

IDENTIFYING NATURE-BASED ENTERPRISE OPPORTUNITIES

for the Wilder Blean

An eco-tourism feasibility
study



REPORT PREPARED BY

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Executive Summary

IDENTIFYING NATURE-BASED ENTERPRISE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE WILDER BLEAN

Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT) commissioned Sarah Loftus to review the feasibility study conducted in 2019/2020. The review aims to identify engaging, innovative, sustainable, nature based ecotourism opportunities for the Blean Woods complex, adapting to global changes brought by the Covid pandemic and climate change challenges.

Methodology: The review, conducted from September to November 2023, encompassed desktop research, site visits and stakeholder consultations, focusing on identifying nature based opportunities and joint promotional partnership opportunities, researching current tourism trends and considering ways forward for establishing an identity for the Blean.

Tourism Performance, Perceptions and Trends: Tourism in Kent and Canterbury showed recovery in 2021, albeit lower than pre-pandemic levels. Trends indicating a greater engagement with the countryside resonate in the Canterbury district, including in the Blean. There is a much greater awareness of and demand for sustainable tourism, with a shift in consumer mind-set towards more sustainable travel options.

Experiential and Sustainable Tourism: The growth in experiential tourism, also driven by sustainability and responsible tourism, is evident. Visitors are increasingly seeking authentic experiences that minimise environmental impact and support local communities.

Wilding Initiatives in the UK: Whilst the introduction of a bison herd in the Blean Woods has drawn significant attention, examples such as the Knepp Estate, Wilder Doddington and Wilder Haweswater demonstrate successful integration of tourism and wilding.

Forging an Identity for The Blean: The review explored an identity for the Blean, assessing how local stakeholders and online sources refer to the area. There's a mixed response to labelling the area as a 'Natural Park,' with some stakeholders resisting due to historical significance and their understanding of the word 'park'.

Tourism Opportunities: Over 100 businesses were identified in the Blean area, offering diverse opportunities for partnership working and community engagement. The review emphasised businesses that align with KWT's environmental commitments.

Strategic Opportunities: Proposed initiatives include visitor research, communications planning, supporting a tourism networking group, developing an awards scheme for businesses, partnering on a number of promotional opportunities, and further collaboration with Visit Kent. Engaging with local universities and offering experiences to students as part of Freshers Week are also suggested.

Conclusion: The review provides a comprehensive analysis for establishing The Blean as a prominent nature based tourism destination, focusing on sustainability, local engagement and unique experiences that have a natural fit with KWT. It highlights the need for strategic branding, stakeholder collaboration, and targeted marketing campaigns.

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1) Introduction

Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT) commissioned Sarah Loftus to undertake a review of the feasibility study delivered in 2019/2020, which explored its aspirations to create an engaging, innovative, financially sustainable ecotourism offer based on plans to deliver a Wilding project on its nature reserves in the Blean Woods complex near Canterbury.

1.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Since the previous study was undertaken, there have been a great many changes, not only at a local level but very much on a global scale. The world has changed considerably over the past four years.

The Covid pandemic impacted greatly on the tourism and hospitality sector, which had to pretty much close down. Brexit, the war in Ukraine, coupled with the cost of living crisis have all impacted travel and tourism. Brexit has now “been done” but its impacts are still felt. The climate change agenda is ramping up and, whilst the sector is still very much in recovery mode, it is interesting to note the changing visitor trends as a result.

Here in the Blean, the bison herd was introduced (and has expanded) and can be said to have put the Blean on the map. Infrastructure requirements changed with the installation of a fence around the bison enclosure, but this has led to plans to install bridges and tunnels to maintain public rights of way and offer a unique visitor experience. The launch of the safari experiences has also gained a fair amount of exposure.

The objectives of this review are to:

- Review economic opportunities in the Blean Woods complex: identify nature based commercial opportunities and potential sources of income generation for KWT
- Develop a plan for how the “Wilder Blean Natural Park” could become established as a destination in its own right
- From the findings of the review, develop a nature based strategy for the Blean Woods complex



1.2 HOW THE REVIEW WAS UNDERTAKEN

The review was conducted through research and consultation undertaken from September to November 2023.

Desktop research included a review of:

- Eco-tourism opportunities, key assets and tourism businesses across the Blean Woods complex
- Current tourism performance data, perceptions and trends to understand the current tourism market domestically as well as in Kent and Canterbury district
- Regional and Natural parks to gain an understanding of the designation as a brand or working title
- Wilding projects in the UK

The online research was undertaken alongside direct consultation – face-to-face and by telephone – with key stakeholders:

- Local accommodation providers
- Activity providers
- Tour operators
- Local eateries
- Potential promotional partners
- Visit Kent
- Swale Borough Council
- Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership
- Stagecoach

Site visits were undertaken, primarily to gain a better understanding of the wider Blean area as a destination, but also with a view to identifying additional eco-business opportunities and review key points of access and existing interpretation. Whereas site visits in 2019/20 focused on the West Blean and Thornden Woods, for this review the South Blean, Clowes Wood, Victory Wood, Blean Wood National Nature Reserve and the woodlands around the Mount Ephraim estate were visited.

2) Tourism performance, perceptions and trends

2.1 TOURISM PERFORMANCE IN KENT

According to the most recent tourism data commissioned by Visit Kent, there were 51.5 million visitors to the county in 2021, at a value of £2.6bn and supporting 58,791 jobs. These results show a recovery in volume of trips and related expenditure compared to 2020, but still below the levels seen in 2019 and those reported in the previous study.

As highlighted in the previous study there is no visitor data specifically for the Blean area; however it is located in what is the most visited district in the county. The Canterbury area still accounts for the greatest proportion of domestic and international visitors, the greater proportion of nights booked, and the greatest share of value.

The most recent data on Canterbury's visitor economy is for 2021, and also shows a significant recovery in the volume and value of trips compared to 2020, but still below the levels seen in 2019.

The data shows that there were:

- 7.2 million visitors to the Canterbury district in 2021
- At a value of £331m
- Supporting 7,572 jobs

The visitor breakdown shows:

- 6.8 million day visitors at a value of £188m
- 416,000 overnight visitors, booking 1.4 million nights at a value of £73.2m
- 368,000 domestic visitors, booking 1.1 million nights at a value of £59.5m
- 48,000 overseas visitors, booking 0.3 million nights at a value of £13.6m

Visit Kent uses the Cambridge model for its visitor data (which has a number of acknowledged limitations) and there is no breakdown between Canterbury, Whitstable, Herne Bay and the district's rural areas. It is worth noting that 65% of trips booked are for holiday purposes and 29% are those visiting friends and relatives, both a substantial increase on the 2017 figures quoted in the previous study. This is relevant to the Blean which, it is understood anecdotally, is used extensively by locals.



2.2 VISIT KENT'S EXPERIENCE DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

This suite of research, conducted as part of the Interreg Channel Experience Project in 2020, highlights opportunities to develop and enhance new and current product in Kent. It looked at opportunities and gaps in the experiential offer in each district, finding a number of interesting possibilities in the Canterbury area.

Some of the key trends shown to resonate with the Canterbury district (and therefore the Blean as well) include:

- Engaging with the countryside: experiencing rural life as well as the landscape
- Under Tourism: getting away from the crowds and the tourism hotspots
- The 'Greta Thunberg' effect: 'how' we travel and the impact
- Reconnect: we want to reconnect with our families, friends, natural environment
- Transformative Travel: activities to leave us positively changed
- Improving wellbeing: comfortable, healthy and happy

Just some of the strengths and opportunities it highlights for the Canterbury area include:

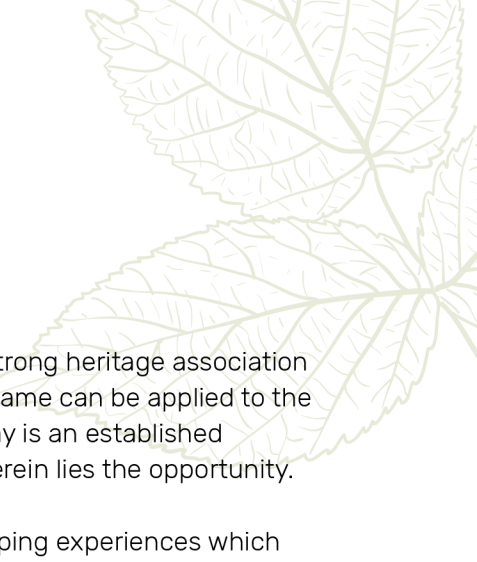
- Walking and cycling: as a lead or component product
- Getting closer to nature
- Wellbeing, transformative and pilgrimage
- Educational courses: around environmental, food and creative themes
- Heritage: behind the scenes and off the beaten track
- Photography: geological/historical/industrial

Whilst opportunities for building on the current product include:

- Walking and cycling: guided and self-guided offers capitalising on the countryside
- The success of themed walking tours
- Sustainable transport: as a bridge to new experiences
- Transformative and wellbeing: the new pilgrimage to find yourself and to reconnect
- Creative inspiration: creative arts courses inspired by heritage, coast, landscape and community

Further product opportunities cited in the analysis include sustainable food, local growers, bushcraft and wild cooking, giving as examples @bangers&balls, Jack Raven Bushcraft and Natural Pathways which offer forage and cooking courses: "wild dining takes catering into the wild to create a unique experience, often showcasing local, wild foods to a 5 star standard".

It must be noted that the analysis places a focus on the Kent Downs product, but many of its highlights are just as applicable to the Blean. It describes rural assets as "often underutilised when they are in close proximity to heritage attractions/city experiences. The consumer and group tour operator focuses their visit on the iconic attractions which often leads to the dilemma of high footfall and low spend, which isn't sustainable."



It continues by highlighting an opportunity for Canterbury to capitalise on the strong heritage association of the Pilgrims Way to develop walking and cycling experiences, but again, the same can be applied to the Blean and potentially the Big Blean Walk. In addition, whilst the North Downs Way is an established product, the Blean, by comparison, is little known as a visitor destination, but herein lies the opportunity.

Finally, in engaging the visitor with the landscape, the analysis suggests developing experiences which incorporate the following:

- For the casual/leisure walker: 1-2 hours walking combined with other attractions – often circular routes to a car park with other products
- For the casual/moderate walker and cyclist with limited time: ½ day to 2 days options combined with other product and accommodation
- For long distance walker, hiker and cyclist: self/guided and/or looking for planning and local knowledge assistance to assist own planning aimed at the solo traveller, couples and groups. Accommodation and baggage transfers included.

This review has identified a number of local tourism businesses which could develop such experiences and products. This is explored in sections 5 and 6.

2.3 IMPACTS AND TRENDS


2.3.1 Growth in sustainable tourism

YouGov.com reports that “As we move away from the fallout of COVID-19, the consumer demand and urgency for sustainability in travel will be a key area of focus for many travel brands and marketers.”

The One Planet Network states in their Vision for a Responsible Recovery of the Tourism Sector:

“The COVID-19 crisis has raised awareness of the importance of local supply chains and the need to rethink how goods and services are produced and consumed, both key elements of a circular economy. Integrating circularity and further advancing resource efficiency in the tourism value chain represent an opportunity for the tourism sector to embrace a sustainable and resilient growth pathway.”

Visit Britain’s Global Report on Motivations, Influences, Decisions and Sustainability in a Post-Pandemic Era (Appendix 1), describes sustainability as an emerging driver of destination and product choice, particularly for younger travellers. It continues: “... whilst there is an appetite for more sustainable behaviour in the future, the immediate opportunity lies in reinforcing and enriching their commitment”, a point worth noting in relation to future experience development in the Blean.



This is reinforced in many research reports and articles. In fact the online space is awash with them. What is interesting is that some are reporting that people will pay more for a more sustainable experience. A survey by Trip.com found that the pandemic has been a key driver of a stronger desire to travel sustainably due to a shift in consumer mind-set and behaviour. It found that 8 in 10 travellers recognise the importance of sustainable travel and 67.7% of travellers are open to paying more for sustainable options.

A recent Euromonitor report, published in August 2023, states that travellers will pay 10% extra for sustainable travel despite the cost of living crisis, whilst a Euronews' article on a survey undertaken by Booking.com shows that as many as 50% of travellers say they do not mind paying more to have a more sustainable holiday. Whether this translates into demonstrable action or not is not known.

2.3.1.1 Sustainable tourism in Kent

Taking a sustainable approach is highlighted as a product priority in Visit Kent's development research. It states that sustainability and conservation currently provide a traveller-centred message opportunity, but it is expected that in the near future the need for destinations, attractions and experiences to be environmentally responsible will increase.

KWT is a member of the Act for Impact Tourism Working Group, working in collaboration to deliver the Sustainable Tourism Action Plan. As such KWT will ensure that all tourism related activity and development will meet the agreed impact priorities.

2.3.2 Post pandemic trends

As shown in a myriad of research papers and articles, Covid has been a key driver in tourists looking for ways to travel meaningfully and responsibly in order to lessen their influence on the places and people they visit.

There are other trends too: for example, Ramble Worldwide (formerly Ramblers Walking Holidays) and sister brand Adagio have been building ties with more travel agents as demand for walking holidays has increased post-Covid.

At a local level, Visit Kent described the shift in trend towards staying closer to home and taking more, shorter breaks. This trend was reflected in conversations held with Blean based camping and glamping sites who reported an increase in visitors from London, the Home Counties and from within Kent, as well as an increase in shorter lead in times.

2.3.3 Impacts of Brexit

During a meeting with Visit Kent, the impacts of Brexit were described as being unique in Kent, citing the perception of the county in relation to transport and continued border issues as being of greatest concern. However the schools market is starting to recover since the ID card ban was lifted for EU school groups, and Dutch and German visitors are returning.

Their International Perception Research report highlights port and airport difficulties as the biggest Brexit concerns, particularly for those from Europe. It found that:

Younger people tend to be more concerned by port of entry/exit difficulties, while more older people worry about exchange rates

Those who have visited England before are more concerned about Brexit than those who haven't

Visit Kent also highlighted the change in land management that has been driven by Brexit, with landowners diversifying their revenue streams.

Numerous articles have been published citing recruitment problems faced in the hospitality industry which started almost immediately after the referendum, long before the UK left in 2020. This issue was initially driven by the fall in GBP but still continues. Visit Kent's latest Business Barometer report for September 2023 states that "an increasing number of tourism and hospitality businesses are reporting challenges with staff/volunteer recruitment and retention, as well as challenges around supply chains". Whilst the report does not relate this to Brexit, the situation here in Kent appears to reflect what is happening elsewhere in the country.

2.3.4 Continued growth in experiential tourism

The previous 2019 study discussed the trend towards experiential tourism, finding that "global consumers prioritise experiences over things and value real world experiences. Apart from value for money, consumers also want authentic, local and unique experiences."

This growth has continued, now also driven by the growing interest in sustainability and responsible tourism. As visitors seek to reduce their impact on the environment and local communities, a more meaningful experience allows them to do so by supporting locally-owned businesses and minimising their carbon footprint.

Coupled with this growth and the increased demand for the great outdoors, there have been some well publicised incidents of "over-tourism" in certain destinations. Situations in Cornwall and Bournemouth made headline news, with both areas having to ask visitors to stay away. This is only highlighted here as it is well known that the Crab & Winkle Way gets very busy in peak periods, and any new experience/product development must bear in mind areas of already heavy usage.

2.4 VISIT KENT'S PERCEPTION RESEARCH OF KENT WILDLIFE TRUST

KWT commissioned Visit Kent to research perceptions of KWT, their activities and reserves, amongst Kent residents. As the results of this research have been reported in full to KWT, there is no need to fully review it here.

However, the following key points are worth highlighting:

The results show a high satisfaction rate with the Wilder Kent safari experience.

Key drivers for attending a KWT run event are:

- Educational – 40.8%
- Access to special reserves that are not available to the public – 40.1%
- Doing something unique that they can't do anywhere else – 38.4%

The two top reasons for choosing to visit a specific reserve are:

- Seeing plants and wildlife – 64.7%
- Beautiful scenery – 57.9%

The top areas of Kent Wildlife Trust's activity respondents were most interested in:

- Nature experiences, events and wellbeing programmes – 54.2%
- Learning how to help wildlife at home – 50.9%
- Children's activities – 43.8%

These points are important to bear in mind when developing new products and experiences.



3) Wilding initiatives in the UK

Whilst exploring KWT's aspirations to create an eco-tourism offer based on its wilding project, the study undertaken in 2019/20 placed a substantial focus on the introduction of the bison herd. The case studies and examples looked at areas where bison roam freely and are a big draw for visitors: ARK Nature's sites in the Netherlands and the national parks in Belarus, Poland and Romania. The third case study looked at the Knepp Estate.

At that time, Knepp was still one of only a few wilding initiatives in the UK and provided a great example of how tourism developed as a direct result of their wilding activities.

As the first major pioneer of wilding, Knepp remains at the forefront, having demonstrated a great many wildlife successes as well as having grown a very successful tourism business. Since 2020, Knepp has opened a farm shop, high end restaurant (the Wilding Kitchen), and expanded its range of Wildland Safaris. Additional facilities include a wild swimming pond, a drying room and an outdoor bathhouse (the 'bathenon') for the campsite as well as wood fired pizza ovens.

Four years on from the previous study and Rewilding Britain is now supporting 65 rewilding projects across Great Britain, as shown on their website. Many of these projects are either developing or have an established tourism offer, and the following examples demonstrate an interesting range of tourism products, partnership working and local community engagement.



Iron Age pigs in the Blean © KWT.

3.1 Example 1: Wilder Doddington: Doddington Hall & Gardens, Lincolnshire

The Doddington Estate sits just 6 miles from Lincoln. Historically Doddington was a little visited historic house and a conventional farm with minimal public access from a small number of footpaths and bridleways.

Since 2007 it has diversified with accommodation, shops, cafes, weddings, events and new permissive access trails (both walking and cycling). It now employs 120 people, attracts 250,000+ visits a year and has a 60,000+ online audience.

Their wilding project, WILDER CONNECTIONS, aims to “realise the huge opportunities to build nature-based social and economic benefits on the back of the nature recovery at Wilder Doddington, thanks to Doddington’s location, footfall, reputation, experience and networks with local organisations”.

The project, which started in 2021, is delivered through the Doddington Hall Conservation Charity, established in 2006.

Facilities include:

- Seven properties: total 28 double and twin rooms available for short stays
- Four eateries: café, coffee shop, tea room and cycling friendly café in the bike shop
- Retail outlets: farm shop with butchery, wine shop, country clothing store, Christmas shop
- The Giant Bike shop – bike hire and bike sales

Partnerships include:

- With leading bicycle brand Giant, the largest manufacturer of bicycles in the world
- With the Lincoln Distillery to produce the Doddington Kitchen Garden Gin, inspired by botanicals grown on the estate

Plans are in place for additional enterprises built on their nature recovery, including wildlife safaris, tours, guided walks and nature spotting. There will be camping, glamping and more self-catering accommodation; new walking and cycling routes; access to Wilder Doddington for education and learning, health, fitness and nature inspired creative and cultural events; research, work experience, volunteering and employment opportunities.

3.2 Example 2: Wilder Haweswater - Lake District National Park

Haweswater encompasses the valleys, fells, woodlands and rivers surrounding Haweswater reservoir which is owned by water company United Utilities and managed by the RSPB. Wilder Haweswater is a partnership between the RSPB and United Utilities, delivering nature-based solutions focused on improving catchment resilience and water quality in the eastern part of the Lake District.

As stated by Rewilding Britain, new enterprises have become established including low-impact tourism businesses such as wildlife watching, guided tours, and accommodation. Education and volunteer programmes are run by the RSPB to encourage connection with nature along with new experiences such as badger-watching and nature photography. Volunteers actively engage with restoring the project’s wild landscapes alongside learning new skills, such as tree planting and developing the alpine plant nursery.

Activities include:

- Fell pony adventures: 3 day wild camp, 3 and 4 day wilderness treks
- Badger hide
- Nature photography
- Forest bathing
- Mindfulness and meditation
- Family discovery days
- Wild swim and hike
- Wilderness therapy

All of the above activities are led by experts, coaches and guides in association with the RSPB and landowners. For example:

- Wild Intrigue: a small ecotourism social enterprise creating and hosting host wildlife experiences in the North of England, including Breakfast with Red Squirrels.
- Fell Pony Adventures: a local family run business leading treks with Registered Fell Ponies.
- The Wilderness Programme: a charity providing a residential, non-medical, mental health recovery programme for adults with mental health related problems.
- At Nature's Pace: providing nature connectedness activities.

3.3 Example 3: Rewilding Sunart Fields - Sunart Fields Farm, Derbyshire

A 120 acre uplands farm based in the High Peak, Derbyshire that is now working to restore a healthy balance with nature. Until 2019 Sunart Fields was an active dairy farm, and 100 years prior to that was coal mined. The farm is participating in the SFI pilot run by Defra and the Biodiversity Net Gain Credits scheme pilot run by Natural England.

They believe rewilding is as much about people as it is nature. In the three years they've had the farm, interventions include creating six ponds, planting trees and hedgerows, all with the help of volunteers. They host talks with expert speakers on topics associated with nature and rewilding and plan to expand the local rewilding network to achieve broader change in the local and wider area.

Facilities, activities and produce include:

- Forest School with tree strung canopies, fire circle and nature viewing hides
- Dry stone walling courses
- Children's creative retreat days
- Moth ID mornings
- Seasonal walks on the wild side
- Wild range meat sold locally
- Hand harvested, organic wild flowers and foliage supplied to local florists

Working with:

- Naturalist and author, Mark Cocker
- Professional qualified waller, Connor Lomax
- The Sea Within – a children's mindfulness practitioner offering nature mindfulness and creative activities

3.4 Example 4: Rewilding Coombeshead - Upcott Grange Farm, Devon

Located on the edge of Dartmoor, this centuries old farm is changing from a highly managed human environment of livestock and intensive farming to nature conservation and recovery. Coombeshead has now stopped farming on over 300 acres, giving the land time to recover and readjust. They aim to maximise biodiversity to create a nature reserve, help with the reintroduction of long lost species, capture carbon and improve the soils, and over time increase the rewilding area.

Beaver, Iron Age pigs, Whitebred Shorthorn and Galloway cattle, Exmoor ponies and a small herd of water buffalo have been introduced. Their tourism offering, marketed as nature breaks, provides an opportunity to stay in the heart of the rewilding area.

Facilities and activities:

- Two shepherd huts with separate camp kitchen
- Camping field – each pitch has a fire pit/BBQ
- Heated shower and compost toilets
- Discussion evenings with the farm based ecologists
- Evening beaver watching
- Complimentary 'animal encounter' tours – learning about white storks, water voles, harvest mice, and incorporating a visit to a wildcat breeding centre
- Walking tours around the farm
- Wildlife photography courses
- Rewilding and ecological education programme

Working in partnership with:

- Westcountry Wildlife Photography Centre
- University of Exeter on hydrological monitoring



European beaver

3.5 Example 5: Wicken Fen NNR - The National Trust, Ely, Cambridgeshire

Wicken Fen is one of Europe's most important wetlands and is the National Trust's oldest nature reserve. Through rewilding the National Trust has created a 'lost landscape' of undrained fenland. Grazing herds of Highland cattle and Konik ponies are helping to create a diverse range of new habitats. The visitor experience is extensive, with board walks and a woodland walk giving access to much of the reserve, and a varied events programme largely aimed at children.

Facilities and activities:

- Visitor centre, with shop and café
- Two historic buildings open to visitors
- Camp site
- Learning centre
- Hides
- Bike hire centre
- Boat trips
- Over 40km of trails, with a boardwalk and woodland walk (accessible)
- Programme of events including family friendly activities, school trips, pre-school activities

Working with:

- Local universities and volunteers on vegetation, hydrology, soil quality and carbon, invertebrates and mammal monitoring
- Three local farmers on grazing

In conclusion, when comparing these projects with the Wilder Blean project, aspects to consider include conservation strategies, community involvement, tourism integration, educational outreach, and sustainability practices. These comparisons can provide valuable lessons and inspiration for the ongoing development and enhancement of the Blean Woods project.

4) Forging an identity for The Blean

An objective of this review is to develop a plan for how The Blean could become known as a destination in its own right. The 2019 study highlighted the lack of a clear identity for The Blean, finding that tourism businesses rarely referred to it as an area to visit in their marketing materials, usually placing a focus on Canterbury, Whitstable and even further afield.

Almost four years on and a number of new businesses have started operating and it's interesting to see that the newer accommodation businesses – largely camping and glamping sites – are featuring the Blean as part of their promotions, with one incorporating it into their name: Blean Bees Camping and Blean Bees Honey.

As a part of this review, some clarity was sought on how local stakeholders refer to the area whilst online research looked at both historical and current references to the Blean. Interviewees were also asked for their thoughts on calling the area a “natural park” which led to a further look at the potential use of both this and “regional park” as a brand or working project title. During a number of site visits it was possible to review some of the existing Blean interpretation.

4.1 FEEDBACK ON THE BLEAN

Interviewees were asked:

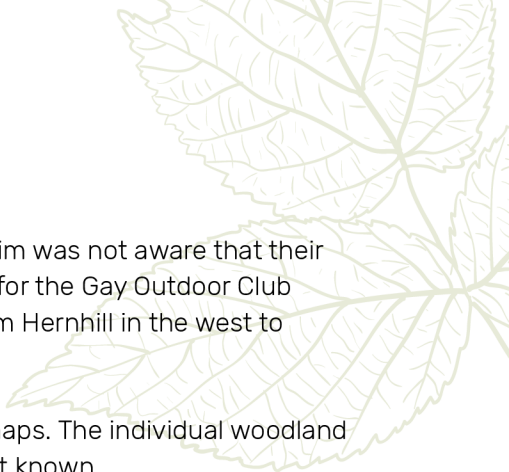
1. What does 'The Blean' mean to you in terms of the area it covers?
2. What do you tend to call it? The Blean? Blean Woods? Forest of Blean? Something else?
3. Do you 'use' the Blean as a destination? I.e. do you refer to the Blean in your marketing materials and encourage your visitors to explore the area?
4. How would you feel about the area being referred to collectively as The Wilder Blean Natural Park?

Feedback gained from all interviews is provided in Appendix 2, but their thoughts on The Blean's identity can be summarised as follows:

Q1. The area covered by 'the Blean'

Most businesses interviewed had no idea of the full extent of the Blean Woods complex, i.e. that it extends from the East Blean Woods across to the South Blean as far as Chartham Hatch.

Most businesses interviewed are located east of the A2 and few knew that the Blean includes the South Blean. Some thought it more localised to their own location, for example Fleets Paddock thought it extended from Tyler Hill to East Blean Woods whilst Worcester's Farm in Chartham Hatch thought it refers to their local woods (Fishpond Wood and Denstead Wood) towards Blean village.



On the other hand, the accommodation and events manager at Mount Ephraim was not aware that their own woods formed part of the Blean, whilst the East Kent group coordinator for the Gay Outdoor Club (who is also a volunteer for KWT), thought that the Blean “covers the area from Hernhill in the west to Hoath in the east and from Rough Common to Herne”.

It is worth bearing in mind that the name ‘South Blean’ does not appear on maps. The individual woodland names are shown, with Joan Beech Wood and Denstead Wood being the best known.

Q2. The name

Everyone interviewed refers to the area as either ‘Blean Woods’ or ‘The Blean’. Some refer to individual woods names when providing information on walking and cycling to their visitors.

When reference was made to the Blean’s historical name, “The Forest of Blean”, those interviewees that expressed an opinion felt that it’s not a forest anymore, but rather a collection of individual woodlands and therefore shouldn’t be named as such. There could also be some confusion with the Forest of Dean, although this was also seen as a potential positive.

“Personally, I refer to it as Blean Woods and then if someone asks where exactly, I just say east or west. The Ancient Forest is nice but, perhaps a bit of a mouthful? The Forest of Blean? It works for The Forest of Dean.”

Q3. Marketing “The Blean”

A greater number of businesses are now referring to the Blean in their marketing materials and websites, providing details of walks in the woodlands and signposting to relevant sites. This is a great change since the previous study was undertaken and applies largely to the newer businesses.

Q4. A “Wilder Blean Natural Park”

Three interviewees felt that a collective name would be useful for the area however it must be noted that the majority were against the idea of calling it a ‘natural park’, some vehemently so. The word ‘park’ came in for the greatest criticism:

“A park is something very specific (look at the historical use of the word) and has different connotations nowadays. And the Blean is not a ‘natural’ park – it’s the result of centuries of human activity. The history of it is crucial – this is an historic landscape.”

“I have never been keen on the word Park when it refers to a wild area. To me, it conjures up thoughts of cafes, safaris and picnic sites. ... there should be wild spaces for people to experience without being signpost-led along well-maintained paths which, ultimately, give false impressions of the countryside. Park, for me, gives the wrong impression.”

“It is not a park. A park is like Richmond Park – managed by one authority – an area of open grassland, somewhere managed and maintained and not ‘wild’.”

“It’s not a park. A park is somewhere you take kids to play. The Blean is a nature reserve”.

“I think of a park as something else – like Knole Park. We just call it Blean Woods.”

“A park is open grassland with some trees. ... it makes me think of naturists! And I would keep accidentally calling it a National Park.”

“I understand the logic behind it, but don’t like it. It sounds American. It makes me think of Bedgebury Pinetum or Richmond Park. If calling the Blean a natural park, expectations would be different. If this is to be pursued then all stakeholders need to be consulted.”

“A ‘park’ indicates collective management, status and administration.”

Those that felt more positive towards the label stated:

“Calling it the Blean Natural park would be good, as it sounds inviting.”

“The Blean is different enough to be called something collectively and it needs pulling together”.

4.2 HISTORICAL AND CURRENT REFERENCES TO THE BLEAN

Online research into the naming and descriptions for the Blean found:

- The Blean Facebook page refers to the surrounding area as the Ancient Forest of Blean
- AA Rated Trips features a walk in Blean's ancient woodlands in which it describes the ancient forest of Blean
- There is a Forest of Blean bowls league
- The local Rotary Club calls itself the Rotary Club of Canterbury, Forest of Blean and the Canterbury Forest of Blean Rotary
- The Blean Forest electoral ward is focused around the village of Blean
- Kent Police refer to the Blean Forest area

References to the area were found in the following books and guides:

- The Companion Guide to Kent and Sussex, Keith Spence, published 1973: "... thick woodlands remain from the ancient Forest of Blean".
- Archaeologia Cantiana, Volume XCII, published by the Kent Archaeological Society in 1976: "... Blean Forest..." and "... the Blean...".
- Walks in the Forest of Blean, published by the Swale Footpaths Group in 1973: throughout the book, references are made to "the Forest of Blean", "Blean Woods" and "Blean Forest".
- The North Wood, by Flavia Taylor, first printed in 1995: throughout the book, references are made to "the Blean woods" and "the Blean".

4.3 EXISTING INTERPRETATIVE SIGNAGE FOR THE BLEAN

There is a considerable amount of existing interpretation for "the Blean", including a large number of information panels produced and installed by the KSCP. Originally 18 in total, 16 are still in place and apart from needing a clean, are in a good condition, as shown by the examples in Appendix 3. All refer to "the Blean".

The web address given on the panels is for the now defunct Blean Initiative: theblean.co.uk. This needs changing. Apart from this, the information provided on each panel, sourced from the extensive work and research conducted by the Blean Initiative, is still applicable. As it is largely focused on the natural landscape and historical aspects of the Blean, it will not date.

There are additional panels at the Clowes Wood winding pond and car park, as well as in Keirs Meadow in Blean, No Man's Orchard and some on the edge of the Blean by Canterbury. These are site specific and of a slightly different design, but also refer to "the Blean".

The Big Blean Walk leaflet, also produced by the KSCP, is in constant demand. It refers to "the Blean" and "the Blean Woods", describing its landscape, its history and the flora and fauna that can be seen along the 25 mile walk. The KSCP is now seeking funds to update and republish the leaflet, as well as check and maintain the route.

4.4 A NATURAL PARK

Within project documents KWT refers to the “Wilder Blean Natural Park”. As described in 4.1, the views expressed by interviewees tend to be rather negative. It should be noted that the term ‘natural park’ has no legal or statutory basis in the UK and is not a term that is generally used.

Online searches for ‘Natural Park’ in the UK tend to result in a long list of National Parks. It therefore has the potential to be quite confusing.

One site that does use the natural park label is the London Wildlife Trust’s Camley Street Natural Park, close to King’s Cross station. The term could be considered appropriate for Camley Street, but as a small, fully enclosed city centre nature reserve, it offers a very different type of experience to The Blean and therefore cannot be compared.

Natural Parks exist in parts of Europe, for example Belgium and Spain, whilst other countries such as Germany, Austria, Czech Republic and France have Nature Parks and/or Regional Nature Parks. The statutory designations are country specific, but all are afforded regulated protection which generally falls within the IUCN Category III and VI designation.

It is recommended that careful consideration be given to the continued use of the term ‘natural park’ to describe the Blean. If there is a desire to pursue its use, KWT needs to explain the justification for it: why, how it came about and the benefits it would bring, and the strategy behind it. This would require an extensive consultation exercise with partners and stakeholders – including tourism businesses that would be expected to use the term – to ensure its acceptance and adoption. In other words, they need to want to buy into it.

4.5 A REGIONAL PARK

An alternative label for consideration is a ‘Regional Park’. There is a growing move towards using this term in a number of places in England, but it appears that, at present, it also has no legal framework.

4:5:1 A proposed regional park in Kent

The KSCP advised that they have put forward a proposal for a Regional Park which is described in the Draft Canterbury District Local Plan to 2045 as follows:

Page 10, point 8: “The council will continue to work with partners to explore the promotion of a Stour Valley Regional Park and to support the extension and improved connectivity of the Blean Woodland Complex.”

KWT needs to consider that if Canterbury City Council does explore the potential of a Regional Park whilst KWT goes ahead with the Natural Park idea, it could lead to potential duplication of effort as well as confusion amongst users in the longer term.

It should be noted that there is an emerging Stour Valley Regional Park in Dorset led by the Dorset Local Nature Partnership. Whilst providing a framework for partners to work within, it is not calling itself a regional park from a marketing and promotional perspective. Their strategy is attached as Appendix 4.

4.5.2 Regional parks across England

In 2021 the National Trust published a Regional Parks Scoping Report, attached as Appendix 5, which states:

“In the absence of an agreed definition, regional parks can be defined as large parks which serve a population greater than a single authority area and may extend across local authority boundaries.”

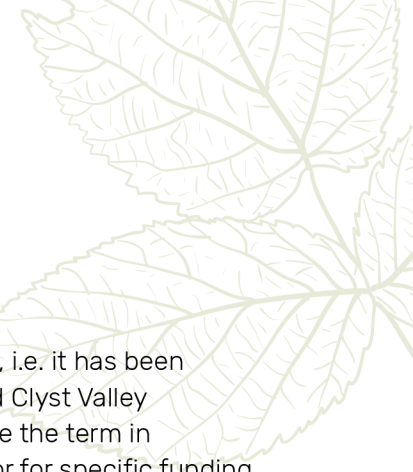
It goes on to highlight the London Plan (2021) categorisation which defines its regional parks as:

“large areas, corridors or networks of open space, the majority of which will be publicly accessible and provide a range of facilities and features offering recreational, ecological, landscape, cultural or green infrastructure benefits.”

The report lists the Lee Valley Regional Park as having a statutory basis. Crossing London, Essex and Hertfordshire, this is a 10,000-acre 26 miles long linear park that made use of London 2012 venues, heritage sites and green space, and provides a large number of built facilities including sports facilities, angling, marinas and more.

The report lists four further regional parks as having status in the planning system, and which are recognised in their Local Plans:

- Wandle Valley Regional Park: still in the process of being created, this is a network of over 40 green spaces and 12 nature reserves stretching from Croydon and Sutton through Merton and Wandsworth to the Thames in the north, linked by the Wandle Trail.
- National Forest: established by the Government in 1995, this park spans across parts of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire with the aim of linking the two ancient Forests of Charnwood and Needwood. It does not call itself a regional park in its promotional materials.
- Greenwood Community Forest: “Nottinghamshire’s Community Forest bringing Sherwood Forest to your doorstep”. The Greenwood partners include local district and borough councils, the County Council, Forestry Commission and Natural England who are currently collating a heritage lottery bid for Sherwood Forest Regional Park.
- Clyst Valley Regional Park: described as “a new breathing space for the growing community of Exeter and East Devon”. In the middle of the Regional Park is Exeter Airport, the new town of Cranbrook and a science park. Much of the National Trust’s Killerton estate lies within the park. A proposed 13 km traffic-free Clyst Valley trail is in development.



It is interesting to note that some destinations market themselves as a Regional Park, i.e. it has been made a part of their brand and is used in their marketing materials (Wandle Valley and Clyst Valley Regional Parks), whilst others promote themselves with their traditional name and use the term in reference to their partnership framework (e.g. Stour Valley Park and National Forest) or for specific funding bids and project delivery (Greenwood Community Forest's Heritage Lottery bid for the Sherwood Forest Regional Park).

4.5.3 The 8 Hills Regional Park

The National Trust is working on a project called the 8 Hills Regional Park, located on the edge of Birmingham's southern urban fringe. The project paper describes a regional park as:

"... much bigger and more diverse than a country park or a park in a town, but smaller than a national park. It's a large area with multiple landowners and uses including farming, recreation, work and housing."

The National Trust describes "8 Hills Regional Park" as a working title, which could change as the plans develop. During a presentation on the area, the NT representative described some of the challenges faced in developing the park and the need extensive stakeholder relationship building. The National Trust is not the major landowner and there is, therefore, a great need to incentivise partners to participate.

The following recommendations were given:

- Present as a set of ideas rather than a fixed plan to deliver
- Identify both the benefits and problems, but don't barge in with solutions
- Put forward as proposals framed as an opportunity to work together

4.5.4 Regional parks in Wales and Scotland

The Valleys Regional Park partnership was established in 2020, bringing together 12 parks and green spaces to become 'Discovery Gateways' to the landscape and heritage of the South Wales Valleys. The intention is to seek formal designation of the Regional Park with a model that could be adopted in other areas.

In Scotland, Regional Parks are defined under the Wildlife and Countryside (Scotland) Act 1981. However there are no statutory rights attached and therefore no protection is offered against industrial development. Scotland has three regional parks: Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park (designated 1990), Lomond Hills Regional Park and the Pentland Hills Regional Park (both designated 1986).



4.6 WHAT NEXT FOR A REGIONAL OR NATURAL PARK?

From a review of existing and developing regional parks, it is clear that bringing together various stakeholders in a landscape to join forces and collaborate under a collective brand brings many benefits: encouraging greater partnership working with all working towards a common vision with shared environmental, social and economic objectives. It can also bring funding opportunities. The National Trust's scoping report highlights the following key benefits:

- A regional park approach provides a mechanism for encouraging local authorities to plan for the enhancement of natural capital across local authority boundaries.
- The Environment Act's statutory requirement for the preparation of Nature Recovery Strategies highlights a growing legislative commitment to nature recovery, and that regional parks could provide a means of delivering these spatial strategies nationally.

4.6.1 A consultation exercise

- It is clear from the feedback that, if KWT wishes to introduce new branding as a collective name for the area then a consultation exercise should first be undertaken. All partners, including local authorities and landowners, need to be on board and to agree a strategy for taking the concept forward.
- There could be sensitivities around referring to the area as a 'park' and KWT should not press ahead without first explaining the concept and ensuring local stakeholders (businesses, community groups etc.) buy in to the idea, especially if the term 'natural park' or 'regional park' is to become the brand and be marketed as such. The views of those interviewed for this review appear to be fairly entrenched – i.e. they know the area as The Blean and/or Blean Woods, even if they aren't fully aware of the extent of the area.
- Consideration must also be given to the extensive history of the area, the previous work conducted by the former Blean Initiative (delivered over many years involving a wide range of stakeholders), current interpretation (which is widespread and in demand) and the needs of a broad range of local businesses, the local authorities and supporting partners such as Visit Kent.

4.6.2 Educational and partnership working

- Education on the extent of the Blean Woods complex and the project area is clearly required amongst tourism businesses and activity providers. This could be delivered through improved communications and networking events, as well as proposed partnership activities set out in section 6.
- A number of ideas were put forward by interviewees that, if pursued by KWT in partnership with interested businesses, would contribute towards strengthening the identity of the Blean. These ideas are also set out in section 6.

4.7 DEVELOPING A DESTINATION PLAN FOR THE BLEAN

- In conclusion, considerable effort and resource would be needed to determine the right framework for carrying forward KWTs vision for the Blean, especially if this is to include a new brand. Getting partners on board and creating a clear communications strategy outlining the vision, objectives and benefits as well as the incentives for participating will be required.
- Once agreed on the framework, developing a destination plan for the Blean will require:
- Researching and establishing (or refreshing) a brand and identity for the Blean as a whole including the wilding offer, that does not detract from its fundamental character and sense of place.
- Creating an identity toolkit to help stakeholders use the brand and communicate the key essence of the experience (how to talk, what to say etc.).
- Establishing a photo/video library as a resource for stakeholders across the Blean to use.
- Utilising the agreed identity in all physical infrastructure and installed features.
- Engaging the services of a specialist destination brand consultancy to develop the brand for the Wilder Blean would be recommended.
- An outline Destination Marketing Strategy for the Wilder Blean is included in section 8, as part of the overarching Nature Based Strategy.



Bison Festival © Tom Cawdron Photography

5) Review of tourism options in the Blean



The research undertaken for this review has shown a number of changes in the type of business operating in and around the Blean Woods complex, both in quality and business type. The completed product listing, attached as Appendix 6, lists over 100 businesses operating in the area including:

- 41 accommodations
- 10 activity providers*
- 26 eateries
- 18 retail
- 14 attractions (including the woodlands)
- 6 producers

*not necessarily based in, but operating in the Blean

The product listing is not exhaustive; businesses continue to open and close, but it provides a good basis from which KWT can explore partnership opportunities, develop closer community links, support a growing business network, share information and educate on nature recovery and wilding.

Whilst the villages of Blean and Hernhill have the greatest number of accommodation providers accompanied by eateries and a couple of attractions, there is now a fairly good spread across the whole Blean, including three accommodations in the Chartham Hatch area and activity providers offering experiences in different parts of the Blean. It has been agreed that KWT's GIS department will plot the product listing on a map in due course.

Whilst the previous study looked at a wider area to identify more businesses, this time the research has focused solely on the Blean area, largely because there is now a greater choice of business to work with. Therefore businesses in areas such as Doddington and Grove Ferry have not been included. Likewise, businesses that have little relevance to the Wilder Blean initiative (such as equestrian, angling and shooting supplies) have not been included this time around.

The one exception to this is the activity providers, some of which are based further afield but are already operating or would like to operate in the Blean.



5.1 SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

For the purposes of this review, a greater emphasis has been put on those businesses that can be considered a 'natural fit' with KWT; its mission and its rewilding aspirations. This applies in particular to newer accommodations which are actively promoting their environmental commitments and have also expressed a keen desire to work with KWT. This is explored in section 6.

Through the online research, around eight accommodations were found to clearly state their commitment to environmental and wildlife issues plus a number of eateries highlight their policies to source locally grown, fresh produce and support their local community through various activities. Opportunities to work with and support businesses in nature recovery and broader environmental activities have presented themselves and are also explored in section 6.

5.2 ACCOMMODATIONS

The past few years have seen an increase in the number of camping and glamping sites operating in the area, with four alone located on Denstroude Lane. One stated that they feel saturation point has been reached and it will be interesting to see how many are still operating in a couple of years' time.

Of the 23 accommodations added to the updated product listing, 10 are camping or glamping sites and 10 are self-catering properties, the majority of which were found on Airbnb. A more detailed trawl of Airbnb finds an even greater number (approx. 40), but filtering out the more business minded operations from the single rooms in private homes would be a very time consuming exercise. In addition, many listings on Airbnb are very transient i.e. they are not operating full time.

Eight B&Bs and self-catering properties, and a campsite on the previous product listing were found to have closed (some of questionable standards).

5.3 FOOD AND DRINK

The Blean has a varied food and drink offering, ranging from high end venues such as the Dairy Restaurant in Boughton under Blean, to a number of good gastropubs such as the Dove at Dargate and the ever popular Red Lion at Hernehill.

A few pubs have changed hands, such as the Curious Cat at Herne Common, the Hare at Blean and the Tylers Kiln at Rough Common, which has recently reopened under new management.

It is worth noting that all of the pubs are located close to footpaths into the surrounding woodland. All those visited expressed a desire to work with KWT and a number would work well as bases for networking events.

There have been a couple of closures with the White Horse in Boughton closing in October 2023.

5.4 ATTRACTIONS AND PROMOTED ROUTES

Within the Blean, the main attractions are of course the woodlands and the opportunities they provide in terms of walking, cycling and various guided activities. The Blean's key assets were discussed in depth in the 2019 study and as there has been little change since, they are not described in further detail here.

However, it is worth noting the following routes which have been added to the product listing:

- Two new cycle routes – the Cantii Way and the Canterbury to Coast route – developed as part of the ERDF funded EXPERIENCE project, both take in the Blean utilising parts of the Crab & Winkle Way.
- Kent Cycle Hire, based in Canterbury (and Whitstable during peak season) has devised a circular cycle route from Canterbury to Whitstable, Herne Bay and Reculver which was featured in the Sunday Times as one of the top 10 recreational cycle routes in the country. The trail is divided into sections named Oyster Bay Trail, Herne Bay Link, Blean Wood Trail and The Crab & Winkle Way. The route is attached as Appendix 7.

*a few issues were raised by Kent Cycle Hire regarding the need for clearance on a couple of routes. The KSCP is also aware of these problem areas.

In addition to these routes, five Blean churches have been added to the product listing. Kent has a rich ecclesiastical heritage and our historic churches attract a great many visitors, especially those on walking holidays and pilgrimage. St. Nicholas' Harbledown is a good example; as one of the few remaining old leper churches in the country it is of particular interest to those walking the Pilgrims Way and North Downs Way National Trail to Canterbury. The potential for a circular church walk through the Blean is considered in section 6.

5.5 ACTIVITIES

Activity providers consulted during the previous study are still operating and a number of additional providers have been added.

5.5.1 Cycling

There appears to have been an increase in cycling activity in and around the Blean. As well as the newly created routes mentioned above, Col's Bike Tours, based in Margate, is leading a guided tour through the Blean and has worked with KWT on delivering a Blean Cycling Safari.

The KSCP is still hopeful that a promoted triangle cycle route between Canterbury, Whitstable and Herne Bay can be developed. It is understood that this has been stalled due to issues regarding land ownership and the safety of certain lanes, but it is interesting to note that Kent Cycle Hire has devised a similar route crossing the Blean and Col's Bike Tours follows the same route.

5.5.2 Walking

Local walking groups for Canterbury, Swale and Faversham have been added to the product listing as there is an opportunity to partner on educational walks. David Reekie, the current chair of the Canterbury Ramblers and creator of the Canterbury Rings, was consulted, as was Gini of Wild with Wheels, also known to KWT.

There is a lot of willing around developing more promoted accessible routes in the Blean with Walk Awhile also keen to support and participate. Existing trails, including parts of the Crab & Winkle Way and the RSPB's accessible routes in the Blean NNR, are suitable for all-terrain mobility scooters.

The Augustine Camino had recently been launched during the previous study, and the last four years has seen it go from strength to strength.

5.5.3 Bushcraft

Kent has a number of bushcraft activity providers, two of which – Natural Pathways and Fergus the Forager – were consulted in 2019. Contact was made again with Fergus and this time with Gary Johnston of Jack Raven Bushcraft, who has in the past, conducted basic bushcraft training sessions for staff and volunteers at Sevenoaks.

As before, there is a keenness to work in the Blean in partnership with KWT but both are aware that KWT has concerns around activities such as building shelters and fires and foraging. The concerns around foraging were also mentioned by Tania Hoser of Images of Canterbury who tentatively suggested a combined photography and wild food experience.

In further conversations about foraging, it was found that those like Gary and Fergus do distance themselves from the commercial foragers, and in particular those that source for restaurants. A conversation with Lucia Stuart of Wild Kitchen in Deal raised the same issues. She, along with Gary and Fergus, all emphasised their focus on education around wild food and foraging, observing and identifying rather than collecting. The key focus for them is imparting their plant knowledge.

Opportunities to partner with these businesses are further explored in section 6.

5.6 CHALLENGES

The previous study looked at the multiple challenges KWT faces in developing eco-tourism in the Blean. The challenges around the introduction of the bison have not been reviewed this time around as the situation is being managed. Likewise, issues concerning planning regulations that were researched in depth in 2019 have not been reviewed as it is understood that KWT is not, at this point in time, progressing with new build accommodations and a visitor centre.

However a number of challenges previously highlighted remain unchanged:

1) Lack of data

In 2019 there was no up to date visitor data specifically for the Blean, and the situation remains the same today. Therefore current visitor numbers and user types remain pretty much unknown, other than anecdotally.

Due to the lack of data, there is limited understanding of the visitor experience. It is known that the better known walking and cycling routes are used extensively, especially during peak holiday periods. Over use of the Crab and Winkle Way is often acknowledged. A better understanding of current users would still be of great use in establishing if the area, its amenities and services, can support an increase in visitor numbers.

The universities in Canterbury could be approached to look at the possibility of engaging their students in conducting research into the area. CCCU has a tourism programme whilst the Durrell Institute at Kent University may be interested in looking at the impacts of tourism on the Blean's wildlife.

2) Access, the arrival experience and managing expectations

As stated in the previous review, the woodlands are naturally at the heart of the tourism offer and are the greatest asset. There is still a need to create a sense of arrival in the Blean and careful consideration needs to be given to the key access areas, some of which require upgrading.

The quality of the arrival experience also needs to be considered, especially if promoting a premium experience. For example, the route through the Wealden Forest Park cannot be considered conducive to either an outdoors/back to nature experience, or one that is being sold at premium rates where expectations are much higher.

There are still issues around access to the South Blean, however the limited access could contribute towards a feeling of a more back to nature experience, especially if it can only be accessed on foot. There appears to be greater issues around path clearance and the need for repairs. During a walk with Shiel Campbell of Worcester's Farm through Fishpond Wood towards Denstead Wood, broken signs, gates and stiles were seen and have been reported separately.

Whilst the Blean is well served by the bus network, there are issues around the lack of suitably located bus stops, access to the footpaths from bus stops and the lack of safe crossing points. As reported by the staff on the Visitor Information Desk in The Beaney, tourists wanting to explore the Blean to try and see the bison are generally put off when the bus options are explained.

3) Market place presence

In 2019, none of the local tourism providers appeared to capitalise on the Blean as a destination. Whilst this has changed and the newer accommodation businesses utilise the Blean in their promotional materials and steer their visitors towards the woodland complex, there is still much room for improvement.

It is recognised that the introduction of the bison herd and all the surrounding publicity has helped put the Blean on the map. But whilst there are now plenty of references to be found on the herd and the Wilder Blean initiative, the Blean Woods complex as a region still has little presence in the online market place and no presence as a destination in its own right.

As discussed in section 4, whilst there are plenty of links to the safari experience, the Blean does not feature as a destination on the DMO websites (e.g. Visit Kent etc.).

Coupled with the lack of any sense of arrival and the poor quality of the arrival experience, there is currently a lack of a cohesive portrayal of the destination in the market place.

The individual woodlands, reserves and walks feature on ExploreKent.org, Visit Kent, Visit Canterbury and of course KWT, RSPB, Woodland Trust and Forestry England list their own woodlands on their respective websites. However, there is still a need for an effective promotional push and significant amount of resource behind a sustained marketing campaign for the wider Blean as a destination.

5.7 OPPORTUNITIES

The opportunities laid out in the previous study remain as important now as they were in 2019, so the following do not need elaborating on further:

- The demand for experiential tourism continues to grow
- Wildlife viewing, tracking and photographing is still big business
- The Blean provides a natural experience to visitors
- The contribution of eco-tourism to the Blean could be considerable
- Educational and study tourism can be developed around the wildling project
- Proximity to the M2 and A2 make the Blean accessible by road whilst the High Speed train connects the London audience
- The Blean is well serviced by established walking routes

However, discussion around the following points continues or has progressed:

- Tourism businesses in the Blean area: we have seen changes and growth in the number and quality of businesses operating in the area. The last four years has seen a growth in camping and glamping sites offering a more outdoors focused experience.
- Eco-tourism in Kent: continuing on from point 8, businesses are making more overt statements of commitment to the environment, supporting nature recovery, buying locally and supporting their local communities.
- Climate change: even more than in 2019, travellers are seeking to reduce their impact on the environment and local communities, seeking out eco-tourism focused experiences and looking to travel more sustainably. Air travel is acknowledged as one of the contributors to climate change and we're seeing more domestic tourists taking short breaks in the UK.

5.8 THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLEAN

All of the above provide an opportunity for KWT to capitalise not only on its experience and expertise in conservation but especially in ‘wilding’ which provides a unique selling point in Kent. However, it was also stressed during the consultation that, whilst the project focus is on wilding, when it comes to developing the tourism offer the historical significance of the Blean – in particular how human activity has shaped the landscape – cannot and should not be overlooked. It has been emphasised that people visit the area primarily because of the historical interest and that the natural aspects of the landscape become woven into this. This really should be viewed as an opportunity for drawing in a wider audience.

In summary, the research and consultation for this review has found that more businesses are operating in the Blean than in 2019, and new businesses have opened and are doing well, especially the camping and glamping sites. As such, a good number of opportunities to work with local partners have been identified which are further explored in section 6.



Westgate Gardens Canterbury © Canterbury Connected BID

6) Opportunities to take forward



The consultation with tourism businesses and a number of other stakeholders has identified a range of opportunities that KWT could pursue in its efforts to raise awareness of the Blean as a destination, to engage and support Blean tourism businesses and develop a nature based tourism strategy.

As discussed in the 2019/20 study, there are potentially many ways to develop the Blean brand by working in partnership. However it is important that not every activity is led by KWT or depends on KWTs support or engagement into the long term. Blean tourism needs to be self-sustaining.

The ideas put forward have been grouped together under six rather broad headings, but a number of proposed activities could overlap, essentially supporting two or more of the Trust's aims.

6.1 VISITOR RESEARCH

Reliable data is required to gain a better understanding of visitors to the Blean and the visitor experience. A survey of visitors and tourism businesses should be undertaken to identify visitor numbers and their needs, preferences and behaviours; in other words find out who's coming, where from, how many, what they're doing, where they're staying, when and for how long. Undertaking this research would also provide a good opportunity to better understand the Blean's tourism business needs.

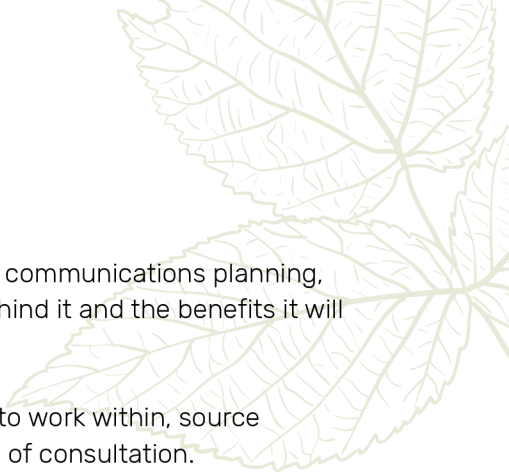
The results can feed into ongoing place making and experience development, and could be used to support funding bids and planning applications.

Building relationships with the universities would potentially enable KWT to tap into the great pools of students undertaking research. CCCU teaches a number of courses in Tourism, Events and Hospitality, so engaging students in a visitor study in the Blean may be of as much benefit to them as it would to KWT. The University of Kent's wildlife and conservation degree already takes advantage of their proximity to the reintroduction project in the Blean so there may be an opportunity to engage students in monitoring the impact of tourism on the rewilding initiative.

6.2 COMMUNICATIONS

6.2.1 Consultation on Natural Park or Regional Park status

There is clearly much discussion to be had to determine if KWT wishes to pursue the Natural Park or Regional Park status to support their work on the Wilder Blean initiative. If the decision is made to use either label as a part of the destination brand (i.e. for promotional purposes), KWT and partners will need to ensure buy in and support from all stakeholders, from local authorities to parish councils, local community groups, Visit Kent, local tourism and related businesses.



This would be a considerable undertaking, requiring detailed preparation and communications planning, carefully explaining the purpose of the label or designation, the reasoning behind it and the benefits it will bring.

If the decision is made to use either label simply as a framework for partners to work within, source funding and deliver projects, this would potentially not require the same level of consultation.

6.2.2 Support a Blean tourism networking group

The idea of bringing tourism businesses together was suggested by Tilly Bayes of Blean Bees Camping as a forum for sharing information on what they are doing and discussing local issues. It could be instigated by KWT but ultimately left to the businesses to co-ordinate.

A group such as this would provide a useful forum for KWT to share information, educate on wilding and nature recovery, co-ordinate familiarisation visits and, where needed, provide specific species advice. In subsequent interviews the idea was supported by other tourism businesses, with one suggesting it be supported by an online hub, such as a WhatsApp group or Facebook page.

The group could remain an informal networking group or could eventually become formalised (like the Chilham Tourism & Retailers group). Ultimately this would be a decision for its members.

It is understood that KWT is attempting to set up a Blean community group and that walks and talks are being arranged for Parish Council representatives. Getting a local tourism group off the ground would enable KWT to reach a wider audience of stakeholders.

6.2.3 Work with destination marketing organisations

Coverage of the Blean on Visit Kent, Visit Canterbury, Visit Swale and Faversham is still limited. Whilst the Wilder Safari experience features on all sites, information on the Blean as a destination is sparse, and usually limited to West Blean and Thornden Wood.

With effective communications and marketing support from Visit Kent, the Blean can be put on the map. KWT needs to work with Visit Kent to create a destination promotional plan aimed at improving coverage of the Blean as a destination, not just individual products and experiences.

6.2.4 Freshers Week

KWT could offer familiarisation experiences of the Blean, in the form of guided safaris or walks, as part of Freshers Week and perhaps on an ongoing basis as part of their health and wellbeing support programmes.

The universities have health and social care teams providing support to students throughout the academic year. Spending time in green space and connecting with nature is known to benefit mental and physical wellbeing so offering students the opportunity to explore the Blean with the rangers could have many positive impacts. There would also be the added benefit of attracting students to KWT volunteer programmes.

6.3 PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

6.3.1 Greentraveller

Who they are and what they do:

Established by Richard Hammond, a travel writer and videographer, Greentraveller provides news and inspiration about lower carbon travel and positive impact holidays, and gives the resources needed to help travellers plan 'greener holidays'. Richard produces the online, bi-monthly Green Traveller Magazine (published by Charitable Travel), has published the Green Traveller guide book, and has a film production unit, Green Traveller Productions, creating editorial and commercial videos for destinations, travel and transport companies.

Richard has produced over 50 green travel guides in England, initially for the National Parks and AONBs (including the Kent Downs) and now for a growing number of other destinations such as the Dyfi Biosphere Reserve in Wales, Cornwall and Somerset. Whilst all the guides are featured on GT's site and promoted through GT's social media channels, they are intended for the commissioning organisation's own use.

The first edition of Green Traveller Magazine, published in August 2023, included a four page spread on rewilding initiatives in the UK featuring nine rewilding examples, including Knepp.

What they could do with KWT:

Richard could create a guide and film for the Blean which would provide KWT with plenty of photos (including aerial), video footage and editorial. In brief, Richard would create a set of assets that would be distributed and handed over to KWT. Production would be undertaken in one trip of three to four days. The story would feature in Green Traveller Magazine and could be shared through Green Travellers and/or KWT's social media. An estimated cost could not be given at the time of writing as each production depends very much on KWT's requirements.

It is recommended KWT contact Richard to discuss options further.

6.3.2 Sustainable Journeys and Sustainable Journal

The Sustainable Journal is the editorial arm of Sustainable Journeys, a new tour operator established by Melissa Tilling selling packaged holiday experiences based on responsible tourism practices. Melissa has offered to include a feature on the Wilder Blean in the Sustainable Journal, which could describe both the wilding goals as well as the aims and objectives of their eco-tourism aspirations.

Holidays featured on Sustainable Journeys are negotiated through local DMOs which also fund the product development. As and when KWT is able to move forward with a bookable experience, Melissa could potentially work with Visit Kent on the product development.

6.3.3 Canterbury Brewers and Distillers

Who they are and what they do:

Producing unique beers and spirits, Canterbury Brewers was founded and is run by Jon Mills. The brewery is based in Stour Street, Canterbury, behind their Foundry Brewpub bar and restaurant. Jon has developed a number of partnerships including:

- With Canterbury Cathedral to produce a gin inspired by the medieval herbs grown in the gardens, and which is sold through Jon's online shop.
- With Princes Golf Club to produce a gin using sea buckthorn which grows wild around the course. Jon covers all the costs of production and holds on to the stock, selling it to Princes at wholesale prices who, in turn, sell it to their members and serve in their bar.
- With CCCU which resulted in the creation of a yeast in St. Augustine's, still used in all Jon's beers. CCCU grows its own hops for its own labelled beer, called Bishop's Blessing. Brewed by Jon, the students named the beer and designed the label (shown on appendix 8).

Everything from the brewing process (heat, water and grain) can be re-used and Jon prides himself on running a sustainable business:

- Energy is recycled by capturing heat from the brewing and distilling process to heat the water for the next day's process and heating the building.
- Waste grain goes to a local farm as cattle feed, and he has recently received funding to start growing mushrooms. As the waste grain has been pasteurised, it works well as a mushroom growing soil and at the end of the process it can still be used as cattle feed.
- Jon also places a great focus on championing all that is Canterbury, forging local partnerships and keeping his product range very local.

What they could do with KWT:

Jon is interested in partnering KWT to produce a Wilder Blean branded beer and/or spirits. A range of products, each featuring an 'eco-system' engineer on its label, could be produced (and a special put on tap) which he would promote in the press and through social media. He would tell the story about the Blean, its history, the wilding initiative and why it's important to the woodland.

Jon shares concerns about foraging and would work with KWT to identify the herbs growing in the Blean. However he would source commercially (as he does with the Cathedral herbs) as he needs a guaranteed supply and requires larger quantities than could possibly be foraged.

A yeast could quite easily be captured in the Blean and KWT may wish to consider a partnership with one of the universities to do this.

If KWT wishes to pursue this idea, contact should be made with Jon Mills.

6.4 IMPROVING ACCESS

6.4.1 Stagecoach

Stagecoach was contacted to ask about the possibility of adding labels or signs at bus stops, informing passengers they can "Alight here for the Blean Woods" or similar.

John Pugh, the Infrastructure Planning Manager, advised that Stagecoach can attach a coloured 'flash' underneath the flags at appropriate bus stops. This would be a 100mm deep coloured band with the relevant wording. In principle, Stagecoach is agreeable to adding flashes for the Blean and this could be done at no cost. They are due to upgrade the flags in the area so in theory, could add the flashes at the same time.

However there are a lot of factors to consider, especially around safe access. They first need to know where the key access points are before they can determine how credible they are. Safety is paramount, access to the closest footpaths is required, and there needs to be a safe crossing point to the bus stop on the other side of the road for the return journey.

There are a number of bus stops where John would consider attaching 'flashes' but this needs further discussion with KWT and partners:

- On the A291, the bus stop near Braggs Lane has been relocated as part of recent road improvements and a new roundabout installed. If alighting here, a short walk down Braggs Lane leads onto a footpath into the woods.
- On the A291, near Wildwood, however this would require access to the footpath to be created. Extending or connecting the footpath to the road would require negotiation with PROW.
- From the Rough Common Turn stops, passengers can walk down Rough Common Road to join the footpaths leading into Blean Woods NNR.

It is possible to install new bus stops or relocate bus stops to safe points on the roads. However, this involves considerable amounts of construction work and they must meet current accessibility standards including new pavements, drop curbs and lighting, all of which incur substantial costs.

A possible site for installing new bus stops is on Radfall Road, where there are footpaths leading into both Thornden and Clowes Woods. The number 5 travels along this road but there are currently no stops. To avoid any confusion, the flash signs may be best carrying the individual wood name, but carry the same branding design as the Wilder Blean.

KCC is responsible for supplying and installing bus stop infrastructure whilst Stagecoach provides the bus information and flags. The Kent Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), published in 2021 and funded by central government, lays out KCC's commitments to improving the network over a three year period. A number of areas are listed as requiring improvements, and John Pugh mentioned that the funding can be spent on those areas only. KCC received the first portion of BSIP funding (approx. £16m) to use on the agreed list of initiatives for 2023/24 in March 2023. No areas in or around the Blean are currently listed. John suggested approaching Councillor Dan Watkins for support. Cllr Watkins is a councillor in Herne Bay and sits on Canterbury City Council and Kent County Council where he is Deputy Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation.

In conclusion, Stagecoach is very keen to get people on buses, to get people into the woods and to support the visitor experience. However there is much to consider in terms of safety and access. It is recommended that KWT makes contact to progress the discussion further.

6.4.2 Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership

The popular Big Blean Walk, produced by KSCP, is a 25 mile circular walk encompassing pretty much the whole Blean Woodland complex. The leaflet is in high demand by the Canterbury Visitor Information desk and tourism businesses, but stocks are running low and the KSCP needs funding to update and republish. Volunteers contribute towards its maintenance however it is understood that parts of the route need upgrading too.

As a circular route it is useful in that it links all the woodlands, the attractions and tourism businesses, and unites the Blean communities, making it an effective promotional tool. Supporting the KSCP in their endeavours would ensure the route is maintained and the leaflet remains in circulation, and would engage tourism businesses. It is recommended that KWT contacts Jon to discuss further.

Two of the Train Rides to Ramble – Sturry and Chartham – take in parts of the Blean Woods and the same applies in that both the routes and publications need updating. In addition, the Sturry route needs redirecting around new housing developments.

Restarting discussions around a new promoted triangle cycling route between Canterbury, Whitstable and Herne Bay is another ambition of the KSCP, for which funding is required. This is another activity KWT could support.

6.4.3 Gateway Signs for the Blean

As the wilding project becomes more established and closer community networks are developed, KWT could consider having signs installed at key gateways into the Blean. Such signs could be along the lines of the Kent Downs AONB village signs, or the type of signs used by National Parks and nature reserves. They should not detract from the Blean's fundamental character and sense of place and careful consideration would need to be given to the design and type of materials used, preferably using natural materials.

6.5 EXPERIENCE DEVELOPMENT

A number of opportunities arose during the consultation process and online research to develop products and experiences in partnership with local businesses. These are also included in Appendix 2, Business Consultation Notes.

6.5.1 Accessible Walks - Working with Wild with Wheels

KWT is already working with Gini at Wild with Wheels to improve accessibility on its reserves and to create a route in Thornden Woods. Walk Awhile is keen to support Gini on this, potentially extending the route.

6.5.2 Self-led and guided walks of the Blean - Working with Walk Awhile

As a result of this consultation, Walk Awhile is considering how they could package a walking holiday or short break around the Blean. This could make use of the Big Blean Walk or even be based around the five historic churches of the Blean. Further discussions are required as they need advice on accommodation and places to eat.

6.5.3 Canterbury Rings - working with David Leckie, Chair of the Canterbury Ramblers

KWT could approach David to discuss and support developing a series of led walks in the Blean as part of the Canterbury Walking Week which has been incorporated into the Canterbury Festival. The walks could be based on David's Canterbury Rings - four walks he created, three of which pass through parts of the Blean. He also leads history walks in the city and woodlands.

6.5.4 Wildlife Stakeout Photography Day - with Images of Canterbury

Tania Hoser currently delivers macro wildlife and birdlife photography workshops at Stodmarsh as well as one-to-one photography training. She would be interested in developing a photography experience in the woodlands complex, based on her idea of a wildlife stakeout which could involve the use of temporary or pop up hides. This needs further discussion between Tania and KWT.

6.5.5 Picnic in the Blean - with Nethergong

As in 2019, Hannah is keen to work with KWT and is pretty open to ideas. Nethergong can host day camps and retreats, weekend retreats (with a focus on exploring nature), walking groups, or set up a site in the Blean. An idea put forward is for a Picnic in the Blean, with food and entertainment around nature discovery, which could raise money for the wilding project, or something local. KWT should contact to progress the idea further.

6.5.6 Stargazing - with Bright Sky Glamping

There is no light pollution along Denstroude Lane, so Tony and Kerry are creating a platform in their field for star gazing. They are keen to partner with KWT on activities, and are pretty open to ideas (they could host e.g. small walking groups, yoga trails, pop up cookery events) but would be very happy to start with a star gazing event. KWT should contact to progress the idea further.

6.5.7 Educational activities - at Neil's Place Farm

In 2024 Jack Boggia of Barn Camping will be opening up his farm to schools and young people, with plans for educational events involving showing his livestock (including e.g. hatching chicks), as well as nature and wildlife activities. He would be keen to develop a series of events with KWT. KWT should contact to progress the idea further.

6.5.8 Dawn Chorus Disco

Based on a mini expedition led by Wild Intrigue in Newcastle, this could be a trip into the woods to hear the dawn chorus, "mixing the dawn orchestra with silent disco tech". Wild Intrigue uses a parabolic dish and wireless headphones to guide participants in "an immersive acoustic safari to 'meet' the musicians within the orchestra; honing in on individual bird calls with headphones on, and enjoying the full orchestra with headphones off". An experience that could potentially work well in the Blean, KWT could either organise this themselves (obviously having to source the equipment) or look into partnering with the arts and music departments at one of the universities.



6.6 SUPPORT FOR SMALL BUSINESS

The following ideas are all based on suggestions and requests made by tourism businesses.

6.6.1 Wilder Blean project information for welcome folders

Feedback gained from tourism businesses indicates a clear need for a fact sheet describing the Wilder Blean initiative, including information on how to get there and what they can do and see, that they can insert into their welcome folders (preferably a double sided A4 sheet). Tailored specifically to visitors to the Blean, this could be a quick win in engaging tourism businesses.

6.6.2 Wildlife and Nature Recovery fact sheets

It should be remembered that all tourism businesses are landowners, whether they have an estate, farm or small back garden. A number of those consulted asked for quite specific advice on topics such as pond creation, planting horse proof trees, planting native trees, shrubs and hedges (see appendix 2: business consultation notes).

KWT is recommended to work with businesses to help make their offers and experiences more sustainable with nature recovery at their heart. Support could be provided in the form of a series of factsheets tailored towards the different categories of business, for example camping/glamping sites, serviced accommodation and pubs, some of which have quite extensive land neighbouring or in the woodlands. These fact sheets could cover a range of topics such as “nature recovery in your gardens”, pond creation and management, supporting the Blean’s birds, butterflies, moths and more.

6.6.3 Familiarisation trips of the Blean

Offering tourism business owners and staff the opportunity to attend a programme of guided walks (safaris) led by the rangers, would improve their knowledge of the Wilder Blean initiative and the landscape, encourage them to promote KWT activities to their visitors, as well as to network and share information amongst themselves. They would potentially have the added benefit of attracting more volunteers.

6.6.4 An environmental awards or certification scheme

Barn Camping suggested an awards or accreditation scheme recognising businesses’ environmental efforts and helping them “learn how to be greener”. This could be another potential quick win for KWT, resulting in a deeper, more long lasting engagement with tourism businesses, demonstrating some tangible actions around nature recovery and improving landscapes for wildlife.

There are two options KWT could pursue: one would be to partner with an existing accreditation scheme, whilst the other is to develop its own scheme.



Partnering existing accreditation schemes

The Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS) is the largest, best known in the UK and applies to all types of tourism business, whilst the David Bellamy Blooming Marvellous Pledge for Nature applies to campsites and holiday parks.

The GTBS covers all aspects of a business' operations and awards gold, silver or bronze according to the number of actions successfully undertaken across a range of environmental and social indicators. The David Bellamy award is focused on environmental actions and their member parks receive regular visits from David Bellamy Advisors to check how they are doing and to give them advice.

Both schemes charge a joining fee and ongoing membership or participation fee. Both are independently certified and it is strongly recommended that, if KWT develops its own scheme, it does the same. Self-certified schemes do not have the same level of respect or recognition.

When the GTBS first launched in Kent, it was with funding and administrative support from the Kent Downs AONB. If partnering an established scheme, KWT could provide support by providing nature based information specific to Kent businesses. Either scheme would most probably expect some funding to launch their scheme in the Blean.

Developing a KWT awards scheme

Alternatively, KWT could create their own scheme, maybe building on the Wilder Kent Awards. This would require some resource but would keep it local and tailored to the Blean, or Kent. It could be focused on environmental actions including nature recovery, or it could operate more widely to encompass community and social actions too.

Whichever way it proceeds, the businesses will appreciate the recognition and the promotional benefits such an award would bring. It would give them proof of their commitment which they can display on all their marketing materials and produce, thus further promoting KWT as well.

Such schemes generally charge a joining fee as well as an ongoing membership fee and there is no reason why KWT shouldn't do the same. Alternatively it could be done in the form of a donation, perhaps in the early days of the scheme. In either case, it could bring an extra revenue stream to KWT. Whatever route KWT takes, the recommendation is to develop an awards scheme that is specific to tourism businesses. This clearly requires further discussion and possible research into the type of schemes already in operation.

7) A nature-based tourism strategy for the Blean

KWT requires a nature-based tourism strategy outlining how the Blean Woods complex can become established as a destination in its own right, and building on the commercial opportunities and potential sources of income generation identified through this review. This strategy should be achieved through a collaborative approach, based on partnership working with local tourism businesses and other relevant stakeholders.

7.1 THE VISION AND MISSION

As stated in the previous study, sensitively designed and managed eco-tourism should support KWT's vision of a Wilder Kent where "wildlife is being restored and is valued as a critical human life support system". The tourism experience should be designed with its mission firmly in mind:

To work with people to restore, save and enhance our natural heritage.

Kent Wildlife Trust is working to ensure that our wildlife is protected and restored, now and in the future. We work to help organisations; people and communities connect to nature and care for our natural places.

Through membership and through wider communication, we aim to develop a lifelong relationship with Kent Wildlife Trust and provide opportunities for people to take action for wildlife.

In addition, this strategy must not compromise but should support the mission of the Wilder Blean project, which is to "promote stronger and dynamic habitats that are able to withstand the current environmental crisis and support nature recovery in the long-term".

7.2 THE APPROACH

As a result of the research and consultation undertaken throughout this review, it has become apparent that there is a need for greater stakeholder engagement and relationship building which can only support KWT's stated aim to "develop a lifelong relationship with communities and provide opportunities for people to take action for wildlife locally, nationally and internationally".

Therefore the approach taken in this strategy is predominantly based on collaboration which will also help forge a stronger brand identity for the Blean. This strategy also provides the opportunity to match the stated aims of Visit Kent's Sustainable Tourism Action Plan. All activities proposed in this strategy will support Visit Kent's three priority actions: Food for Good, Go Nature Positive and Go Loco2, as well as their Impact Priorities: Community, Climate and Nature.

7.3 OUTLINE PLAN OF ACTION

The previous 2019/20 study included a timeline of actions required to develop and deliver a Wilding eco-tourism product in the Blean, taking a phased approach over a five year period. This has been repeated (in appendix 9) to include the suggested actions identified through this review, but with a shorter timeframe.

The ability to plan ahead will depend on some of the outcomes of this review. It has raised a couple of issues that require further discussion and agreement by KWT and project partners.

However, as most of the actions suggested here are predominantly based on collaboration with local tourism businesses, they could be delivered quite quickly, also requiring less resource. They include activities that could be delivered over the next three years, with phase 1 from January 2024. Phase 2 is 2025 and phase 3 is from 2026 onwards.

Whilst a number of the previous (2019/20) actions have been delivered, some are no longer relevant, in particular those relating to plans for building accommodation structures in the woodland and have been omitted.

Much of phase one is focused on forging partnerships, planning and developing product and developing business support. It is therefore largely geared towards consultation and working with stakeholders to identify what is needed. Roll out and delivery largely happens in phase 2, whilst phase 3 is focused on ongoing delivery and maintenance.

The recommendation is to capitalise on the local businesses' enthusiasm for working with KWT and to pursue as many as possible.



7.4 AN OUTLINE DESTINATION MARKETING STRATEGY FOR THE WILDER BLEAN

The following provides a step by step overview of how a destination marketing strategy could be planned and delivered. It would be undertaken in partnership with Blean project partners with the support of Visit Kent.

Step 1: Establish a strong brand identity

- Objective: Create a unique and recognisable brand for the Blean.
- Actions:
- Develop a brand name and logo reflecting the area's biodiversity, wilding initiatives and eco-system engineers.
- Craft a brand story that resonates with the target audience, emphasising conservation and nature recovery, historical significance of the Blean, and unique experiences.
- Ensure consistency in branding across all platforms
- KPIs: Brand recognition surveys, increase in website traffic, social media engagement metrics.

Step 2: Understand and segment your target audience

- Objective: Identify and segment the target market based on interests, demographics and travel motivations.
- Actions:
- Conduct market research to understand visitor profiles and preferences.
- Segment the audience into categories such as adventure seekers, families, eco-tourists etc.
- Tailor marketing messages to each segment.
- KPIs: Market research insights, demographic engagement data, conversion rates by category.

Step 3: Develop a compelling digital presence

- Objective: Enhance online visibility and engagement.
- Actions:
- Design an interactive website (or dedicated webpages on KWT's site) with detailed information about the destination.
- Utilise social media to engage with potential visitors and share content.
- Implement a content marketing strategy with blogs, videos and virtual tours.
- KPIs: Number of partnerships formed, joint campaign performance, local economic impact

Step 4: Collaborate with local businesses and stakeholders

- Objective: Foster partnerships for mutual growth.
- Actions:
- Establish a tourism networking group for local businesses.
- Develop joint marketing campaigns with local accommodations and eateries.
- Engage with local communities for a comprehensive visitor experience.
- KPIs: Number of partnerships formed, joint campaign performance, local economic impact.



Step 5: Create unique and sustainable experiences

- Objective: Offer distinctive, experiences in line with the Kent Sustainable Tourism Action Plan.
- Actions:
 - Develop guided walks and educational programmes with wilding at their heart.
 - Promote sustainable practices amongst visitors.
 - Organise (or support local businesses in organising) events and workshops that highlight the wildlife and heritage of the Blean.
- KPIs: Visitor participation rates, sustainability metrics, event attendance figures.

Step 6: Leverage public relations and media outreach

- Objective: Gain broader exposure through media and public relations.
- Actions:
 - Engage with travel bloggers, influencers and journalists.
 - Distribute press releases about new developments and events.
 - Organise familiarisation trips for media professionals.
- KPIs: Media coverage quality and quantity, press release distribution reach, influencer engagement.

Step 7: Measure and adapt marketing efforts

- Objective: Continuously evaluate and refine marketing strategies.
- Actions:
 - Implement tracking tools to measure campaign effectiveness.
 - Collect visitor feedback through surveys and reviews.
 - Regularly update marketing strategies based on performance data.
- KPIs: Web analytics, visitor feedback scores, campaign ROI.

In conclusion, the main objective of implementing a destination marketing strategy would be to position the Wilder Blean as a leading nature based eco-tourism destination. By implementing these steps in partnership with Blean project partners and Visit Kent, KWT can enhance visitor engagement, support local communities and contribute to the conservation of the Blean Woods complex.

8) Conclusion

The comprehensive review of the Wilder Blean 2019/20 study provides a detailed assessment of the current opportunities and challenges faced in developing a nature based strategy for the Blean Woods complex. The review's findings indicate a significant potential for growth in nature-based tourism, driven by increasing public interest in sustainable and experiential travel. The introduction of the bison herd and the subsequent attention it has drawn underlines the unique appeal of the Blean Woods as a destination for nature based tourism.

However, the review also highlights the need for strategic branding and marketing to establish a clear identity for The Blean. There is an evident gap in perception and recognition of The Blean as a distinct destination, which could be bridged through collaborative efforts with local businesses and stakeholders, targeted marketing strategies and take up of the promotional opportunities that have been identified. The potential involvement of around 100 businesses in the Blean offers a solid foundation for building a tourism network that aligns with KWT's conservation and environmental goals.

In conclusion, the review provides valuable insights and actionable recommendations for the Kent Wildlife Trust. By leveraging these findings, KWT can effectively position the Wilder Blean as a leading destination for ecotourism, contributing significantly to the local economy while promoting conservation and sustainability, with nature recovery at its heart.

The success of this initiative will depend on the effective implementation of the recommended strategies, continuous stakeholder engagement, and adaptive management to respond to evolving market trends and environmental considerations.



Bison herd in The Blean © Donovan Wright

Appendices

Appendix 1: Visit Britain's MIDAS Global Report

Appendix 2: Business consultation notes

Appendix 3: Interpretative panels and Big Blean Walk

Appendix 4: Stour Valley Park Dorset Strategy

Appendix 5: National Trust Regional Parks Scoping Report

Appendix 6: Blean business product listing

Appendix 7: Kent Cycle Hire route through the Blean

Appendix 8: Canterbury Brewers + Bishops Blessing

Appendix 9: Outline Action Plan



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