



Roughly worked Bluestone still waiting to be transported to Stonehenge

by Andy Williams

Place is special when we do a bit of homework

It has been pleasing to read in recent issues of Horizons of a broader understanding of outdoor learning. I was particularly inspired by the musings of Bulmer on *'Tourism meets Outdoor Learning'*⁽¹⁾ as well as Orgill's piece on *'The Power of Place'*⁽⁴⁾. Similarly the thoughts of French and Phillips⁽²⁾ on *'Cultural Education through Outdoor Education'* as well as Towers and Loynes⁽⁶⁾ Finding New Ways. All these contributions shift the focus of outdoor learning away from the mastery of technical skills and the development of personal qualities and start to re-think outdoor education in new, different, challenging and, for me, exciting ways. This article draws upon all of these articles in contributing some thoughts on the 'hot topic' that is place responsiveness.

Place is where people respond to the opportunities and stimuli around them, sometimes called 'affordances'⁽³⁾ or opportunities to interact with the landscape. It is where we make experiences. We connect to place as a consequence of the memories, events, ideas, feelings and meanings we associate with those experiences. It is place that provides the opportunity to engage in outdoor activities. It is place that provides the individual and group challenges that are so attractive to outdoor practitioners and learners.

There are *'those who consider that a place is made through the accumulation of human experience in a particular setting.... (and).... those who propose that place has its own inherent spirit and meaning'*⁽⁷⁾. I locate myself squarely within the camp of those people who make sense of place as a cultural construction.

In essence it is place that shapes all forms of human interaction outdoors whether the outdoor experience is canoeing on the Leeds-Liverpool canal, walking on the South-West Way, caving in the Yorkshire Dales or coastering in Pembrokeshire. Place provides outdoor experiences and learning opportunities that are real and meaningful and through outdoor activities helps learners make a connection to the uniqueness and shared experiences of life that are reflected in that place.

Connecting to Place

Connecting to Place means developing an increased understanding and awareness of the place where the outdoor activities occur. I would suggest there are three complimentary ways in which connecting to place can be explored: consideration of how the current generation live in and around a particular outdoor place; consideration of the different ways that previous generations have lived their lives in that same outdoor place; and consideration of the concerns and issues that might arise for *future generations* in that place.

Place has a present, a past and a future. It is certainly evident all around us today. In fact I would dare to suggest there is not a river, cave, hill, forest or mountain in the UK that does not display evidence of recent human endeavour in and around its specific location. Nan Shepherd noted the same thing in The Living Mountain her acutely insightful homage to the Cairngorm massif and people's ambiguous interaction with it, written in the closing years of the Second World War⁽⁵⁾.

Man's presence too is disturbingly evident ...in the wrecked airplanes that lie scattered over the mountains...he has driven the snow bunting from its nesting sites, banished the capercaillie and re-introduced it from abroad. He has protected the grouse and all but destroyed the peregrine.

Evidence of the different ways that humans have interacted with place over millennia is also evident all around us if we care to look carefully. From the industrial heritage linked to mountains, quarries, caves and rivers to the cultural heritage of long-disused field boundaries, local folklore and place names. It is there just waiting to be given new meaning through the observations, discussions and practices we bring to it.



Battle of Preseli memorial plaque

Likewise, consideration of future concerns and issues is possible in exploring the tension that exists at the local level between the desire to retain the best features and practices of current and older generations and the desire to be part of a global community who benefit from the newest advances in technology and communications. The colossus of sociology that was C. Wright Mills explained it succinctly, it is the point where a 'personal concern' becomes a 'public issue'. How for example do we as individuals and communities react to the prospect of windfarm developments being sited in our favourite hills? What do we think of new road developments that will speed up travel links between bigger towns and regions but will involve by-passing smaller communities and destroying locally important eco-systems and walking areas? And how about new housing developments that encroach on local brown/green spaces? These are very real tensions and concerns that interface personal concerns with public issues and will impact the lives of future generations, yet future generations will have no say in determining the outcomes of these concerns. It is you and I who are charged with the responsibility of making the best decisions for these future generations. I believe outdoor education provides a fantastic opportunity to raise these concerns with young people and to encourage us all to become more aware of how local issues around place can and do impact our lives today and the lives of future generations tomorrow.

For me place is given meaning by the human interactions it reflects and presents to us. As outdoor facilitators I am suggesting the evidence of these interactions counts for more than the silent physical context in which outdoor activities take place. Rather these place-focused interactions need to be highlighted as a key aspect of participants' outdoor learning. This focus on place should be the background and social setting that is brought to light by the facilitator. It should circumvent and locate what we do there (the outdoor activities themselves) and it should be part of the learning experience that participants take away from their outdoor activities/experiences. Whether we consider ourselves to be a caver, paddler, biker, or climber; whether we call ourselves an instructor, facilitator or educator; and whether we are full time and long served in a location or new, part-time and casually employed, I am suggesting that we enhance the learning of others by highlighting the importance of place, and that outdoor learners should take from their experience a deeper understanding of the human interactions with the place they have explored. Outdoor experiences are inextricably linked to the places in which they occur. They cannot and should not be separated as if the place itself does not matter.

Preseli Hills of Pembrokeshire

I want to explore these ideas a little further in elaborating on the potential that a focus on place offers outdoor learning. I have chosen to do this within the county of Pembrokeshire in south-west Wales, where I have lived, worked and played for the last 30 years. As a location for outdoor activities these gentle hills with their

distinctive rocky outcrops are nothing special. In total a full traverse of the broad ridge is about 11 km long with the highest point being the summit of Foel Cymcrwyn at 536m. You can navigate, orienteer, camp and mountain bike on the Preseli Hills and the occasional local rides a pony. They are ideal for introductory, low-level activities and other than low mist, they hold no obvious risks or hazards. In effect the Preseli Hills are like many other lowland, hilly areas of the UK. Nothing special then?

Special or Not?

On the contrary I think the Preseli Hills are very special indeed. They are special because they represent a key place for human interaction with the upland landscape of west Wales reaching back thousands of years to the early Bronze Age (4000 – 2200 yrs B.C.). They are the location from which the Bluestones of Stonehenge were quarried as well as the setting for the richest and oldest legends of Wales – The Mabinogion. In living memory they have been the focal point for local resistance to the whims of an anonymous, distant government in London wanting to use them as a military area and more recently a proposed site for a wind turbine location to address the nation's sustainable energy needs.

In addition, Wales like Scotland, is fortunate to have its own language. Welsh is an older language than English and whilst English is understood by everyone who lives hereabouts it is Welsh that is spoken by many on a daily, social and business basis. The Welsh language is evident in the daily lives of locals and visitors alike: in the public notices we read; the directions on roads; place names of towns and villages, and in shops and pubs throughout the country. Fortuitously for outdoor practitioners we have a readily accessible opportunity to interact with the Welsh language whenever we venture outdoors with a map in hand. There right in form of our eyes are the Welsh language place names that survive as the language heritage of the area. Place names that are as alive and important today in helping guide our way across the landscape as they were when Welsh was the only language of the area. We can choose to ignore these Welsh place names as unpronounceable and irrelevant as we undertake our outdoor activities in the area. Alternatively we can choose to embrace the same Welsh place names and connect with them. We can use them as a way to better understand this place, from their literal translations to their cultural heritage, and in doing so we can expand and enrich the learning experiences of our groups. For all these and many other reasons I think the Preseli Hills are very special, for it is the material and linguistic culture that is evident in, around and on these hills, that is there waiting for us to connect with it when we venture outwards and onto them.

And yet at the same time the Preseli Hills are not special at all! Every outdoor location is a place that has a past, present and future. In a temporal sense every place is therefore similar, existing at a given and shared period in history. If we interact with the Preseli Hills as a place for outdoor activities and make no effort to recognise the unique history, present and future of that place it is not special at all. There is nothing intrinsically different to be found in the landmass of the Preseli Hills than there is to be found in the Mendips, the North Yorkshire Moors or Exmoor. Yes, particular locations may offer some unusual outdoor activity opportunity or a site-specific hazard that requires consideration but beyond that these hilly regions are largely the same. They offer similar opportunities for outdoor activities wherever you go and they support a like-minded community of outdoor practitioners. This is good. I have no problem with high quality and safe outdoor learning opportunities being the standard practitioner experience throughout the UK. But if this is all we focus on when we are outdoors with a group then I suggest we are missing a fantastic opportunity to make that outdoor activity more meaningful and genuinely different for our participants. We can do this by bringing to the fore our knowledge and understanding of the uniqueness of that place. When we think of the Preseli Hills only as an outdoor activity venue they are not particularly special. It is only when we think of them as place and the range of human interactions that are evident there that they become special.

Using map, compass and place in the Preseli Hills

The walk described below makes use of map and compass navigation as the outdoor activity focus for a day in the Preseli Hills and follows the crest of the broad ridge along the Golden Route walked by travellers for thousands of years. Beyond practicing fundamental navigation competencies with a group I want to better connect the group to the Preseli Hills as place, by drawing attention to the cultural heritage and human-place interactions of the area in order to make the outdoor day more meaningful and reflective of this particular part of Wales.



In order to do this I give consideration to how I can best interact with the group during the walk in order to explore the best learning experience for everyone (myself included). In relation to the way I approach such a day I remind myself to:

- Encourage the group to be active in their own learning and to use their eyes to observe landscape features that are visible on the land around them or on the map.
- Invite individuals to ask questions about the features that they can see and to make connections where possible to similar features they are aware of at home or in other locations.
- Recognise that there may be other members of the group who might be more knowledgeable than me on a particular topic or issue and invite them to share their knowledge with everyone else (me included).
- Acknowledge that some people may ask questions about features I know nothing about and which can be the focus of further research and study after the walk has finished.
- Acknowledge that it is the participant's learning that is important rather than what I as the outdoor facilitator / leader want them to learn. Indeed it is quite likely that they will each take away from the day something different and specific to them as an individual based upon their different personal histories and life-experiences to date.

Focusing in more detail on the multi-disciplinary learning potential of the Preseli Hills I recognise that discussions with group members during the walk can be wide ranging and stimulated by all sorts of interests and experiences they might bring to the walk. Subjects as different as biology, history, geology, botany, anthropology and science might be considered to name just a few. What is discussed is dependent on what stimulates the interest of the group through what they observe and do and what I am able to introduce them to. It is a shared learning experience. We learn from each other. Observations may draw attention to how people in the past occupied the same space we are occupying on our walk, but how they did so in a very different way making use of different technologies to help them. Alternatively, features on the map and ground may prompt discussions about how in the present we are connecting to and impacting the local and global environment today - what I call *Little Picture – Big Picture issues*. Similarly observations may lead the discussion to consideration of the future of local environments and communities as well as much bigger planetary concerns and the legacy we are leaving for future generations. The range of possibilities is both endless and continually motivating. However, it is this open-ended nature of the learning that I think causes most concern for other outdoor professionals and which prevents them from wanting to know more about place. To this end they are quite right to ask, as many colleagues and students have done *How can I know all that stuff? About history, geology, science, biology and anthropology?* My answer to this is quite simple, I would not expect anyone to know an area intimately from all these different subject areas. However, this should not mean that we do not know an area at all. Our knowledge may only be partial but it is still important. When we share it with others we provide an opportunity for them to not only better understand and connect with that place but to consider how all these different subjects come to interact with each other in this one place. They, and I, can start to see the Preseli Hills as the multi-dimensional and complex place that it really is. It is not just a place to recreate and experience outdoor activities, though it is that

as well. It is a place with a rich history, a complex present and an exciting but uncertain future. So how I am suggesting we go about sharing our knowledge of that place?

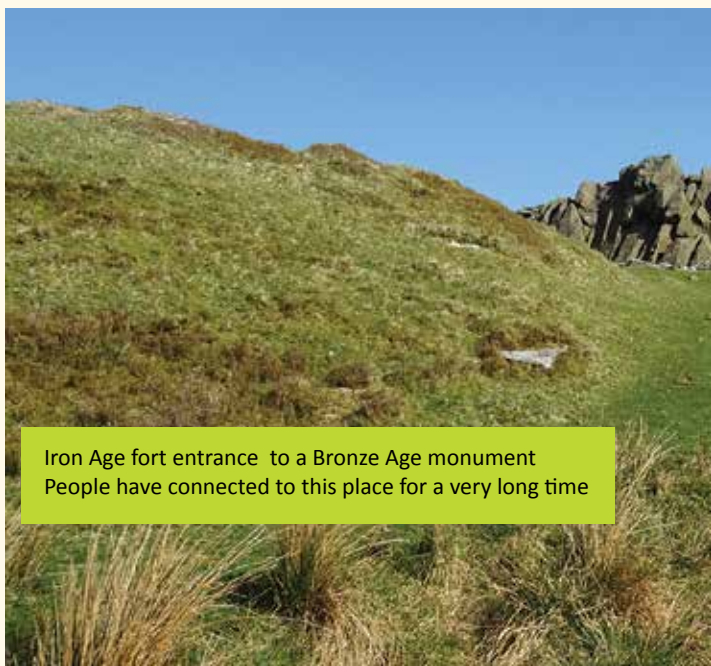
Do a Bit of Homework!

I am not a botanist, not a scientist and not a historian. In fact my undergraduate degree was called Human Movement Studies (what we can Sports Studies/Sports science today) which had aspects of outdoor skills, knowledge and training in it. From this background and with a passion that still burns strongly I have had a fantastic career exploring the physical and cognitive aspects of the outdoors in Wales and beyond, because I have always been willing to do a bit of homework. This I believe is the key to bringing alive the unique learning opportunities that every place offers.

So what exactly do I mean by *doing a bit of homework*? In essence I am suggesting nothing more than gathering local knowledge. Informed outdoor practitioners have been doing it for decades with a particular focus on finding safe routes and identifying potential hazards. For me it goes beyond these essentials and includes a whole range of sources that provide insight into the social and cultural activities of a place. At the most obvious level it includes speaking with colleagues and friends about their knowledge of the area and talking with local people that I encounter. As obvious as it sounds reading local heritage information boards that are displayed around the area is valuable, whilst a search of the internet always provides insight that was previously unknown. Bit by bit, year by year, my knowledge of the Preseli Hills has increased. What has surprised me is that I am never tired or bored with the place. My increased knowledge seems to have fuelled an on-going thirst for more knowledge which means I want to explore the hills from different starting points, I want to visit slightly out of the way outcrops and features of the hills, and I want to end the walk in different places. It is this greater insight and knowledge of the hills that I try to bring to the outdoor activity we are doing in an effort to make the groups experience more memorable and interesting.

End Point

I have described above the diverse learning afforded by a map and compass walk in the Preseli Hills of west Wales when place, and human interactions in place, are valued. The ideas I have outlined are equally relevant for a canoeing trip on the river, for a mountain bike trip through the forest or for a coasteering journey around a sea-cliff interface (I have done them all), because it is not the activity that is different, it is the place. For me this is the real contribution that outdoor activities have to make to meaningful learning. I would encourage others to share their own local places in a similar way. ■



Iron Age fort entrance to a Bronze Age monument
People have connected to this place for a very long time

Table 1 (below) details points of interest and discussion topics to share with others in the course of a map and compass walk following the legendary Golden Route across the Preseli Hills from east to west.

NO.	POINT OF INTEREST	DISCUSSION FOCUS
1	Hedgerows along lane	Hooper's law suggests we can date hedgerows by counting the number of different tree and shrub species to be found in a 30m section and multiplying by 100 eg. 6 x 100 = 600 years old (approximately).
2	Lower slopes of Hills	Location for WW2 military training with tanks.
3	Foel Drygarn (Hill of 3 cairns)	Eastern summit of the Preseli range. Both a bronze age monument (from 2200 BC) and an iron age fort (from 850 BC).
4	Forestry plantation	Upland coniferous plantation dating from after WW2. Linked to post-war establishment of Forestry Commission and drive to be self-sufficient. Eco-systems.
5	Sheepfold	What is it? Creative story time.
6	Carn Menyn (Hill of butter)	Location of 'Bluestone' quarry for Stonehenge. 20 mins solo time.
7	Bedd Arthur (Arthur's grave)	Neolithic feature associated with the legend of King Arthur.
8	Carn Sian memorial	Memorial stone marking the site of a crashed WW2 plane.
9	Slopes of Mynydd Bach (small mountain)	Location for 'hefted' sheep, wild ponies and (if you are lucky) adder. Hefting is a traditional method of managing flocks of sheep on large areas of common land without a shepherd. Solo walk opportunity.
10	Cerrig Marchogion (Stones of The Knight)	800m stretch of rocky outcrops fabled to be petrified Knights on horseback who fought the wild boar in the Mabinogion tales. Drawing and art opportunity.
11	Foel Feddau	Bronze Age burial cairn on the Golden Road route across the Preseli hills.
12	Foel Cymcerwyn	Highest point of the Preseli Hills at 536m. Series of Bronze Age monuments around the summit.
13	Boundary Stone	Marker denoting the intersection between the Golden route and quarryman's walk to and from Rosebush.
14	Quarryman's walk	Centuries old path to and from Rosebush for quarrymen.
15	Tafarn Sinc	C19th pub in the village of Rosebush. Notable for its traditional features, metal roof and welsh language hospitality,
16	Rosebush station	Picturesque (now disused) terminus station adjacent to Tafarn Sinc for branch railway line linking Rosebush with Fishguard.
17	Bwlch Gwynt (Windy saddle)	Open area denoting westernmost crossing point of the Preseli Hills.
18	Foel Eryr (Hill of the eagle)	Western summit of the Preseli range with Bronze Age monument, many bird species and fantastic views to Carn Ingli and across the Irish sea. Nearby points of interest
19	Carn Alw	Iron Age fort with chevaux-de-fries defensive fortifications evident. Contemporary to Foel Drygarn or not?
20	Carn Goedog	Neolithic quarry. Recent archaeological activity suggests it is another location of 'Bluestones' of Stonehenge. Visible slightly raised platforms of early Bronze Age quarry workers.
21	Hafod Tydfil	Mysterious derelict upland hill farm from C17th.
22	Bedd yr Afanc (Monster's grave)	Bronze Age passage / gallery grave. Circa 1500 BC.
23	Carn Ingli	Impressive Iron Age fort and settlement overlooking Castell Henllys Iron Age village re-construction. Associated with many myths and legends – including Saint Brynach. Become a poet or go mad after a night on its summit!
24	Bluestone pillar	One of two stone pillars airlifted from the Preseli Hills in 1989. The other is at Stonehenge.
25	Waldo Williams memorial stone	Memorial pillar stone to local Welsh pacifist, poet and defender of the Preseli Hills. Poetry reading ' Preseli'.
26	Gors Fawr	Late Neolithic stone circle comprising of 16 small stones. Key part of the larger ceremonial landscape of Preseli Hills.
27	Crmych village	Is this where the people who lived on Foel Drygarn moved to and where their ancestors now live?



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