

Transcript:

Cwrdd â mi wrth yr afon - Nature's Work Tour 10 August 2022

David Cleary: So I'm just coming into the project space into cwrdd â mi wrth yr afon with Jim Langley from nature's work. My name is David Cleary. I'm the learning and engagement curator at Mostyn. We are here today to do a guided audio tour of the exhibition to look at the works presented, but from the perspective of the plants that are featured in the exhibit.

David Cleary: cwrdd â mi wrth yr afon, was a project that was developed with Mostyn and artist Frances Disley and we're sat in front of the first piece of work, which is a single channel video piece which has been produced by Fran and was edited and filmed by George Ellis. Title of the work is Wetland Woodland Heath Woodland Wetland, and it's a vignette, it's a video montage or collage of shots produced during the programme.

David Cleary: Over the course of cwrdd â mi wrth yr afon, which constituted a series of workshops and rural encounters in three nature reserves located along the afon Conwy and just off its tributaries, so I'm just at here with Jim, from nature's work who took us to two of the sites Capel Curig and Coed Hafod

David Cleary: And we're just gonna sort of chat about what we're looking at, the different plants that we can see, and he's just gonna vibe off me really.

Jim Langley: Definitely, definitely. It's great to really visit it.

David Cleary: Yeah. It's quite nice. So we've got some Sphagnum Moss that's just come up, which is at Coed Hafod.

Jim Langley: That's right. So there's a lovely little wetland site in this beautiful ancient Oak Woodland, and it's covered in mosses.

Jim Langley: And it was great to walk through their barefoot to really get a sensory experience there. I mean them Woodlands are fantastic damp shade

environments, but when you get these wet areas as well, you really get some very specialist species.

David Cleary: Yeah. It felt like we were walking on something. It was like, really?

Jim Langley: Yeah.

David Cleary: It was really interesting. Wasn't it? Um, but the Woodland, like it's an ancient forest, isn't it?

Jim Langley: Yeah. Yeah. It's an ancient Woodland. It's been there for hundreds of years. We're looking at species like Lesser Stitchwort and Wood Anemone and Bluebells and these are what we call ancient Woodland indicators, meaning that the Woodland has been forest cover, at least Woodland cover for at least 400 years and these sites. So these species can't just reappear in a field for instance. So they're, they, they tell us a, a really interesting story about the past.

David Cleary: Well now we've got some images which show the flowing sort of small river, and then we've also got, Spruce Bark which just appears...

Jim Langley: and lots of mosses

David Cleary: Lots of mosses, lots of, reeds, but this is on from Capel Curig wasn't it?

Jim Langley: That's right. And now we are up in the, in the moorland. So this is the higher part of the catchment. It's colder. It's not got a forest canopy cover, so it's higher rainfall area, a wetter area as well. And the species there are, are moorland species. So moorland grasses, bog asphodel, there's, we're looking here at, at Bog Myrtle, which is a fantastic, an amazing aroma and, every part of the plant is aromatic. It's been used to flavor beers as well as, and it is reputed to be a really good insect repellent as well. But they're real specialists in these wetland areas, along with all the rushes and, and the reeds as well.

Jim Langley: So, we're looking now back in a Woodland environment and North Wales, it's such a, it got wonderful clean air and moist damp air and lots of, water droplets. It's very moist atmosphere, incredible epiphytic growth on trees. So, we've got mosses and lichens covering branches and trunks, and it's

just a; it's a phenomenally diverse ecosystems really for; because it's such, these Celtic rainforests in a way. They're just superb for diversity of these lower plants and mosses and, and lichens and ferns as well.

David Cleary: What we're looking at now is the bilberry's, I think.

Jim Langley: That's right. Llys. So, yeah, it's a great edible berry in the summer. They're the black berries, which are fantastic. You can harvest enough to make jams and tart as well with them. So they're really good, quite bitter, but full of antioxidants, some reputed properties for health and for healing as well.

Jim Langley: We're looking at Blackthorn famous for its black berries. The sloe berry used to flavour gin in the autumn.

Jim Langley: And now we're into more of a... still hedge species, but Germander Speedwell they do like the shade, but you also find them in fields as in open space as well. So, Speedwells and we're looking at the Gorse, beautiful yellow flowers and when go and flower it's kissing season, which is quite a long season because they flower from March right through to October.

David Cleary: Yeah, there, there was. Um, I remember when we first started the project and we came across the gorse and that was kind of like the first, so that plant was kind of like the introduction, what we came into it with and I'll always sort of, the smell is really nostalgic because it's got that really fresh kind of coconutty aroma to it, hasn't it.

Jim Langley: Yeah.

David Cleary: and like right now you can see a hand picking the gorse it's a really slow process that you have to do it because obviously the, it's barbed and it's really sharp. So, it was almost like you was in commune with the plant in a way. I just always think about gorse in that way as a result of this project. But we came across a lot of that in the upper catchment, didn't we?

Jim Langley: That's right. I mean, you find it up to 400 meters or so into the mountain. And you find a species that grows down by the coast as well. So, there's actually two different species, but yeah you see it right across, right across the catchment.

David Cleary: I mean, we were quite deliberate with our choices and a lot, I mean, Coed Hafod was actually informed by you and we were kind of looking for places to go just in terms of accessibility. Because Coed Hafod is kind of like a bit of a hidden gem in the sense that it's, it's next to Zip World, but it's not commonly known as a place where people visit. The group that we had constituted of a large contingent of the... well, half of the group in fact were from Llanrwst, which was only about a mile away. And some of them had never walked through that...

Jim Langley: that's right.

David Cleary: ...bit. But yeah, you mentioned to me that it was managed by Snowdonia?

Jim Langley: Yeah. So, the national park authority own, I don't know what the current figure is about half of 1% of the national park area. So, our national parks are, are privately owned or have different landowners. They're not a national asset. They are a national asset, but they're not owned by the but the national park authority own small bits of Woodland specifically, so they have permissive access through, through there, and yeah, it's, as you said, the hidden, it's a hidden gem. It's a beautiful, accessible part of the common valley, but isn't frequented that often, but it just means that it's, you know, next to the chaos of Zip World it really is a nature haven.

David Cleary: It was... I mean we've Coed Hafod. Well, who manages Capel Curig?

Jim Langley: So that land is privately owned and I'm not exactly sure who owns that. I know there's Snowdonia National Park own bit to it because there's permissive path in some of the sections as well. So, I'm not sure on the, the ownership of that. I mean, there are grazing and graziers up in, in Capel Curig. But it's really interesting because you see a pattern of grazing management and there's lots of fences and impacts of water, but also you can see grazing pressures are different in different parts, so it allows different vegetation to establish. So, it's been really, it's a really interesting site to visit.

David Cleary: And this in the last place that we visited, you weren't with us for that one, but it was RSPB Conwy which is obviously conservation area in avian life and...

Jim Langley: That's right. A series of wetland ponds

David Cleary: ..That was, yeah. So, like, in a sense we've kind of transitioned throughout the project from, sort of exposed open heathland down through to, like ancient forest and then moved into the wetlands. Yeah, and it was kind of like that journey back through...

Jim Langley: That's right down. I mean, down to estuary, I mean the bird reserve is only around 30 years old. It was created as a waste site when they built the Conwy tunnel and it came, it wasn't initially designed to be a bird reserve, but it was thought of as the waste was being created to create ponds and then to hand it over to the RSPB who then manage it. So the site's very young, but the wildlife that's there is incredible how it's all naturalized and the pond levels vary and the amount of salt water vary so they're quite brackish some of the ponds and it's a management, issue for the bird reserve, but it's an incredible haven next, right next to a big busy, very busy dual carriageway.

David Cleary: It's funny. I remember one of the things that I learned from you during it was like how very little any of the lands in the UK are. actually hundred percent natural. In fact, the majority of them have been managed to some extent. There's a lot of human, human impact on even the most natural environments that we have in this, this country.

Jim Langley: So, you take, for instance, a woodland and that woodland has been managed. We saw a building, the Hafod in Coed Hafod was probably a gamekeeper managed that for the landowner. For grouse or for, the sheep grazing or; so, there's also its, woodland pastures are quite an old fashioned ecosystem, which is managed for grazing. So, the woodland itself, they're all managed to some extent for certain outcomes. Is it timber? Is it resources? Is it for grazing? And, so when you look at the understory of the structure, like we saw lots of Hazel stands that were shooting up, which would've been used and cut down and used for agriculture, for fences and for broom handles, for instance. So you find traditional Copist areas of, especially of, of Hazel, cause it's such a useful resource. So you get this Oak Woodland with a Hazel understory. And so that's a manmade environment. We've selected those two species over other species. So even woodland have that evidence of land management.

David Cleary: So we move from a darkened space, which features the first video work. As you move around a partition wall, you're greeted by to your

right... oh no, to your left even... you've got, shelves, which have, air dried clay pinch pots, but also, mounds of air, dry clay with, samples of dried flowers and different plant species that we kind of encountered along the way. A lot of these plants that we've already just spoken about, but we've got a number of the things that we might have potentially absolutely collected. We've got some celandines over there?

Jim Langley: That's right. I mean, they've been, they've been dried and pressed and yeah, we can still see the colours. We can still make out the leaf shape and a lot of the flowers, even in the dried state in the displays. There's a lot of rushes, which are, are type of grass, which form predominantly there as well as some of the conifer cones that you've got. So we've got things like a Douglas Fir cone there, quite a large cone, but lots of larch. We came across a lot of larch on our walks. Ferns have kept their colour as well so there's some wonderful fronds of ferns. I can see some, some of the really beautifully scented Bog Myrtle.

David Cleary: Because we... when we, when we, as you told me about the rush as well, how it was used to create candlewicks, dipped in pick fat or...

Jim Langley: that's right...

David Cleary: fat, and when we were actually talking about that, Myfamwy who joined the group later on, brought to us a book, which was, was owned by her and her family. I don't know if it was owned by her family actually, I think she came across it just from being connected locally, because she was from the area. But it literally rooted that practice or that way of making candles in that area around just to the west or to the east of Llanrwst.

Jim Langley: That's right. So that is an old practice, where the expression doesn't burn your candle at both ends comes from and there's this really, really incredibly light, it looks like a, a cigarette filter tip the white spongy kind of substance. That just is all the way through these rushes. And they live in the water and it's an adaptation to living in a wetland area and a water-logged area. So, they were bundled together in dipped in fat, as you said, David and, and yeah, they would burn all evening. So traditional candles.

David Cleary: On the wall. I mean, because the wall behind the shell, behind the shelves as well, like basically the whole installation is, is kind of like looked at as one thing. But we've used natural pigments or Fran had used natural

pigments to paint directly onto the wall to create these sorts of thin shape and sort of like gradient changes of colour, which almost have this kind of like, almost like a sort of like soft red tone to it and then there's also like a yellow that overlaps it. And I think these were used amongst the mix of different pigments that she produced. So she used a mixture. of Alder Catkins, Hawthorne, Beech, Spruce Bark, Oak as well which is like a really dark pigment. So these are actually available on the tables, which are in the centre of the space, just opposite the installation, which also features, a video work. The work on the wall is called What Grows, Where We Wonder, and this was kind of like a parallel video, which sits alongside, Wetland Woodland, Heath, Woodland, Wetland and Fran wanted to produce this to capture sort of, the human voice in the work. So the, voice of the group and you featuring the work, you make a joke, everyone laughs it's very nice. And yeah, it kind of, it kind of like almost like balances the room in the way. So you go from this guided meditation and landscape and then into this sort of section, which almost...

Jim Langley: It brings people into the, into the, the natural world. Doesn't it?

David Cleary: Well, I mean, there's a, there's a number of like histories and knowledges, which we don't know. We were coming into this as, in a sense as outsiders and what we needed to, what we wanted to do with this project as work with the existing networks and the existing sort of like histories that are here and almost interpret it through the project in a way. And I guess that's kind of like what you do as an educator in the area, because you kind of interpret on behalf of these different plants.

Jim Langley: Yeah, it's making, I always, the work I do is trying to connect people with the natural world, but show it through the lens that I look at the natural world and what I think is important and, and if people can take away elements from the day, not necessarily what things are called, but maybe the way they grow and where they grow and, and something, how we use plants and that traditional, methods of you know, creating dyes, or, having healing properties from, from plants. These are all the connections I think are really valuable and we don't want to lose them.

David Cleary: In the exhibition guide, we've actually got like the full plant list. Because these are...

Jim Langley: Wood Anemone. These are wind flowers.

David Cleary: Yeah.

Jim Langley: That looks to me. It's the leaf is oppressed. It's looking at the leaf and looking at that leaf shape. I think that could be Germander Speedwell. Could be, it's hard to see the way it's been pressed.

David Cleary: It's got a really deep violet flower and, it's really kind of like quite a delicate frame, isn't it?

Jim Langley: Yes. Yeah. And the way it's flattened it's not easy to see, but the Wind Flower is more obvious for me. We've got a yellow flower here, which is Birdsfoot Trefoil, which features in a lot of the displays. Leaves of the Rowan tree as well. I don't know what that... can't work out, what that one is. It's not a Dog Violet shape the way it's been flattened.

David Cleary: These are the Lesser Celandines, aren't they?

Jim Langley: They are the Birdsfoot Trefoil with the yellow. These ones with the grass like leaves are the, Stitchwort, Lesser Stitchwort. A Lesser Stitchwort, the name is given, anything with the wort in the name was often used medicinally or had some function to the body and it was supposed to prevent you getting a stitch or to help you with a stitch so the fact that you have stitchwort indicates that it was used for that conditions.

Jim Langley: That looks like Sea Century looks like a delicate little century. So that was probably from the coastal walk.

David Cleary: Yeah. You can kind of tell. You can kind of see the characteristics of the different plants from the different places, because ones from Capel Curig because they're more barky because we went there in April.

Jim Langley: There were the, the dwarf shrubs that were there. The annuals or the leaves that had come through. The herbaceous non woody plants hadn't come through. It was too early. So, we got a lot of the, the, the dwarf shrubs.

Jim Langley: Forget me not...

David Cleary: Scarlet Pimpernel

Jim Langley: one flowered, Scarlet Pimpernel. They Sea Century, Scarlet Pimpernel. This lowland coastal one. So I think that's Scarlet Pimpernel. Common Perth, Birdsfoot Trefoil, Common Water Hemlock, ooh, I don't know where that one is. Red Campion! Now what I need to do this is, Wild Strawberry, Brackish Water Crowsfoot, that would be a white flower.

Jim Langley: Hedgerow Crane's-bill, they're not Crane's-bill. So Herb Robert, Cuckoo flower. Wow, that's quite a tall plant, but I'm just think Bee Orchid

David Cleary: The Bee Orchids were really amazing. Yeah, they were in the RSPB Conwy and yeah.

Jim Langley: They're amazing. Amazing. I trying work out what this one is... it's a Crane's-bill.

David Cleary: Is that the Crane's-bill?

Jim Langley: Yeah.

David Cleary: So it's, it's got...

Jim Langley: Hedgerow Crane's-bill Yeah. That's what that one is.

David Cleary: It's got quite a large flower. hasn't it with yeah, it's like an almost like light purple flower with...

Jim Langley: yeah, it's quite a large flower, so I'd say three or four centimetres across, but the Crane's-bill gets their name when the seed forms it produce a seed and a long stalk that looks like a Crane's bill.

David Cleary: Oh, yeah simple!

David Cleary: But there was a lot of wild strawberry in all of the sites. I think there, they seemed to grow everywhere that we went, didn't they?

Jim Langley: They did. Yeah. And they creep as well. So they're a good, they're a good woodland indicator. That's the Wood Anemone again? Just trying to think...

David Cleary: We've actually got a few more things on the tables as well. So alongside like sort of the pigments that we produced, we have some, it makes a different piece...

Jim Langley: These are really interesting. This is a fungus which grows on dead Ash trees and it's called... it's really good for lighting or keeping a spark going so for bushcraft, it's really, it's really useful to start a fire. That's called King Alfred's Cakes when you find these lovely, really hard black fungi on dead ash.

David Cleary: Why do they call them King Charles [Sic Alfred's] Cakes cake?

Jim Langley: Because they look like they're burnt cakes that... King Alfred's Cakes. So, he'd meant to burn his cakes.

David Cleary: Overdone?

Jim Langley: Overdone and they meant to represent that. Yeah. Well, that's interesting. They're red clovers.

David Cleary: Yeah. These, these grew on the, in the fields, just outside of RSPB Conwy, they're quite common. aren't they.

Jim Langley: They very, very common.

David Cleary: Yeah, little, little flourishes.

David Cleary: We have some Elderflower which has been picked to pieces, but with the Elderflower was all was actually taken later on. We kind of like foraged that later on in the exhibition run, not in the exhibition run, during the project.

Jim Langley: Flowers in end of May to June.

David Cleary: Yeah. And it kind of came just around the time that the project was finishing and we looked, we actually, Delyth, who ran the trip to RSPB Conwy was really kind in sort of saying that she decided that she wanted to do the tour voluntarily after meeting the group, she actually joined the club and that allowed us to kind of do like a little get together a private opening with the group. And as part of that, I managed to pick some elder flowers and then I

made Elderflower cordial, and we fed and nourished the group with nice little of thing.

Jim Langley: And then you can get them in the autumn when they turn black berries.

David Cleary: Oh, can you?

Jim Langley: Yeah. And the black berry, the name for elder is Sambuca Nigra and Sambucol is a drug you can buy in Boots and other pharmacies and it's meant to be very powerful remedy for the flu.

David Cleary: Not related to the drink Sambuca, or is it?

Jim Langley: I think it may well be the same family.

David Cleary: Urgh...

Jim Langley: But it's a very powerful flu remedy.

David Cleary: Do you remember these? These are the needles from...

Jim Langley: Are they from the Larch? Let's have a smell.

Jim Langley: Well, they're Fir they're Fir needles. Yeah. They're Fir. They're not Spruce. I think they're Fir. They've got a pine scent. It's quite nice when they're giant.

David Cleary: They're quite few around. We've got some sort of loose, Bog Myrtle on here, which is gradually going down because I keep picking it and getting a sense of it. I mean, when you sat in the space you've got on the partition wall, you've got a wall full of hanging fabric which on top of these, there are, 5... 6... 7... 8. Eight May crowns which we produce with the group. That was again made from all collected plant material that we found on the way we've got a few more little glimpses of plants. So it is a lot of...

Jim Langley: That's like Mulberry.

David Cleary: There's a lot of it is...

Jim Langley: Ivy.

David Cleary: Yeah. A lot of Ivy, some Oak, Ferns. Some dried small little flowers in here. They've kind of changed their, um, shape slightly haven't they.

Jim Langley: Yeah, they have, I mean they look like Mulberries is now their dry that edge, but I don't think they are. That's interesting. It's got low leaf.

David Cleary: Can you tell what this one is?

Jim Langley: It's mixed in with another.

David Cleary: Like a small again, tiny violet flower. There's about four of them all together.

Jim Langley: They kind of look like Bluebells but they're dried Bluebells. They're very small because they've got the white stamen that come out from the centre. They are Bluebells, but they're very, that's thrown me because they're so old. Daisies there as well. Yeah. They're Daisies and Bluebells and Dandelions. This is a fir there's a little bit of fir in there and then Ivy... beautiful. Oh, they've lasted very. These are the Stork's-bills, you can see them. Can you see that seed?

David Cleary: Oh yeah.

Jim Langley: Yeah. So you get Stork's-bill and Crane's- Bill.

David Cleary: And they, this kind of like, what colour would you say that is? It's almost like a light...?

Jim Langley: It's gone kind of reddish...

David Cleary: veering towards pink. Isn't it?

Jim Langley: Pinky red.

David Cleary: And then inside it you've got this kind point on this side.

Jim Langley: And that would've been the pollen tube for the pollen to go down and then fertilize it, fertilizes the egg, and then it produces that that seed that we notice.

David Cleary: So when we initiate the project, because the group that we formed constituted of two different groups of really different desires from the projects. So for example, one group came from health and wellbeing angle and thinking about how nature could support them emotionally, physically, and mentally.

David Cleary: Um, the other group, is a Welsh horticultural society. Cymdeithas Edward Llwyd, the other group is the Well Women, but Cymdeithas Edward Llwyd come at from trying to champion Welsh language in terms of horticulture, plant naming in almost trying to bring that idea of cultural history plants together as one thing. I mean, the work that you do, Jim, and specifically you're work in North Wales, especially, do you think there's still a needs to bring people closer? From a local point, but also like from... do you think people need to be aware of the cultural heritage as well?

Jim Langley: Well, I think they get a sense of cultural heritage through connection and the work I do gives people that sense of local or sense of place, the sense of local place by looking at the way land is managed, looking at the landscapes, looking at the way vegetation reflects that as well. It very much reflects that, but it's, yeah, my route has always been through the landscape, which is, you know, very heavily you know, it's a cultural reflection on what's going on.

David Cleary: Yeah, and also geology is something that we didn't really talk about when we discussing the exhibition. Especially the geology of this area, is quite specific. Obviously, you've got slate lot of limestone in Capel Curig. It was really apparent. Wasn't it? Because I remember you were talking about differences in the actual soil and bedrock that was in the area, correct?

Jim Langley: That's right. So there's, I mean the bedrock of the Snowdonia is essentially volcanic but there's also, metamorphics like, as you mentioned, there's a slate and we all know about the connection with the slate industry in Wales and you mentioned limestone regions more on the coast. So you've got this whole incredibly diverse geology, and that has an impact on the way water moves through the landscape, but also on the chemistry of the soil, which affects the vegetation types as well.

David Cleary: Does the water carry the minerals from those different rock surfaces down into the estuary as well, like, cause is there like a transference from these different sites in some way? Does the water carry that?

Jim Langley: Absolutely. So it's reflected on the hill slope, so water will move on the hill slope. So you'll get, accumulation of minerals in the bottom of valleys as well, compared to on the side. So you can find some quite big differences in the uplands to the lowlands sides of the valleys, the bottom of the valleys as well. So there's lots of trans locations through the movement of water and the geology adds that mineral component to a soil.

David Cleary: So, yeah the plants in the same way do that, is there because there was common plants along the edges of each of the sites we visited. Cause I remember Wild Strawberry being present.

Jim Langley: So calcium, loving plant. So you'll find it more where there's bases and calcium. You won't find it where it's the soils quite acidic. So that was common because of where we were, was flushed with calcium and bases. So yeah, maybe it was the sites we selected possibly.

Jim Langley: I tend to pick field sites based on accessibility, but also ones that highlight the sheer diversity of in terms of landscapes, land, uses and so on. I let the natural world do the teaching in many ways. So I facilitate the learning through what's there and interpreting what's there and then bringing in elements, like how do we use certain plants that we find in these places and why are they there in many ways as well?

Jim Langley: No, I think it's been a really wonderful project and I mean the creativity and the way the land that I work in and how I operate from an ecology point of view to see what's been created from an artistic point of view is just incredible that the sheer beauty of the artwork is great. So no, it's been very successful in many ways.

David Cleary: Wow. Thanks.

Jim Langley: And it is, I just love it. This is, I don't do this. I love it. You know, my mum was a potter and an artist and she gets this, but I'm an educator and it's just brilliant, I love it so creative.

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