

Rosehill Quarry Community Park

Green Space of the Month – January 2004

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View over the city

Rosehill Quarry Community Park is a semi-natural urban green space, which strikes a delicate balance between wilderness and recreation amenity. Many varieties of wildlife coexist with diverse human communities in this lush habitat of bare rock and running water. Traditionally used by working class people for recreation - walking, playing and gathering berries - the management group is now actively encouraging ethnic community groups in the neighbourhood to participate fully in activities in the park.

Rosehill Quarry is a very unusual place, defined by the topology of the city in which it is situated. Swansea is a coastal city, with a jumbled mix of industrial, residential and wild areas threaded among steep hills running down to the sea. The city centre is overlooked by a mighty slab of sandstone supporting three distinct, densely populated human communities. Uppermost is the vast housing estate of Townhill, a mainly white neighbourhood which includes a famous early example of social housing design. On the hill's steepest side lies Mount Pleasant, consisting of several strata of privately owned and rented town houses arranged in terraces sloping down past the college of further education towards the business district and shopping centre. On the gentler Western slopes, backing onto the University is the residential neighbourhood known as The Uplands. Both Mount Pleasant and The Uplands are home to a great many students and to a high proportion of Swansea's ethnic communities.

Running around the sides of Townhill there is a band of rock too steep to be built upon, which has been recognised by the City and County of Swansea as a wildlife corridor, part

of an important network of green spaces and wildlife sites dotted throughout the city. Rosehill Quarry is one pearl on this string of potential Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation (SINCS).

Chequered History

This six acre site was quarried for stone for house-building from the 1840's, thus creating the only flat ground in the area. It then stood derelict for some time. In the early 20th Century, this flat area became a fashionable tennis court, but that too stood derelict for a time, becoming overgrown with gorse and bramble. Margaret Burdett, a member of the Rosehill Quarry Group, has described in the journal of Landscape Design, October 1990, how "the quarry basin itself developed into a place for fly-tipping, burning copper wiring and abandoning stolen vehicles."

Yet, she goes on, "In spite of these problems, people still visited the quarry for picnics and blackberry picking and to enjoy the beauty and remote feeling of the area." For although it is only a stone's throw from the city centre, the site commands sweeping views over Swansea Bay and, on a clear day, across the Bristol Channel to the North Devon Coast.

Positioned as it is between Mount Pleasant and Townhill, Rosehill Quarry serves as a direct walking route to the city centre for those who are fit enough to make their way back up the challenging gradient of Constitution Hill. What better place to stop and catch your breath on the ascent?

In the 1970s, planning permission was granted for a huge block of flats, but as luck would have it, they were never built, and local people awoke to the potential of the site for recreation. Residents' initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s persuaded the city council to buy the quarry site, and designate it Public Open space in the Local Plan. The Rosehill Quarry Group was formed, with support from the council, to develop and maintain the quarry as Swansea's first Community Park.

Delicate Balance

The Community Park must strike a balance between the recreational aspirations of the different communities it serves and the needs of the wildlife for whom it is a vital habitat. Hence it is not a formal, cultivated park, but rather a quiet sanctuary, with a feel of wilderness about it.



Icicles in Rosehill Quarry

Wildlife areas include several ponds, a stream and a waterfall. The quarry supports more than one hundred species of plants including rowan trees, oak and royal fern, among others; thirty odd species of birds including sparrow hawks, kestrels and tawny owls, as well as frogs, newts and an array of dragonflies and damsel flies, notably the rare bluetailed damselfly – which has been adopted as the quarry’s symbol.

Recreation features include benches and picnic tables, play equipment, a BMX track and, believe it or not, a Cretan labyrinth made from that ubiquitous local natural resource - cockleshells. When I visited one frosty morning I found the labyrinth hidden under a thick blanket of wet brown fallen leaves, but I was able to trace its route by the satisfying crunch of shells underfoot. It is a very meditative activity, to spiral in and out of an ancient maze, contemplating this paradoxical combination of local distinctiveness with diverse spiritual heritage.

The geology as well as the plant and animal life of the quarry makes it a fine place to explore and a useful field study resource centre for schools and other environmental study groups. The old tennis court has become a kick-about area, used by local children for games and by the nearby primary school for physical education. Terrace Road Primary School, which includes significant numbers of ethnic minority pupils, does not have any other access to a grass sports area. The kick about area is used for the annual school sports day, but that might be the only time some of these children get to play on grass. So negotiations are underway to convert the kick about area for more formal use by the school.

Community Participation

People can join in with using, improving and creating new elements of the Rosehill Quarry Community Park by joining the quarry group, which meets monthly, or helping on practical work days once a month. Membership of the committee is described by one

member as “very fluid”, with people coming and going and not a lot of continuity. More people are gradually getting involved and the group is keen to encourage this, aiming to become fully inclusive. So far the main interest from ethnic communities has come from the young people, who come to play football and play hide and seek in the undergrowth. Rehena Begum has been working with BEN and the Rosehill Quarry Group to try and encourage the wider community to become active too.



Rehena is one of those very dynamic people who can be found in every community, stirring people up and getting things to happen. Being born and bred in Swansea’s Bangladeshi community, she knows pretty much everyone and has strong links with many community groups, such as the Bangladeshi Welfare Association, Swansea Muslim Youth League (SMYLE) boys and girls clubs and Darwatul Islam community group. She is employed by Swansea Council for Voluntary Services as a Trainee Community Development Worker but is currently on 9 months placement with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, shadowing their Community Development Worker, organising projects and generally learning by doing. She is also a proud Auntie to 14 nieces and nephews and volunteers in her spare time lay on stimulating activities for the young people and their friends and families.

Increasing physical activity

Although many people in the Bangladeshi community know about the Rosehill Quarry, they would not have thought of visiting it for a number of reasons – the steep climb; lack of transport; fears about personal safety or just lack of confidence to explore unfamiliar territory – issues affecting every community but especially ethnic communities. Increasing physical activity is a high priority on National government agendas at the

present time, and is addressed in Judy Ling Wong's paper, "Increasing physical activity within ethnic minority communities", available on the BEN web site.

Rehena told me how she managed to get people interested: first, she organised an environmental art workshop at Swansea Environment Centre for Darwatul Islam, attracting 35 women and children to make decorative plant holders and plant them up with colourful flowers to take home to brighten up their small, town-centre gardens. This workshop took place in the big old hall next to BEN's South Wales office, so we can attest to the buzz of excitement throughout that afternoon.

The groups were delighted with the day and wanted to do more, but these things take a lot of time and energy to organise. So Rehena talked to Mike Cherry, BEN Development Worker in Swansea, to see if he had any ideas. Mike is also a resident in the Mount Pleasant area and in his spare time he and his wife Jannie volunteer with the Rosehill Quarry Group. Mike suggested that the Bangladeshi groups might like to participate in a Summer Fun Day that was being organised. Activities included parachute games, an environmental treasure hunt, conjuring, plate spinning, tug of wars and guided tours of the Quarry.

Every Sunday afternoon in the Mosque, a group of girls aged 6-15 year meet; and every Sunday in the early evening another group of 16+ young women meets in a nearby home. They would love to meet in the open air in the summer if there was somewhere they felt safe to go; but they would only go as a group, not as individuals. And even then, they have no minibus, so it would be hard to get everyone up there. So Rehena and a co-volunteer from the other community group, ferried people by the car-load the short distance from the Mosque and bookshop to the community park.

All day long they drove back and forth giving people lifts, with just a short prayer break at midday. This had the effect of bringing the two groups together, to mix with the white community and created a feeling of harmony and community spirit. While the young people happily played together under Mike's supervision, Rehena was able to show the adults around and help to familiarise them with the different facets of the site. Many of the young people attending Terrace Road Primary School are from the Bangladeshi community and they use the quarry with school groups, but this was the first time they had come in their own time, with their families and community groups.



Mike commented that the event was for everyone, but Reheena's group brought lots of energy to liven up the day. The initial aim is to introduce people from ethnic communities to the space and support and encourage them to feel able to use it more. Feedback from the Fun Day confirms that this was a successful introduction, and the groups have asked for more opportunities to participate.



Earth bubble – photo by courtesy of South Wales Evening Post

There are plans for a further event, supported by the Small Woodlands Trust, to celebrate the quarry as a small woodland. The event will take place in February, and include a wide variety of activities, such as:

- bird watching and making bird boxes with someone from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- coppicing with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV)
- hedge planting for local school children with the council's development department nature conservation team

- making shelters from natural resources
- clay-modelling workshops with Rehena
- also lantern making storytelling, perhaps a barbeque, and an earth oven for bread making.

It is hoped that eventually Swansea's ethnic communities will come to have a sense of ownership of the space and feel able to use it in their own ways, and contribute to its management and upkeep; but there is a long way yet to go. Some families have commented that they would love to use the secluded, natural areas for prayers, but they would be concerned about, for instance, encountering dog-walkers or the evidence of them. Issues such as this would need to be addressed if the community park truly wants to become a resource for all. It will take a long time of gradual trust building between different communities for this goal to be achieved. It's good to know that the work is underway.