

An ancient wonder: Managing Cwm Clettwr forest

During WWII, many of our native woodland sites were felled and replanted with fast-growing conifers. This is what happened in parts of the Cwm Clettwr forest. If you fast track to the 1990's, the valley boasted a circular walk through a Wildlife Trust Nature Reserve that was full of contradictions! The southern side of the steep valley supported one of western Wales' best ancient semi-natural woodlands - a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) well known amongst plant lovers for its mosses, liverworts and ferns and popular with bird enthusiasts for its pied flycatchers and wood warblers. On its northern flank, mature western hemlock provided a rather dark and foreboding end to a venture across the River Clettwr.

In the autumn of 1998 we embarked on a project to remove the western hemlock as a first step in restoring the site to native woodland. It was a difficult site to get right. Great care had to be taken not to alter the damp and humid conditions supporting the plant communities clinging to the river gorge. There was limited access for removing any timber to market and all the tree tops and branches had to be removed from site to help speed up restoration. It was undertaken in the wettest part of the year to avoid the breeding bird season making it challenging work.

Twenty years later and you would perhaps not know that 20 hectares of western hemlock had ever been present. Recovery has had a helping hand with initial planting of locally sourced and grown ash, birch, rowan and oak to help maintain woodland soil condition. Otherwise nature has done its thing with natural regeneration of native trees and slow but sure recovery of native woodland flora and fauna, including the dormouse. Volunteer support, managed by the Wildlife Trust, has been valuable in ongoing management of the site.

Cwm-Clettwr is part of a network of ancient woodland site restoration work in the Dyfi Valley that has been underway for the last 20 years. Some of the sites form part of Historic Park and gardens, such as Pryce deer park and estate. If you travel along the A487 you may not remember the dense mature western hemlock or rhododendron groves as it has all been removed to vast improvement of the condition of the ancient woodland site.

Whilst the restored ancient woodland is more resilient and better connected, the trade-off has been a reduction in softwood timber production in preference for native species, but this was the right decision at Cwm Clettwr

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