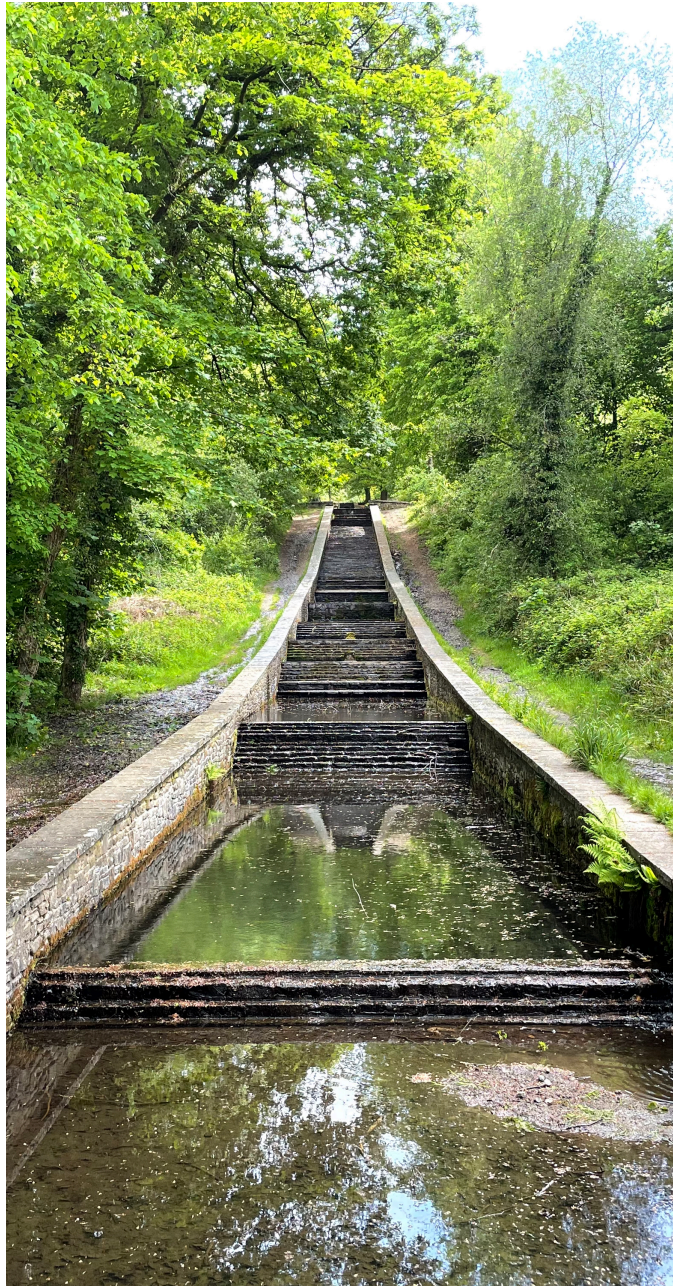




THE PROJECT PROPOSAL

Planning Solutions Consulting Limited were commissioned by Neath Port Talbot to develop a visitor experience action plan to enhance the wider parkland, together with assessing the opportunity to introduce a form of overnight visitor accommodation within its boundaries.

The prioritised visitor experience development plan was informed by the site review, strategic context, market assessment, consultation and direct primary research with members of the local community. The visitor research highlighted-specific elements of the visitor experience within Gnoll Estate Country Park which could be enhanced.

Derived from this, the proposal is to develop facilities at Gnoll Estate Country Park, to act as a focal point, gateway and launch pad for residents and visitors to Neath and the wider Vale of Neath incorporating education facilities, interpretation (physical and digital), an enhanced Visitor Centre and café, visitor accommodation, tea room and improved landscaping, all within the context of an evolving historic narrative. Improving the environment and investment of this magnitude will encourage further inward investment by the Public, Private and Third Sector which will contribute to economic growth in the region. The further development of the parkland seeks to apply the principles of sustainable management of natural resources in line with the Environment (Wales) Act and will act as a focal point and flagship for the wider Vale of Neath initiative.

Central to this proposal is the reinstatement of the site of the former Gnoll House as the focal point of the parkland. The reinterpretation of the ruins of this building as a functional part of the park will assist in developing the wider interpretation of Neath, and reflect in the association of the community with their historic roots and identity. Gnoll House was at the epicentre of the industrialisation and establishment of the communities up and down the Vale of Neath. Its loss has been significant to its community. The importance of its reinvention is consequently fundamental to rediscovering its reason for being.

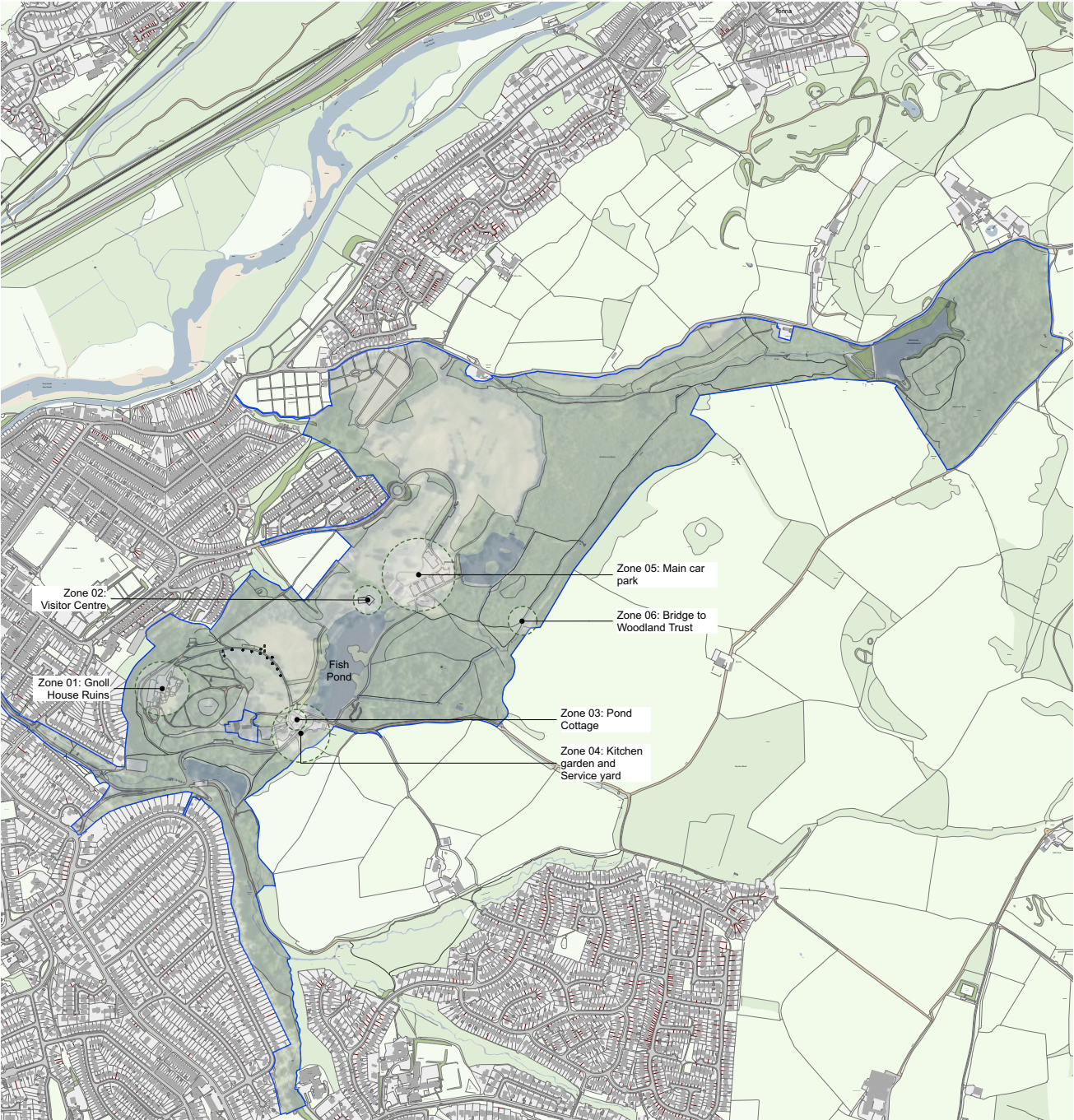
For the contemporary audience, the park looks to incorporate interpretation and provide information on a plethora of activities such as walking, cycling, events, local groups, dog walking groups and many more in the surrounding area, together with linking with other facilities and activities within the Vale of Neath. It will also provide an excellent location for the potential provision of social prescribing programmes. The existing Visitor Centre is to be demolished as it is felt that it currently does not deliver the required accommodation and would be challenging to adapt whilst maximising the opportunities of its site. The new Visitor Centre will provide toilets for those taking part in activities and be fully DDA compliant, including the provision of a dedicated Changing Place and wheelchair accessible seating indoor and outdoor. It will incorporate an education/meeting and associated room hire providing a perfect location for learning or meeting within a natural environment.

The location of the site of the existing building will enable stunning views over the Fish Pond providing an experience for residents and visitors to absorb the excellent landscape of the parkland. Together with the conversion of Pond Cottage into a tea room, the promotion of sustainable seasonal food and showcase local producers will build a stronger more resilient local economy and progress towards a shorter supply chain as well as contributing to the resilience of habitats and communities in the Vale. It will also ensure that the food provided at this location is grounded in local ecologies and is responsive to local conditions and seasons. This will reconnect communities with producers supporting wellbeing and helping to sustain the local/foundational economy. Local producers can add value to their produce and contribute to the local economy and increase the potential of the multiplier effect.

In addition to the above, the park will introduce overnight visitor accommodation. This will enable visitors from further afield to stay in the parkland – a unique experience that will serve to draw people to the area again with the potential for the multiplier effect to develop in terms of the surrounding economy.

The park will ultimately be a flagship development and demonstrate ‘Best Practice’. New construction will incorporate the latest renewable technologies including air source heat pumps, sustainable insulation, solar technology and integral ecology measures. This will ensure the long-term sustainability of the building for future generations and the enhancement of biodiversity across the park.

It will be important to ensure that the ‘offer’ responds to the needs of the market. The investment in the project will also make the wider area a more attractive place to live. The interpretation incorporated into the park land will ultimately help to tell the story of this important site. This ‘eco’ design will form part of the interpretation story which is told within the visitor centre. Together with the visitor centre, it is also be important to consider the visitor facilities within the wider park itself such as play, seating, picnic areas, car parking, supporting infrastructure for events such as toilets and storage requirement, service buildings and landscape improvements. All will serve to make the park a vibrant, diverse and exciting hub of activity with community benefits that transcend beyond its boundaries.



00004.1 SITE PLAN ZONES
SCALE 1:5000 @ A1, 1:10,000 @ A3

Groll Park is a Grade II* registered parkland. As a consequence of this designation it is statutorily protected. Extreme care should therefore be taken not to cause any unspecified damage to any fabric or part of structures and landscape on or within the site when undertaking any construction works.

General Notes
Responsibility is not accepted for errors made by others scaling from this drawing.

All construction information should be taken from figured dimensions only. Dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.

All dimensions and conditions are to be checked on site prior to preparing drawings or commencing any work.

Any variations or supplementary drawings are to be approved by The Architect.

All details are to be read in strict accordance with GA drawings and construction notes

All steelwork sizes, padstones, blockwork strengths and associated structural design to be in accordance with structural engineers design and requirements. Hiraeth Architecture accepts no liability to any discrepancies in the structural design indicated on these drawings. Any structural related queries should be directed to the project engineer immediately.

SERIES		EXISTING
SUITABILITY		S2 - ISSUED FOR INFORMATION
REV	DATE	NOTE

Hiraeth.

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job number

Zone

2325 00

Neath Port Talbot CBC
GNOLL PARK

Site Plan Zones

UPRN	Zone	Originator	Role	Type	Sheet number	S Code	Rev
2080	00	HIR	A	DR	00004	S2	

do not scale from this drawing | all dimensions to be verified on site | not liable for all discrepancies | copyright hiraeth architecture

THE BRIEF

The aspirations of the project extend much further than simply repairing existing structures and developing new buildings on the site. The Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places a duty on public bodies to apply the sustainable development principles in everything they do. This is similarly matched by the duty to maintain and enhance biodiversity as established by the Environment (Wales) Act. The Levelling Up Fund looks to maximise the economic benefits and by association, contribute to the well-being goals. Through actively engaging with the opportunities and constraints of the site the proposals look to address the output criteria to the right of page.

These proposals are summarised in the first phase of the strategic development plan shown on the facing page, derived from the evolution of the brief and contextualised by the Conservation Management Plan of April 2022, by Ian Baggott, of CFP, informed by an overview condition survey of the site, and summarised as follows:

Facing page: Strategic diagram showing the proposed Phase 1 interventions at Gnoll Estate Country Park derived from an overview condition survey of the site and associated business planning proposals by Planning Solutions Consulting

- Provide high-quality and multipurpose interventions that engage positively with the existing natural environment
- Deliver an identifiable proposal that is an exemplar of its type
- Reinterpret the ruins of Gnoll House, reinstating them as an identifiable focus in the parkland and beyond
- Improve visitor reception facilities and signposting through the rebuilding of the existing Visitor Centre and opening up of Pond Cottage to the public
- Provide flexible community and education spaces that can be used by a variety of community and educational groups and initiatives, and that may evolve and change in the future
- Improve accessibility to the parkland through dedicated infrastructure such as toilets, bike washing areas, and administrative areas, together with inclusive design
- Physically respond to the immediate environment of the site, considering factors such as siting and orientation, direct solar gain, thermal mass and air tightness
- Undertake a holistic sustainable approach that minimises the ongoing running and maintenance costs of the park so that it is economically sustainable in the future
- Enhance the experience of the park by incorporating interpretation of the wider site, together with facilities that help to increase dwelltime, and the number of repeat visits
- Importantly, engage with people who may not currently visit The Gnoll
- Deliver a viable mix of visitor accommodation that will be economically, environmentally and commercially sustainable in both the short and longer-term operation of the estate
- Provide an equally high-quality landscape approach to the parkland environs that enhances the local flora and fauna and associated habitats.



View of Pond Cottage from the North East looking South West across the fish pond

THE SITE AND CONTEXT

Gnoll Estate Country Park

Gnoll Estate Country Park is a grade II* designated formally designed park encompassing wider informal areas. Its main phases of construction include the 1720's, 1740's, 1776-1790, 1811-1861 and 1899. It is in the ownership of Neath Port Talbot Council, with the following description is provided by Cadw (reference no. PGW(Gm)50(NEP)).

The Gnoll was located on a prominent, steep-sided hill or knoll, on the east side of Neath.

It is registered for the survival of its largely eighteenth-century landscape park, which is of great historic interest, in its original rural setting above Neath. It lies on the flank of the Vale of Neath, long famed for its picturesque beauty. The landscape of the park is exceptional for its combination of industrial and ornamental functions and for its strong visual relationship with the surrounding countryside. The eighteenth-century landscaping is of several phases, including an exceptionally interesting early transitional layout by Thomas Greening, in the style of Stephen Switzer, with formal and informal elements, including a (restored) formal cascade. The following phases include an outstanding informal cascade of the 1740s and the later eighteenth-century follies of a rock-hewn grotto and the Ivy Tower, which forms a prominent landmark in the Neath valley. Although the park's historic character has been somewhat diluted through the loss of the house and planting, most of its structural elements remain intact or have been restored or rebuilt. Most of the major developments in the park and grounds took place during the eighteenth century under the ownership of the Mackworth family.

The park lies on elevated, rolling ground on the south flank of the Vale of Neath. It is linear, orientated north-east by south-west. Its eastern, upper side is largely wooded, its western side more open. On the east the ground rises towards the high ground of Cefn Morfydd, while to the south and west it drops below the park to the town of Neath. The house is sited on a prominent hill at the south-western end of the park. There are three ponds and a late nineteenth-century reservoir, to supply water for coal mining and copper smelting, and for ornament.

South of the house site, at the south end of the park, is the wooded Preswylfa valley, largely deciduous, with the Great Pond half way along it. To the north is an open area of parkland, the largest pond, the Fishpond, and a smaller pond with two small islands. Fishpond Wood is mature woodland containing the (restored) formal cascade to the east and remnants of a more extensive lime avenue. This is aligned on a long formal axis from the north end of the hill on which the house stood, across the ha-ha and up the cascade to Brynau Wood and Cefn Morfydd, beyond the park.

The northern part of the park comprises open ground on the western side, now partly a golf course, and Mosshouse Wood, mixed woodland which extends from Fishpond Wood on the south to high ground on the north. It contains the reservoir and a long, informal Grade II Listed cascade (LB 22870). There are also several eighteenth-century follies including the rebuilt 'gazebo' and a Grade II Listed Grotto (LB 22860). The final feature of the landscape park is Grade II Listed Ivy Tower (LB 11768), a prominent eighteenth-century eye-catcher folly tower situated on a hilltop to the north of Mosshouse Wood, overlooking the park and the Vale of Neath.

There have been several entrances at The Gnoll, only two of which remain in use. An entrance with imposing castellated stone archway and a simple iron gate now lies on Gnoll Avenue. Inside the entrance the former drive, now a public road, is lined with pines, leading to the Grade II Listed War Memorial Gate of Honour entrance (LB 11784). Inside, a tarmac drive runs eastwards up the Preswylfa valley. A former entrance at the end of Gnoll Avenue is marked by Grade II Listed gate & lodges (LB 11782).

The garden and pleasure grounds lie on the hill on which the house once stood. The garden consists of the terrace to the west of the house site,

which looks out over the town and beyond. It is a rectangular grassy platform bounded with a low stone parapet wall on the west and a revetment wall on the east, accessed from the house by a flight of steps. Below is an area of deciduous woodland with ornamental understorey. At the north end is a curving recessed stone seat and a yew on a small mound. To the south of the house is the oval forecourt area, with grass in the centre. Two paths now lead into it.

The grounds lie mainly to the east of the house site but also on the slopes of the hill to the west and south. The crown of the hill is occupied by wooded grounds laid out informally, with paths and a few open areas. The south side is bounded by a stone revetment walling. Below on the south-east is a walled enclosure, formerly the herbaceous garden but now rough grass. On the hill summit is the bowling green, a roughly circular level lawn surrounded by rhododendrons and mixed trees. To the north is a gentle slope down to a long, level, grass terrace running east-west from the north end of the house to a ha-ha on the east. North of the terrace is an area of mixed ornamental woodland and shrubs, with some bamboo clumps.

The former kitchen gardens lie to the east of the pleasure grounds, on ground sloping gently to the south, and have origins in the mid-eighteenth century. To their west is Gnoll Cottage, or Little Gnoll House, and garden. The kitchen gardens forms three compartments. The northernmost is roughly oval in shape, partially walled and under rough grass. The others occupy a roughly rectangular area adjoining on the south, bounded by walls 2.5m-4.5m high with a wide entrance at the east end. The east compartment is on two levels; on the upper one is a modern glasshouse; on the lower one are two long, parallel ranges of single- storey stone and brick bothies. To their south are three modern glasshouses set at right-angles to the bothies. The third compartment, to the west, is roughly square, the south-east corner rounded and with an entrance towards the

west end of the south side. Tipping has raised the ground level in this compartment.

Of further note are the following points:

Setting - The Gnoll stood on a prominent, steep-sided hill or knoll, hence its name, on the east side of the town, the park lying on the flank of the Vale of Neath, well known for its picturesque beauty. Urban expansion means that the town now abuts the southern and western margins of the park.

Significant views - From the main west front of the house there were magnificent views out over the town and Vale of Neath, and from the pleasure grounds views east towards the higher ground of Cefn Morfudd. The view eastwards from the end of the pleasure ground terrace is across the sloping park to the Fishpond and up the cascade on the wooded slope beyond. The Ivy Tower folly, at the north end of the park, afforded panoramic views over the park and the Vale of Neath.

A more detailed description of the park is included in the Conservation Management Plan that accompanies this document, an executive summary of which is included in the following text.

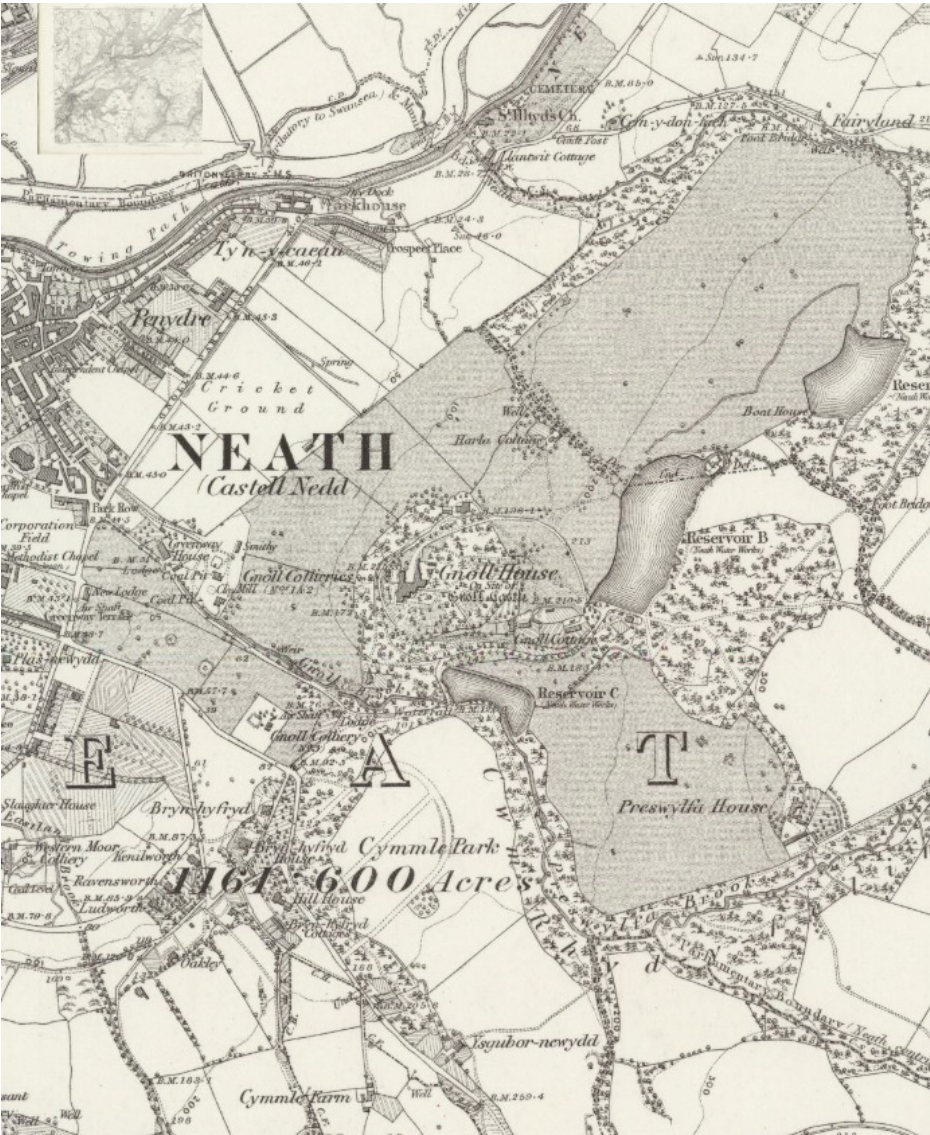
The dissolution of the monasteries in the 16th Century led ultimately to a transfer of landholdings from the church to the local aristocracy, following which many landed estates remained in the same families until modern times. The pattern of industrialisation was influenced by these estates, including copper and iron at Neath Abbey and particularly the lead and copper industries at the Gnoll Estate.

These early industrial developments were subsequently affected by changes in sources of materials and motive power (including the

importing of materials from elsewhere by sea and the move from water power to steam and the use of coal). This resulted in a general move of industry from locations near water power (such as in the valleys) to more accessible coastal sites.

Whilst it followed that industrial development on the site inevitably waned, the introduction of improved transport systems on the back of the establishment of such early industry – initially canals in the Neath and Swansea valleys in the 1790s and later tramways and railways – opened up the valleys to development to exploit the coal resources, resulting in new settlements (Glynneath, Ystalyfera, and the villages of the Afan Valley in particular). Other industries were locating at Briton Ferry and Port Talbot close to port facilities vital for coal exports and the iron and steel industry.

Further into the 20th century new industries (including petro-chemical installations at Baglan and Llandarcy and the establishment of manufacturing such as that associated with the motor industry at Resolven and Fabian Way) brought new development and associated housing as more traditional industries declined. The newer industries of the 20th century have now declined in their turn, to be replaced by service industries and high-tech manufacturing linked to the universities and new forms of energy generation. The prosperity of the estate can almost be mapped against this rise and fall in industry, but having been there at the start, it was without doubt a catalyst for the development of Neath and the wider Neath Valley.



Glamorgan XVI Series Ordnance Survey, Surveyed 1876 to 1877 and Published 1884 (Do not scale) - showing Gnoll House in its environs



Glamorgan XVI.SW Series Ordnance Survey Revised 1948 Published 1951 (Do not scale) - the town has encroached towards the parkland

Indigenous Materials

Local styles and traditions of building tend to reflect the history of settlement development in the area, from traditional Welsh farmsteads (with their longhouses and traditional stone barns), characteristic terraces of stone and slate houses associated mainly with the growth of the coal industry in the valleys, and extensive housing estates to accommodate workers in the steel and petro-chemical industries of the 20th Century.

Indigenous materials are naturally and commonly found within the locality of the site. These give the area an identity and familiarity to both its visitors and residents. Identifying these and incorporating them into the proposal in innovative ways will give the interventions a strong sense of place.

Resources

The Vale of Neath demonstrates a history of extracting and using local resources and materials. Manufacturing and the development of supply chains to meet the material demands of society are age old traditions that have the potential to be enhanced and in some cases rediscovered. This should be considered as part of the development process of the project.



View from the cellars of Gnoll House