. The latter is now also carrying out the day to day updating of the Geopark website.

For those wishing to participate in talks and field trips take a look at the programmes of the Woolhope Naturalists Field Club and the West Midlands Group of the Geological Society. And why not join the geological conservation programmes at Gloucestershire Geology Trust. For something unique, the Severn Valley Railway runs a full programme every year, of heritage trains with a superb visitor centre at Highley.

