



# EXPLORING COMMUNITY ORGANISING

in the Blean

The Wilder Blean  
Initiative Community  
Organising Project

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# Table of Contents



## PROJECT SUMMARY

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Introduction                      | 2 |
| Understanding the Blean landscape | 3 |
| Methodology                       | 4 |

## ENGAGEMENT

|                          |    |
|--------------------------|----|
| Who We Engaged           | 5  |
| Cluster Engagement       | 8  |
| Community Advisory Group | 11 |
| Youth Engagement         | 13 |

## IMPACT AND REFLECTION

|                                       |    |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| Key Lessons, Challenges and Successes | 14 |
| Community Organising in numbers       | 15 |
| Looking Ahead                         | 18 |

|            |    |
|------------|----|
| APPENDICES | 19 |
|------------|----|

# Introduction

## COMMUNITY ORGANISING IN THE BLEAN



*Community Organising Team at the Wild About Whitstable Eco Fair with the Lord Mayor of Canterbury and her colleague in Whitstable © KWT.*

**The Wilder Blean Initiative Community Organising Project<sup>[1]</sup>, 2023-2024, funded by Rewilding Britain's Rewilding Challenge Fund, aimed to engage with and community organise residents and organisations across the Blean to take action for nature.**

[1]Note that between April 2023 until October 2024, the Community Organising (CO) Team at Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT) continued to build upon the community engagement and community organising delivered and initiated by the Blean Bison Project (2020 – 2023), funded through the People's Postcode Lottery Fund. This involved expanding the range of engagement from West Blean and Thornden Woods and prioritising a wider area, including Canterbury City, Whitstable and Herne Bay.



*Community Organising Team and the Youngwilders Team in West Blean © KWT.*

# Understanding the Blean Landscape

## DIVERSITY IN AND AROUND THE BLEAN

Looking at the landscape from a Canterbury District perspective required that the engagement strategy included identifying and understanding the demographic characteristics of the area.

The 2021 Office for National Statistics Census showed that around 157,000 people called this district home. The average age is 41 years of age, and about 20% of the population identify as being disabled. 46% of the population identify as Christians, 42% as having no religion, and the remaining 2% is composed by other religious beliefs. 89% of the population are white, 4% identify as Asian, and the remaining 7% is made up of other different ethnic groups.

The team used this demographic information to improve our understanding of the diversity of the area. If we wanted the Wilder Blean vision to be shared and representative of all, we had to create and share meaningful and personal actions for nature for everyone, including underrepresented and minority groups.



Map of the Blean complex and surrounding areas © Ordnance Survey

# Methodology

## COMMUNITY ORGANISING:

"THE WORK OF BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER TO TAKE ACTION AROUND THEIR COMMON CONCERNS AND OVERCOME SOCIAL INJUSTICE"

In a broad sense, our methodology and delivery were guided by community organising and its principles of practice.

In our case, we aimed to work and gain the trust of the people who live and work across the Blean. This aim is key to achieving the long-term vision of the Wilder Blean Initiative, and most importantly, how to deeply entangle the citizens of the Blean as stakeholders and actors/enablers/custodians of this vision.

This, both in theory and with time in practice, allowed us to build upon the existing connections of the Blean Bison Project and consolidate new ones, inviting people to explore and build understanding of the landscape vision. Once people knew about the Wilder Blean Initiative, we worked to gather and create opportunities for people to increase their skills, knowledge and resources for them to take meaningful actions for nature.



*CO Team in the autumn session of the Community Advisory Group at Tyler Hill © KWT.*

# Engagement

## WHO WE ENGAGED

The Wilder Blean Community Organiser, funded by the Rewilding Challenge Fund, reviewed and continued to grow the existing relationships held in the landscape, by visiting previously engaged groups and the neighbours of Kent Wildlife Trust's reserves.

Canterbury's 14th Scout Group, St Nicholas School forest school and Avenue Nursery forest school own and manage land immediately next to West Blean and Thornden Woods. We ran a livestock safety workshop with Area Manager Alison Ruyter for **neighbours of West Blean**, including the various forest school leaders; this workshop was to support these people to feel comfortable when around the free roaming livestock in West Blean, especially when with children.

Additionally, we reached out to organisations in Canterbury City, Herne Bay and Whitstable working with and for **young people**, such as: Canterbury District former Youth Hubs, Special Needs Advisory & Activities Project (SNAAP), Prince of Wales Youth Club and Sea Cadets.



*Participants of the livestock workshop for neighbours and forest school nurseries in West Blean © KWT.*

In 2024, after our successful engagement with some of the youth organisations, we visited all the locations where the former Canterbury Youth Hub Services offered provision. To complement our understanding of what was available for **young people** in this area, we liaised with three national organisations: Action for Conservation, The Woodland Trust's Youth Council leader and RSPB regional volunteer and communications team.

We worked on relationship building and applying the Community Organising principles with Blean **volunteers, community gardens, Parish Councils, adult queer communities, other e-NGOs, and other community groups** to broaden their understanding about taking actions for nature in the landscape and understanding the reach of the Wilder Blean Initiative.

The next stage of our community organising activity began in the spring with the first **Community Advisory Group** meeting taking place in April 2023.

The following day we delivered a "Youth Leaders" session, attempting to organise and bring together **adults working with young people in the landscape** in a single space. Although two people signed up, sadly no one attended the event. However, we did host a group of SNAAP students and their families in our Art Trail at West Blean.

An indicator of the challenge of working with young people is that Canterbury Youth Services were transformed into a Family Hub model around May 2023. Their new provision was aimed at families and children, leaving young people, between 11 and 17, without a provision.

We reached out and created potential leads with all further **education institutions** in the district, participating in their own activities and events. Additionally, we attended **Canterbury Pride** for the first time with other colleagues and local volunteers.



Canterbury Pride 2024 © KWT.

Another pivotal event for the programme was the **Save the Blean Community Campaign** that materialised into a march to the University of Kent (UoK) to demonstrate opposition to their development project. Our engagement and participation gave us the opportunity to engage with **350+ local people**, some new and some familiar.

Additionally, we delivered **presentations for seven organisations**, participated in **two bioblitzes**; one for L'Arche Kent and one for the Conservation Society, and engaged in **community garden sessions** with Stream Walk Community Garden and Herne Bay in Bloom.

We joined local group meetings and engaged further with people actively involved with other e-NGOs such as **Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion**. We also connected with an international PhD student researching e-NGO engagement from the University of Amsterdam.

During the summer we engaged with a wider range of people by **linking up with existing networks** participating in events, presentations and meetings. In early July we delivered the second meeting of the Wilder Blean Community Advisory Group, an **online information session** attended by 41 people from all over the South East of England.

We continued to work with young people, working with all universities in the area: **University of Kent, Canterbury Christ Church University and the University for the Creative Arts**, including their respective student unions.



*Helen Pitman, Wilder Blean Landscape Development Manager at Save the Blean March. © Sally Smith, KWT.*



Additionally, we met **Global Action Plan's** Transform Our World team to understand how they work with **young people who care for the environment online**.

Our last two events during autumn reached 96 people. We participated in the **Stour Riverfest**, organised by Canterbury City Council. And crucially, we delivered the third **Community Advisory Group meeting** named "**Vision for the Blean**", attended by 36 people.

## OUR APPROACH TO CLUSTER ENGAGEMENT

In total, through the life of the project we engaged with nine clusters across the Blean:

- education organisations and youth groups
- community gardens
- residents, local organisations and community organisations
- religious bodies
- Parish, Town and City Councils
- LGBTQIA+ groups and queer communities
- creative collectives
- organisations for people living with disabilities and/or who are neurodivergent
- environmental organisations and other NGOs

It's important to note that there is often significant overlap between one cluster and another. The people of the Blean play many roles and represent different organisations; it is interesting to note this, as familiar faces became allies over time, helping us raise awareness and they became advocates through word of mouth.

## EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND YOUTH GROUPS

This group is divided into educational organisations such as universities, grammar schools, local schools and nurseries. Forest schools are included as an extension of the provision given by both educational organisations and groups. Youth groups include uniformed bodies like scouts and sea cadets, to Canterbury's Youth Hubs (now incorporated into Family Hubs with a significant decrease in provision). We also worked and engaged with student unions and youth clubs in the area, and a PhD student from Amsterdam doing research on the engagement of e-NGOs.

## COMMUNITY GARDENS

We engaged and reached out to community gardens in Canterbury, Whitstable and Herne Bay. Additionally, we connected with Faversham's community garden and a potential guerrilla garden in Sturry. These are all grassroots organisations run by local people with support from volunteers. They showed an interest in permaculture and organic products in addition to engaging with nature through horticulture and a degree of land management.

## RESIDENTS, LOCAL ORGANISATIONS AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

These are official organisations as well as much smaller groups of local people. Here we include: The Canterbury Society, the many 'Friends Of' groups, resident groups and other local people working for their community.

## RELIGIOUS BODIES

As aforementioned, the most common religion in the area is Christianity. We engaged with Canterbury's Cathedral Gardens team and participated in different green/eco local celebrations with the Cathedral and other local churches. We also reached out to Canterbury's Mosque and Buddhist groups and temples, but we had limited engagement with these bodies.



*Blean Team 2024 © KWT.*



## PARISH, TOWN AND CITY COUNCILS

There are 12 councils in the landscape. Five have received a Wilder Blean Initiative presentation, which gave updates from the 2020–2023 Blean Bison Project and future engagement opportunities as part of the Wilder Blean Initiative. All 12 councils receive the Wilder Blean e-newsletter.

## LGBTQIA+ GROUPS AND QUEER COMMUNITIES

We worked with people who identify as queer, both young people and adults. Young people included Canterbury's Youth Hub, Whitstable Centre and Porchlight's Be You project. We also participated, for the very first time, in Canterbury Pride. Other groups included Older Lesbians in Kent, Herne Bay Pride and other safe and inclusive queer meet ups and events.

## CREATIVE COLLECTIVES

This cluster has been a work in progress since the Blean Bison Project (2020 – 2023). In the past, work with this cluster resulted in an exhibition in the woods and large art displays of the project in Canterbury. We investigated the other locations where creative work is taking place. A key organisation we have developed a strong relationship with is Beach Creative in Herne Bay, a place where artists meet and exhibit.

## ORGANISATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND/OR WHO ARE NEURODIVERGENT

Through this cluster, we worked with both young people and adults. We are keen to ensure our work on the Wilder Blean Initiative is accessible. We visited organisations in Herne Bay and Canterbury City. We supported L'Arche Kent's first bioblitz and hosted a Special Needs Advisory and Activities Project (SNAAP) Family Day at the surfaced Art Trail in West Blean.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND OTHER NGOS

We engaged with local branches of organisations such as Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion. Although not technically local, we are aware of Friends of the Earth in the South East. We joined their activities and campaigns, helped share their communications and met them on various occasions.

# Community Advisory Group

## KEY RESULTS AND IMPACTS

As a result of the engagement and community organising work we delivered for the Wilder Blean Initiative, we have established a Wilder Blean Community Advisory Group (CAG). A space that aims to integrate people from across the landscape, united by a long-term vision. During the year we welcomed 116 participants, 14 of them reoccurring, to the CAG events.

In the first session of the CAG, held at Canterbury's Umbrella Centre with 16 participants, we displayed information about the Wilder Blean Initiative, including an interactive map of the landscape with guiding questions for participants to explore differing opinions of the landscape.

The responses from participants included thoughts on landscape connectivity, roads, bikes, pets, birds, parking, traffic, permaculture and land management. Feedback from the session demonstrated that people wanted to better understand who's involved in the Wilder Blean Initiative and what engagement opportunities are available.



*Interactive map of the residents of the Blean, © KWT - Katie Gurdler*

As a result we held an online information session to address the comments we received.

We combined a presentation with interactive questions and polls for attendees. From our conversation with 41 participants, issues most commonly highlighted included climate change, and housing developments. Improvements people wanted to see included, included wildlife corridors, enhanced landscape connectivity, education and restricted vehicular access.

Feedback we received included sharing IT instructions beforehand for less tech savvy audiences, formal introductions from all attendees and in-person engagement for future sessions. Positive feedback included that people enjoyed the open questions and active participatory spaces.

Putting into practice all the information and feedback received, the third autumn session took place in Tyler Hill Memorial Hall.

27 people attended to share their individual vision, support, barriers and actions for the Blean to inform a shared vision and action plan for the Group. The session also included national and international inspiration of other community-led environmental groups.

Significantly, people wanted to engage with other decision-makers from across the landscape, such as universities and the districts councillors. Participants were also keen to see how we developed individual contributions into group contributions.



*Autumn session of the Community Advisory Group at Tyler Hill © Charlotte Lewis - KWT.*

# Youth Engagement



## YOUTH WORK IN THE BLEAN

This group was the most challenging to build connections with, however, our months of work materialised in engagement with several Canterbury and Kent based youth organisations that we can now develop further.

Internally, we have established the policies and procedures necessary for us to deliver work with young people (14 – 17 yrs old) in the future, as we did not have these in place previously. This will enable us to deliver more with this group going forwards.

Two new policies were created for working with minors: the Arrivals and Departures Policy, which specifies how to manage under 18s arriving at activities they travel to themselves, and the tailoring of the Complaints Policy for 14–17-year-old participants.

A risk assessment for the first Youth Forum meeting (Lunch in the Blean) was created and approved, and can be used in the future, and lastly, the process for young people to sign up for youth events was established (this navigates the challenging issues of under 18s signing up for events and establishing parental permission). We engaged with four grammar schools, along with other private and public secondary schools, and continue to support these institutions' actions for nature through our Education Team and the Wilder Kent Awards.

For young adults between the ages of 18–30, we partnered with Youngwilders, a Community Interest Company (CIC) that works with young people around the country on different projects. We also engaged and worked closely with all three universities in Canterbury and their Student Unions.

In terms of online engagement, we used the Trust's social media channels, including Facebook, Instagram, website and Eventbrite. We also continued to use a Wilder Blean e-newsletter established during the Blean Bison Project. We also connected with KWT's Community Network public group, a new Facebook group specifically for community groups and members to share how they are taking action for nature. The Facebook group allows the Community Organising Team to communicate with a broader range of people, connect with new people, groups and organisations and establish relations, and share knowledge and opportunities among the network.

# Impacts and Reflections



## KEY LESSONS, CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

Working and engaging with such a wide breadth of audiences via the Wilder Blean Initiative has been a learning curve and ultimately a success.

We have learned the importance of tailoring the vision of the project accordingly, so that it is meaningful for everybody involved. Talking with people in ways that are accessible for them has been imperative. In our presentations, and attendance at events, we always wanted to understand our audiences, how they connected with the landscape, and what they want and need to contribute to the vision.

Some of the key successes have been:

**Establishing the correct policies and procedures for working with young people** aged 14-17 has been a success, especially when taking into consideration the associated barriers of youth engagement.

Establishing these policies is key to ensuring we safeguard any young people we work with. And although this work has now paused, this foundational work will ensure we can collaborate with young people in the future.

We are pleased with the number of people we successfully engaged with, totalling **over 1,400 people and almost 200 active relationships with local community organisations**, who are now aware of the Wilder Blean Initiative. We feel very proud to have successfully delivered **5 events**, and are delighted with the new connections we've made. It's been very meaningful to be noted as a means of connection in this landscape, especially in our role in redistributing information and sharing opportunities.

We have **successfully taken the Wilder Blean Initiative vision beyond the Wilder Blean Bison Project into the hands of local people**. With this integral community support, we are confident in our position to scale up and broaden our impact.

**A participant of the Community Advisory Group said:**  
**"My vision for the Blean area is one of a haven for**  
**wildlife. I'm so pleased about the current**  
**reintroduction of bison, beaver, etc, to the area; and**  
**I'm desperately worried about the continuing threats**  
**of housing, roads, traffic and pollution. We need to get**  
**back to nature and understand we can only survive in**  
**harmony with all species."**

# Community Organising in numbers



| Engagement overview                                  | Total |
|--|-------|
| Meetings and events                                  | 105   |
| Blean community events                               | 5     |
| Active relationships                                 | 193   |
| People engaged                                       | 1482  |
| New members of Kent Wildlife Trust Community network | 157   |
| New sign ups to Wilder Blean e-newsletter            | 280   |

## **We have also experienced numerous challenges:**

From the beginning, **consolidating information** into a single, cohesive and usable format has been a challenge. However, the introduction of a **new Customer Relationship Manager system** allowed us to make our data collection far more efficient. Keeping an up-to-date log of activities has proved invaluable.

We experienced the **limitations of staff time and resources in contrast with the size of the landscape** at hand. For us, **prioritising Canterbury, Whitstable and Herne Bay** helped us direct our efforts. However, this meant neglecting other big town centres such as Faversham, which also borders the Blean and surrounding rural communities.

At times, it proved **difficult to provide sufficient and valuable legitimacy for the Community Advisory Group**. Providing the group with power to achieve change, a safe and reliable space, sharing decision making beyond consultation and cross organisational integration required a lot of resource. In practical terms, it has been interesting to see this evolve, as the mission of community organising is to rightfully enhance the power of people. Finding routes towards trust and collaboration is at the heart of the community organising ethos, and despite the challenges we faced in meeting the needs of the CAG, overcoming these obstacles has brought flexibility and resilience to the project.



*Participants of the spring session of the Community Advisory Group in Canterbury © KWT.*

Another challenge we faced when engaging with new contacts was scoping and agreeing upon their level of participation. We needed to **differentiate between traditional engagement strategies, community organising and the CAG**. However, through listening to the needs of the community, we were often able to find a way to work with interested parties regardless of the time they had available.

We faced various **challenges in working with young people**. As mentioned previously, young people are a significant minority in the county; despite the student population in the Canterbury district, they are a very mobile and transient community. Therefore, this community required repeated engagement.

For those under 18, the challenge was even harder, as their calendar is planned far in advance and is often restrictive. We had to gain their trust and build relationships while competing with other valuable time constraints, such as studying and recreational activity. When the Canterbury District Youth Hubs came to an end, the accumulated work ended abruptly and without chance of extension.

An additional challenge is that **the landscape and partnership of organisations has multiple working groups of volunteers**. At times, this made it difficult for the Community Organising team to engage with them all due to having to navigate different communication routes and conflicting volunteering schedules.



*Community Organising Team, with the Wilder Blean Reserve Manager and the Youngwilders Team in West Blean © KWT.*

# Looking Ahead

## WHAT'S NEXT FOR COMMUNITY ORGANISING IN THE BLEAN?

Much of the work built with young people has progressed into our dedicated Education Team. Through connecting the team to local schools, we have been able to maintain many of these new relationships and continue supporting them via the Wilder Kent Awards. In the future, we hope additional provisions for this group will be created at Kent Wildlife Trust, now that the policies and procedures have been created.

For young adults, we have continued to build relationships with universities, we hope that this continuation will result in more events and opportunities in the landscape for this audience. Additionally, the University of Creative Arts would like to explore presenting the Wilder Blean Initiative vision to their new students to inspire them and inform them of the nearby opportunities.

The Community Advisory Group will meet again in February 2025 to share the results, thoughts and comments from the Building the Vision for the Blean meeting. Following this, we hope to support the group in considering formalisation, and if so, what it will work towards in the future. If the group decide not to proceed, we hope to support members into other positions supporting the Blean.

The Wilder Blean e-newsletter helps to spread our message across the landscape and beyond. Sharing information and updates is crucial in keeping communities engaged and our publications consolidate information for new audiences to join the conversation at any time.



*Iron Age Pigs at West Blean and Thornden Woods © KWT.*

# Appendices



## 1.1 COMMUNITY ORGANISING THEORY OF CHANGE

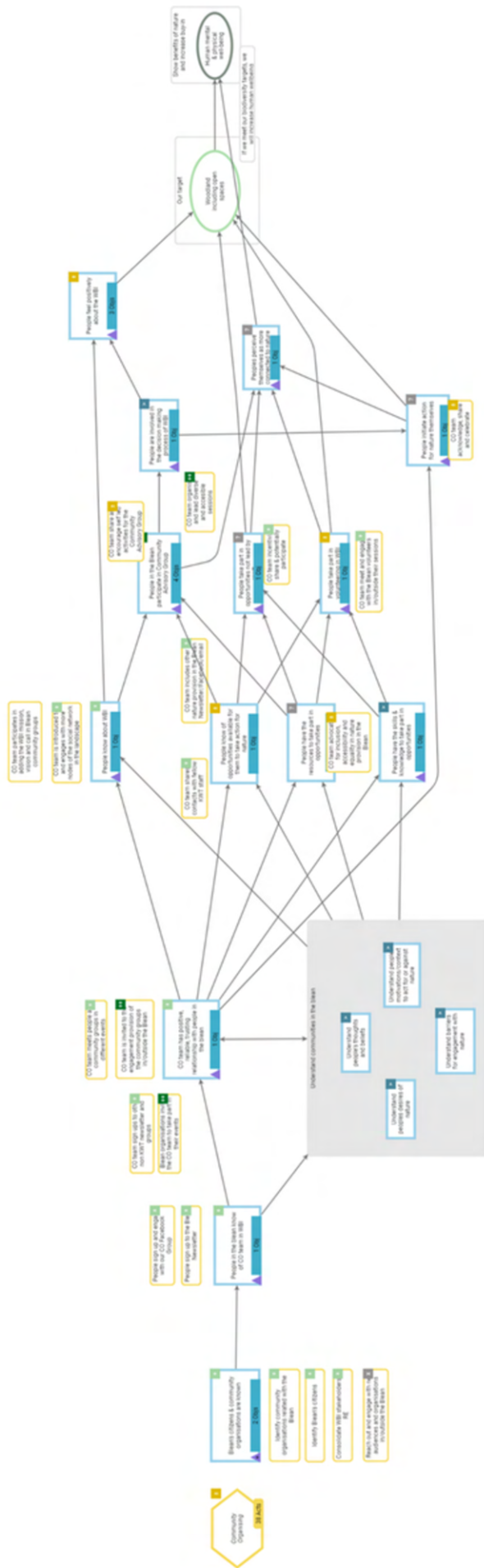
The Community Organising Theory of Change represents the progression of objectives and actions to reach the broad goal of improving biodiversity and human wellbeing targets.

The first objective we decided upon is context definition. This meant identifying the organisations, citizens and stakeholders to commence the engagement strategy. Following this, the relationship would work in both directions, indicating that KWT knows of the context and therefore the citizens and organisations of the Blean know of the Community Organising Team.

Developing on this multi-directional relationship, the intention is to have positive, reliable, and trustworthy relations between the people of the Blean. We want to further the understanding of the citizens of the Blean: their thoughts & beliefs; their motivations to act for or against nature; the barriers for people to engage with nature; and finally, people's desires around nature. This understanding allows us to share the Wilder Blean Initiative's vision. Consequently, people can take part in the Community Advisory Group of the Wilder Blean Initiative or volunteer in the Wilder Blean Initiative in another capacity. This engagement will motivate the community to take part in the decision-making process of the Wilder Blean Initiative and/or initiate actions for nature themselves. In time, this will make the community feel more connected to the Initiative and more connected with nature.

# Appendices

## 1.1 COMMUNITY ORGANISING THEORY OF CHANGE





[kwtg.uk/blean-wildscape](http://kwtg.uk/blean-wildscape)

