

East Wemyss Workshop documentation



Introduction

This workshop was held in the Rosie Hall community centre in East Wemyss on Tuesday 12th June 2018. Twenty two people participated; 10 from the SUII team, 5 from HES, 5 members of the Save the Wemyss Ancient Caves Society (SWACS) and 2 members of the local authority. The workshop followed a site visit to the Wemyss Caves led by SWACS.

The Wemyss Caves are known for their ancient carvings, including the largest collection of Pictish symbols in Scotland. The caves and carvings have been damaged, and some destroyed, since they were first recorded in the 19th century, and they continue to be threatened by land subsidence and coastal erosion. This has made access to some of the caves difficult and threatens their survival in the long-term. Today, vandalism is an ever present and urgent threat to the survival of the carvings. SWACS were established in 1986 following an incident where a stolen car was set alight in Jonathan's Cave destroying two carvings of Pictish Beasts and a carving of a bird. Since then, SWACS, whose membership is drawn predominantly from the local area have looked after the caves, raised awareness about them and campaigned for their better protection. They have had a long working relationship with Historic Environment Scotland and Fife Council.

The aim of the workshop was to bring the SUII team of heritage researchers and practitioners together with SWACS members and other stakeholders to talk about the themes of significance, threats, aspirations and responsibilities for the future of the Wemyss Caves in the face of uncertainty around anticipated accelerated deterioration of the carvings and their coastal cave setting as a result of climate change.

Summary of discussions

Workshop format

Participants were divided into 4 mixed groups with SWACS members, HES officers, local council officers and SUII participants split up between tables. Each table discussed the same 4 pre-defined questions, based upon the SUII Learning from Loss programme objectives. Each question had a 15 minute discussion slot.

Q1. What is significant about the Wemyss Caves?

Q2. What are the main threats facing the caves?

- *What courses of action are being taken now?*
- *What more could be done?*

Q3. What are your aspirations for the Wemyss Caves by 2030? What needs to happen to achieve them?

Q4. In order to achieve future aspirations what are the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders?

At the end of the small-group discussion period, the nominated note-taker from each group reported back their key discussion topics to all. Notes of the discussion as recorded by each note-taker are reproduced below with only very light editing.

Main findings of the workshop

Q1. Significance

Every group ascribed significance to the uniqueness of the carvings themselves and indivisibility with their cave context, so that the sensory experience of the light, geology, and surrounding landscape and seascape is inseparable from the experience of visiting the carvings. Perhaps because they are well-recorded and familiar to our SWACS guides, the local traditions, histories and stories relating to the caves through time was highlighted by all groups as fundamental to their significance alongside their archaeological and intellectual importance and potential. This extends to the role of the caves now as a place of local pride and focus for community action. The significance of the caves to the original engravers and to people in the past was also considered.

- the carvings, their uniqueness
- local history, traditions, stories, community memory
- context, sensory experience, flora, geology, geography, peripheral/liminal
- history, time-depth
- research and intellectual potential

Summary of discussions

Q2. Threats

All groups identified deliberate or inadvertent damage to the carvings as a result of vandalism, anti-social behaviour or lack of awareness of their existence or fragility as the greatest threat facing the carvings. Geological instability of the caves could also result destruction of the caves and carvings. Because of the seriousness of these threats, natural erosive processes of coastal erosion and weathering were perceived as less critical, although still pertinent.

It was acknowledged that anti-social behaviour is a societal issue wider than SWACS, but that a strategy (already in progress by SWACS) of making the caves as inviting as possible to encourage more people to use them by keeping the area tidy, managing vegetation, improving local education about the caves, installing site interpretation and holding events was the best protection for the carvings.

“I am touched by the prominence of community buy-in as the first response to addressing issues at the caves. In my organisation it is more often the technical fix that is the immediate go to”.

Most groups also identified practical actions to prepare for natural threats such as commissioning a structural survey and investigating coastal defence or beach nourishment options.

- vandalism and anti-social behaviour
- inadvertent damage as a result of lack of awareness
- geological instability

Q3. Aspirations for 2030

All groups focussed on the need for developing the economic potential of the Wemyss Caves and the importance of a visitor centre. The potential value of the caves for wider social benefit in this economically deprived area emerged as a very strong theme in the East Wemyss workshop.

- Visitor Centre
- realise economic potential
- increase community involvement and benefit
- realise research potential
- secure the carvings

Q4. Roles and responsibilities to meet aspirations

Every group thought that partnerships between the local community, Historic Environment Scotland Fife Council and other relevant organisations, e.g. Fife Coast and Countryside Trust, Wemyss Estate, were essential to achieve the quite focussed aspiration to transform the caves into an economic asset for the area. Historic Environment Scotland and Fife Council have important roles as, centres of expertise, enablers and funders. There is local responsibility to fully engage and commit to the caves – some groups discussed the opportunity for SWACS to acquire ownership of the caves. One group raised an interesting point about the criteria and values applied by HES when allocating budgets to

Summary of discussions

heritage sites they manage and external grants available to communities to manage significant local heritage assets.

- collaborative working
- long-term investment and buy-in
- upskilling and capacity building of community
- funding and expertise of other stakeholders
- ownership
- HES budget allocation