

Introduction to Somer Valley Rediscovered

Hidden in the hills in the southern region of Bath & North East Somerset (B&NES) lies the Somer Valley. It includes the urban areas of Radstock, Midsomer Norton and Westfield, the large villages of Paulton and Peasedown St John and is surrounded by countryside dotted with smaller villages.

The area has been profoundly shaped by the former coal mining industry which has left its mark on the landscape and has influenced settlement patterns, transport networks and social structures. The population of the area is around 40,000 which equates to 20% of the population of B&NES.

Somer Valley Rediscovered is one of the West of England Joint Green Infrastructure Strategy 2020-2030 strategic green infrastructure projects. It aims to better connect communities to their local greenspaces tackling both biodiversity loss and improving health and wellbeing. It will help people to 'rediscover' their local walks and sites, their heritage and natural environment and will show how that 'rediscovery' can influence positive change for communities and nature.

A Wild Landscape

The undulating landscape of the Somer Valley is made up of farmland (both arable and pasture), mature hedgerows, woodlands and steep sided river valleys. There is a sense of remoteness even though you are rarely far away from towns and villages. The coal mining industry has left a legacy of densely wooded 'batches' (the local name for coal mining spoil heaps) which are distinctive features within the landscape.

A Sense of History

Within the past 250 years the area has gone through significant change from rural to industrial and now a relatively rural area including an urban population within Midsomer Norton, Radstock and Westfield. Relics of the Somersetshire Coal Canal and the multiple railways and tramways that criss-crossed the area can still be found if you know where to look and many of the buildings associated with mines remain, now used for other industrial purposes or converted into houses. William Smith, the 'Father of Geology' began his work on the developing the world's first geological map while working as a surveyor on the Somersetshire Coal Canal and even today many fossils can be found in the spoil on the batches.

A Chance to Explore

Another legacy of the mining industry is the large number of footpaths and bridleways in the Somer Valley. Many of these originate from miners' routes to work. The Limestone Link long distance path which connects the Cotswolds to the Mendips passes through the area and closely follows the route of the Somersetshire Coal Canal. Old railway lines and tramways built to transport coal are now cycle routes including the Colliers Way. Currently they offer mostly traffic free routes to Bath and Frome and there is potential to extend to Bristol.



Somer Valley Rediscovered Aims

Re-connect people to their local greenspaces

Covid-19 and lockdown has brought into sharp focus the importance of access to greenspace within walking distance of home and the benefits this brings to mental and physical health. New research is also showing that connections with the natural environment not only brings about a plethora of health benefits but is linked with pro-environmental behaviour.

Improve Biodiversity and build Climate Change resilience

The State of Nature Report (2019) shows that on average the abundance and distribution of UK species has declined since the 1970s due to factors such as changes in farming, increased development and rising temperatures attributed to climate change. The B&NES Corporate Strategy cites addressing the climate and ecological emergency as a core policy, with associated actions to restore existing wildlife habitats and create new habitats.

Improve the health and wellbeing of the whole community

The natural environment is a wonderful health asset. The influence that the great outdoors can have on both physical and mental wellbeing will be recognised and celebrated. B&NES Council adopted a 'Whole Systems Approach' to maintaining healthy weight in 2019, which includes actions to encourage and enable more people to be active within the natural environment and Somer Valley Rediscovered supports this approach.

Wessex Water are currently piloting a social prescribing project in the area with the aim of reducing levels of pharmaceuticals in the water course to improve water quality. This involves working with Health Authorities to identify groups and outdoor activities where patients can be signposted as an alternative to prescribed medicine. Natural England have funded an officer to work specifically on this sub-project within the wider Somer Valley Rediscovered context.

Promote the area as a visitor destination for walking and cycling

The potential of the Somer Valley to attract more visitors is currently under-developed. The stunning landscapes, heritage interest and excellent network of footpaths and cycleways could be marketed to tourists and this in turn would contribute to the green economy.



“The influence that the great outdoors can have on both physical and mental wellbeing will be recognised and celebrated.”

Next steps

Miriam Woolnough, Somer Valley Rediscovered Project Manager, is currently undertaking conversations with town and parish councils, ward councillors, council officers, organisations and community groups to gain a deeper understanding of the area, to discover what the issues are and devise projects that address needs and meet the aims as described.

A costed action plan is being drawn up and funding bids will be sought to take the programme of projects forward.



Contact

Miriam Woolnough
Project Manager - Somer Valley Rediscovered

✉ Miriam_woolnough@bathnes.gov.uk

☎ 01225 477590

🌐 www.somervalleyrediscovered.co.uk



Lead Project Partners:

