

Self-sufficiency case study: A sense of fun and friendship to get the Mawr community walking.



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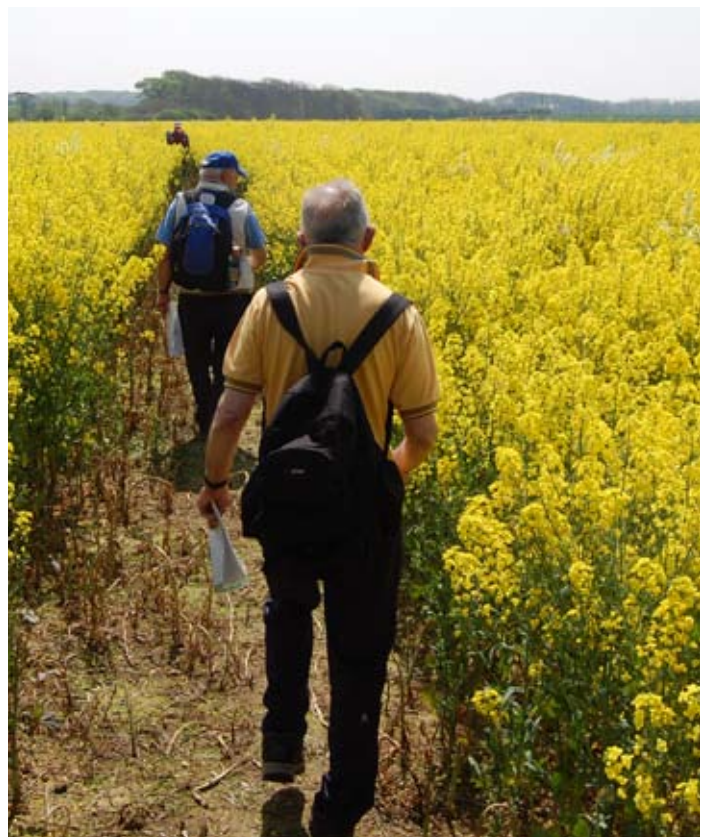
Introduction

Mawr Walking Club started in 2005 when a few volunteers agreed to create a walking club to encourage local communities to take part in planned walks throughout south and west Wales. The club is constituted as part of the Mawr Development Trust (a community based organisation working for the sustainable regeneration of the area to the north west of Swansea including Craig Cefn Parc, Felindre and Garnswllt). It does not target a specific age group and is open to everyone. There are now 246 members.



↘ The original aim was for people who enjoy social walking to be able to undertake walks of seven to eight miles or more; this has now developed so that there is also a programme of shorter walks. The two programmes of walks run simultaneously, with some people taking part in walks from each programme. Short walks cover two to three miles, following paths on fairly flat ground, and are run twice weekly on Mondays and Thursdays. Longer walks on Wednesdays and Saturdays cover eight to ten miles. Every walk is mapped and risk assessed, and the longer walks are then rated 1-4 depending on the level of fitness required. Some of the members are now using mapping software to plot the walks and give more accurate assessment of the level of difficulty; these skills are being passed on to other group members.

↘ In excess of 100 walks are undertaken each year. These include walks around Lliw reservoirs, Swansea Bay, Pembrey Country Park, Margam Park and the Gower, as well as trips to places including Shrewsbury, Llandrindod Wells and the Brecon Beacons. As far as possible when travelling further afield, the walkers use public transport, so the walks are often located along the Heart of Wales train line.



Benefits and achievements in relation to self sufficiency



The group has always been entirely volunteer based and has developed considerably over the past five years from its inception by just a few people. At the beginning, one volunteer undertook most of the organisational duties but now there is a very strong team of approximately 35 volunteers, each of whom have taken on clear areas of responsibility.

- As well as the committee Honorary Officers, the club also has a Club Co-ordinator, Membership Secretary, Footpaths Officer, a key contact First Aider and a team of 13 First Aiders. Also, there are 18 qualified walk leaders, some specialising in short walks and some in longer walks.
- An annual calendar of walks is created for the two walks programmes. The volunteer leaders for each programme meet, with each person suggesting three or four walks that they are prepared to lead. This level of activity means that their duties remain enjoyable, rather than feeling taxing. The routes and dates are compiled on a calendar template and once these are finalised, the first aiders volunteer to cover specific walks. The volunteers say that running of such a full programme is only possible by having enough willing volunteers.
- When the club organises weekends away, more people take on voluntary tasks such as arranging entertainments, booking accommodation and transport and other small tasks that together make the weekends more enjoyable.

- The club has instigated an annual membership fee of £8 per person, which provides the club with income towards its activities. The group has increased its membership and gained strength and stability through its strong core of volunteers.

➤ Walkers have also benefitted from the approach which encourages volunteer development. A great range of skills amongst the volunteers has been tapped, with all sorts of interests coming to the fore. For example, people with an interest in local history have explained significant features along a walking route or suggested routes focussed on places of historical interest; keen photographers have shared their passion by taking pictures of the groups' activities; people who have always walked but are unable to map-read have been able to discover new places. Many of the volunteers are retired and have been able to use skills they had in their working lives and have also gained new ones. Volunteers particularly emphasised the importance of everyone having an opportunity to use the skills they have.

- The people who started the group in 2005, including the person who was then the key volunteer, are all delighted that their vision has developed to become such a thriving club and feel a huge sense of achievement.

Success Factors

The most important things in helping the club to be successful have been:

- ↘ The leadership and vision of the initial key volunteer.
- ↘ His and other volunteers' ability to spot chances and opportunities for getting funds to buy essential equipment such as first aid kits and attend training courses.
- ↘ The club has a strong ethos of respecting everyone and working together.
- ↘ People are invited to take on tasks that make use of their skills and interests, and they will be good at.
- ↘ The club demonstrates appreciation and value of members, for example, through awards such as Mawr Walking Club 'Walker of the Year'.



Challenges

The club intends to maintain or increase its current level of membership. They are keen to attract 'younger blood' and are already thinking about ways to link into the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme and the Welsh Assembly Government's 5x60 exercise programme.

- ↘ There is an ongoing need for walk leaders, in particular at present for the short walk programme. Initially there were only four or five walk leaders, but the club has worked hard to recruit more. More men than women were volunteering to become walk leaders; support and encouragement has brought more women forward.
- ↘ The club is financially self sufficient but volunteers have had to learn to apply for grants to support the club's activities. At present, money is needed to support training for current and new members, and to renew health and safety equipment.

Self-sufficiency and looking forwards



This thriving club has 105 walks planned over the coming ten months, discovering new places and revisiting well known ones. Their motto is, "If the path be beautiful, why ask where it leads?"

Let's Walk Cymru has helped the club to maintain itself by providing funding for health and safety equipment and training courses. This has been of great value to the group as it means that membership of the group, training and increasing skills remain affordable for everyone to take part.

The most significant difference this scheme has made

We asked the co-ordinator to complete the following sentence,

"In my view, the most significant difference that this scheme makes for the people who take part is..... fitness, fun and friendship."



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