



TURNING THE COALFIELDS GREEN

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Inspiring residents and visitors to Dover District is one of our roles at the White Cliffs Countryside Project. We work with the countryside, and use features of the landscape to theme our popular guided walks programme. However, much of our so-called White Cliffs Country does not afford views of the famed and dramatic chalk coastline. What else is there to this corner of Kent?

The word "Coalfields" is really not one that you immediately connect with a rolling Kentish countryside, lush green, and deeply sauteed in history. But this imagery is what you find just beyond the grassy brows of the cliffs.

For the last few years a special effort has been made by the White Cliffs Countryside Project (WCCP) to promote and help improve the countryside now labelled as the "Coalfield Parishes". My job as the project officer for the area involves providing a collection of events, as well as being a source of advice to local people on their own ideas for projects.

The events include countryside conservation tasks, guided country walks (each following a theme) and the Green Gang projects, which are especially child-friendly. A recent theatrical walk called "Follow My Footsteps" took walkers back through time to meet people of the past- a miner, a mediaeval woodsman, a Roman, and a Bronze Age boat builder! We also invented and organised the Spinney Wood Open Day, which attracted over 400 people this year, to see traditional and modern methods of the management of ancient woodland.

Themes for the guided walks have taken me on adventures of learning, because before I take groups out, I have to walk the route and research for snippets of information about local history, landscape and wildlife. This is a rewarding part of my job, and means that I get paid to wander the countryside and thumb through interesting books in the local library.

Outings in the Coalfield Parishes take themes ranging from Jane Austen to wetland, from Norman churches to flowers on roadside nature reserves. I always try to develop new ideas each season, but what are my own

favourites? (Without blowing my own trumpet too much!) A few of my favourite occasions would perhaps be the May walk to visit the famous Fredville Majesty Oak, the largest oak in the British Isles; or the toadstool walk that captivated us so much that we happily ignored gale force winds; and I should mention the "sun dogs" magical sunlight effects in the evening sky last summer near Northbourne. But there is a host of fascinating things that one could recount - too many to list here. Of course, you should really come along yourself to find out what you can encounter on these walks. But some people like to put something back into the countryside, and volunteer with us.

Our countryside conservation tasks are the kind of thing which many find highly rewarding, not just for the result of seeing a difference being made in a day or from season to season as part of a team. It is also a chance to discover how to help wildlife in the woodland, wetland, hedgerow, pond or meadow habitats that we get involved with in the Coalfield Parishes. You also meet other people who care about giving a helping hand to the countryside.

Local projects, too, are helping the coalfields to feel greener, such as the schools boosting wildlife in their grounds to create living classrooms and the latest village pond campaigns.

Green Gang is our family-centred collection of events. The new Junior Ranger scheme helps some of the older children to gain reward points for joining our Green Gang outings, and get a free notebook to help develop their budding naturalist skills. Actually we get everyone from toddlers to great grandads!

If you would like more details about activities in the Coalfield Parishes, call WCCP for a free leaflet, and be sure to ask for the latest Green Gang details. We may also be able to help you publicise your own countryside events. Our Dover office number is 01304 241806 (also Fax).

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Countryside Project Officer*