

Honouring the Past Valuing the Present, Imagining the Future



WILDWORKS is an arts-led international theatre company with a focus on site-specific events.

Location

St Dennis and surrounding area, Clay Country, Cornwall

Aim



Create a receptive climate for discussions about the future



A Suitcase of Memories

Photo by Steve Tanner

St Dennis is situated exactly in the centre of Cornwall, a village deeply connected to the clay industry. The industry is now in decline and St Dennis faces the challenge of re-inventing itself for the 21st century.

Honouring the Past, Valuing the Present, Imagining the Future was a WildWorks Community Project commissioned by Restormel Borough Council. It took place in St Dennis and surrounding area, from January to April 2008.

The project was commissioned as part of Restormel Borough Council's Sustainable Communities Consultation in the Clay Area. Officers at Restormel felt that the Clay communities were suffering from excessive use of consultation by questionnaire, and that a fresh approach was required.

The aim of the project was to create a climate of receptivity in the target community, encouraging and facilitating a process of reflection where the things that are valued about people and place could be expressed. More specifically, we were hoping to encourage pride of place, to facilitate the community's articulation of their hopes and fears for the future and to create a receptive environment in which other agencies may, working with us, gather specific data.

WildWorks put together a team of experienced practitioners including a project director, a schools specialist, a researcher and liaison person, a film maker, and six visual artists. The project was divided into three stages: Honouring the Past, Valuing the Present and Imagining the Futures.

Engagement Events



Stage 1 Honouring the Past

If you want to get to know a community, ask the children

We started with a project on memory at St Dennis County Primary School. Through map-making and poetry the children explored where they live now and created a poetic map of St Dennis, taking a closer look at their landscape, the plants that grow there, their own important and secret places.

The children invited their elders to a tea party at the school. They asked them to bring photographs and artefacts that brought memories of the past. The children hosted the party, treating their guests to plenty of tea and cakes whilst interviewing them and gathering memories.



Photo by Steve Tanner



The extraordinary work that came from the event can be seen in the Suitcases of Memory that each child made, filled with what they'd found out about their guests and where they live.

What surprised the children was how much they had in common with their elders, how a lot of the things that are important to them, the shops, the band room, the carnival, the school, the Working Men's Club, the Downs, were just as important seventy years ago.

I think the project so far has been SUPERB! I was quite choked when I joined the class and guests for the tea party. It was really touching to see the youngsters and older people engrossed and in each other's stories.

Ann Force, Head teacher, St Dennis CP

Immediately on completion of the School Project a team of WildWorkers set up an open workshop at the Hendra Road Methodist Chapel and invited the local community to bring their stories and photographs. The response was overwhelming. Around 600 photographs from private collections were brought to the workshop. The photographs, together with the stories that accompanied them, form an archive of the living memory of St Dennis. Through them, the village emerged as a resourceful, hard working and very talented community. We digitised the photographs and gave slide shows at a number of community tea-parties held throughout the residency.

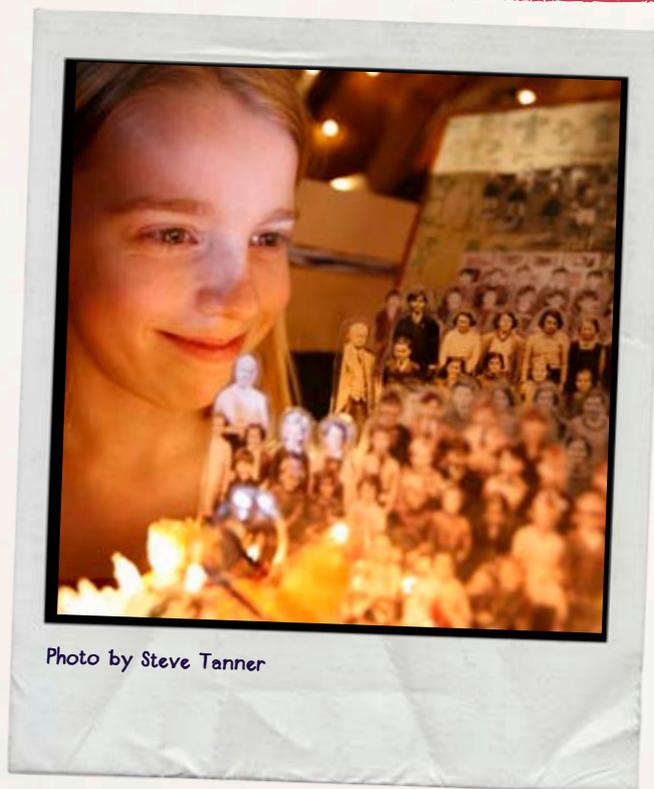


Photo by Steve Tanner

We selected themes that had emerged during our contact with the community. These themes represented the things the community valued about the past, a rich source of identity and meaning.

Stage 2 Valuing the Present

We invited 15 community members to participate, representing an age range between 10 and 84. We asked each of them to take us for a walk somewhere they loved. We wanted to start to map out the emotional territory inhabited by the community: the places and things they love and the aspects of their way of life that make them proud.

The film-making team, spent two weeks filming our local guides as they took us on their chosen journeys. The film *Heart of Clay* is a vehicle for the community of St Dennis to present itself in terms of what they value about place and people. The film was widely distributed amongst the community.



Stage 3 Imagining the Future



We started with a second school project. The future is harder to imagine, especially for children who live in the here and now.

So our first approach was again to look at the landscape and write poems about what local children loved and would hate to lose. Much of what the children came up with was intimately connected to their own lives, their grandparents house, where their parents worked, where the children played, the band room, carnival, pantomime, Flatty and Pointy (two landmark clay spoil-heaps much beloved by people of St Dennis), the Spar shop.

We then made maps of what we could add to improve things. The children devised questionnaires for parents and relatives and wrote letters to the future:

Dear Future, Please save:

Flatty and Pointy

The bad tempered bramble

My granny's house

The church spire

The yawning space

The music.

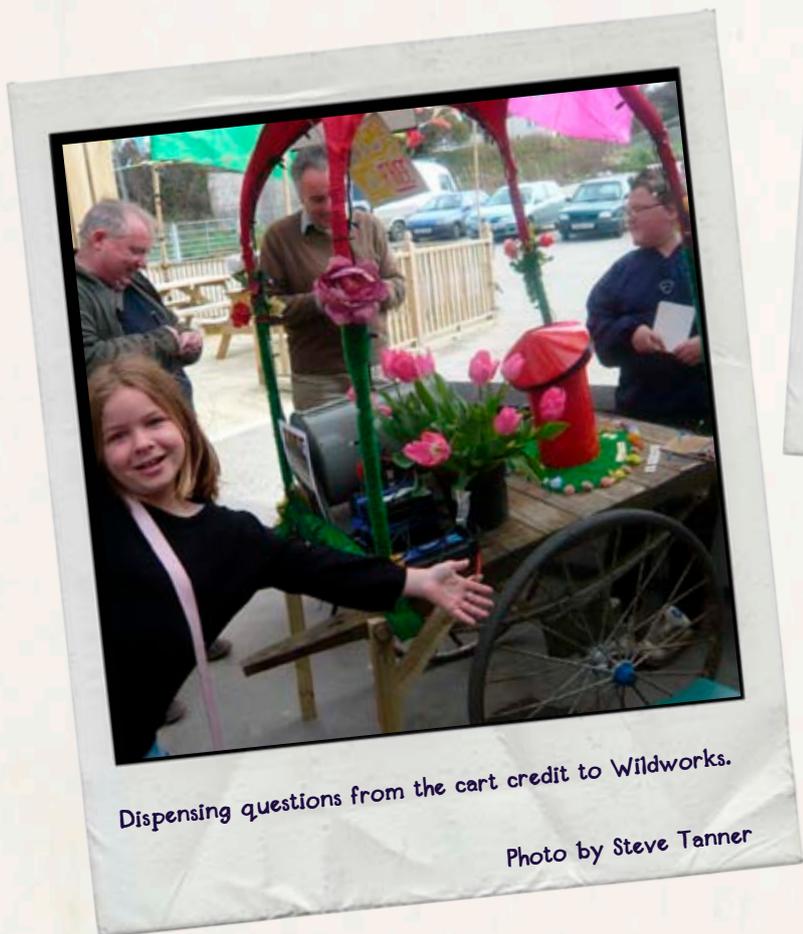


WildWorks set up an open workshop at the Working Men's Institute in St Dennis. In addition we set up some day-long workshops aimed to the young people of the area.

We aimed to create a number of interactive installations that would allow the community to engage in imagining possible futures. Restormel Borough Council had provided us with a list of themes relevant to their consultation process including housing, transport, energy, employment, community, biodiversity and waste.

Bearing these in mind, we set up a two-day research and development session including the WildWorks team, the Eden Project's Foundation team and the Sustainable Communities Officer from Restormel County Council. During the session we planned the themes for the installations and came up with a list of twelve questions that related to the consultation themes and aimed to encourage imaginative thinking about the future. These were then printed on question cards so people could respond to them during the consultation.

Although the open workshop was based in St Dennis, we wanted to reach out to neighbouring villages. We constructed a portable cart from which to dispense our questions about the future.



Dispensing questions from the cart credit to Wildworks.

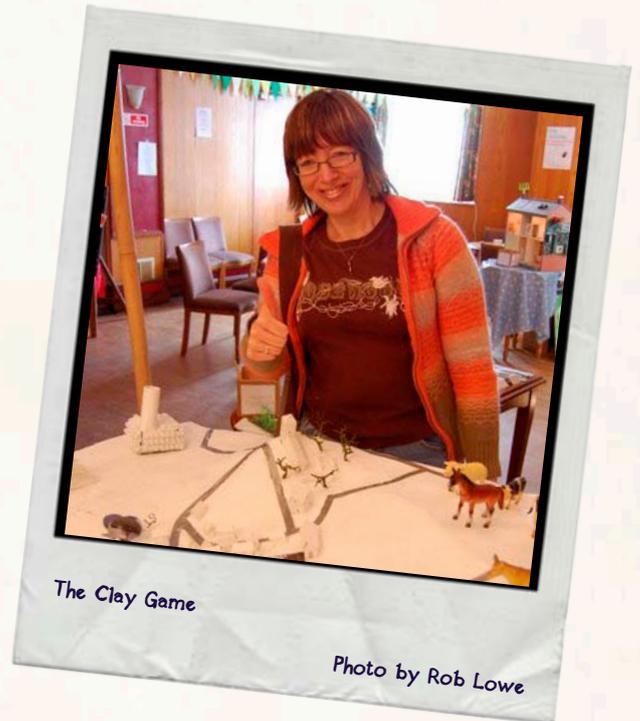
Photo by Steve Tanner



Photo by Steve Tanner

For two weeks the Working Men's Institute was a hive of activity. The cart went out daily, we received visitors and tested our questions on them, we ran workshops for young people, we created our interactive installations for the final event.

The final community celebration was an all-day event where all the work to date was on display. This would be a final but significant opportunity for the community to explore their feelings about the future. A series of installations were created based on the themes provided by Restormel Borough Council. These included a Museum of the Past, a Wishing Tree, a living allotment, the Clay Game and a Library of the Future.



Wishing Tree

Visitors were encouraged to write a wish onto a 'cloutie', a piece of cloth, and tie it onto a branch.

The Living Allotment

Essentially a visual prompt, the Living Allotment was designed to provoke visitors to respond to questions framed around food growing and self-sufficiency.

The Clay Game

This was a large, 3D model of the area, used as a planning game where people could put things in or take them away. Roads, windmills, cattle, houses, community centres...The Clay Game provided a means to start imagining possible futures for the area.

The Library of the Future



A corner of the room was set up as a library containing some of the many specimens that the children had collected from nature: examples of local soil, flora, water; fragments they found in the landscape.

It also contained a wealth of books, films and information on sustainability donated by the Eden Project. The library was hosted by a group of staff from the Eden Project Foundation Team, led by Juliet Rose and representatives from Restormel Borough Council. This team of experts was available to assist community members in the task of imagining possible futures. The contents of the library of the future, around 400 books and films, were donated to St Dennis library at the end of the project.

The event concluded with the premiere of the film Heart of Clay.

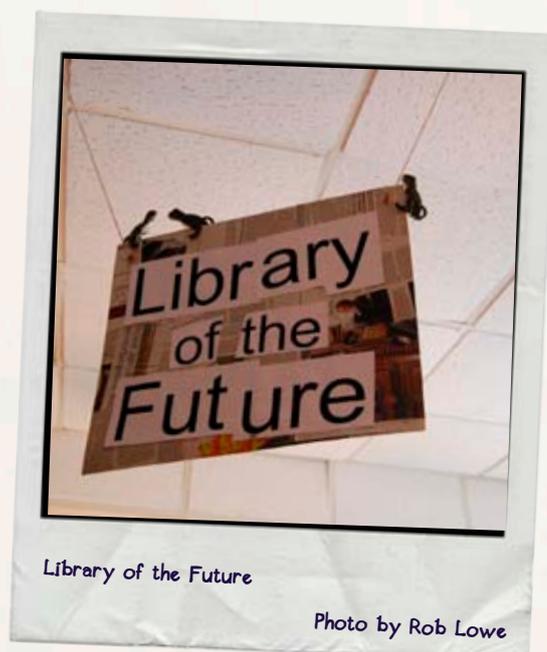
Over 400 people from St Dennis and surrounding area attended the event. An analysis of responses to the question cards was carried out by Restormel Borough Council and fed into their Sustainable Communities consultation process.

This project was a success in no small measure thanks to the hospitality, commitment and enthusiasm of the community in St Dennis and the surrounding area. The project engaged all age groups and, more importantly, created a space where they could talk to each other.

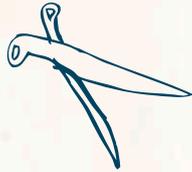
Participants were able to articulate the things they valued about the place where they live. WildWorks returned their stories and memories to them through a series of events, film and installations that gave value to what they, so generously, had entrusted to us.

Participants were able to articulate and express their hopes and fears for the future by a range of means and a variety of media.

More importantly, the project generated a sense of trust which should provide a solid basis from which to continue community consultation in the future.



Techniques



'Harvesting Memory': stories and photographs

Community celebrations, tea parties. These are the highlights of the process. The community gets together in a celebratory mood. Each Tea Party includes an exhibition of work to date, the children's work, Memory Boxes, Film, Installations, all of the highest level of meaning to the community. This provides a focus and a prompt for community members to talk to each other meaningfully

Creating installations, games and activities to facilitate community's imaginative engagement with questions

Key concepts



-  Mutual hospitality and generosity.
-  Exploring the past as a source of pride and common identity.
-  Work across the generations.
-  It is really important for the team to be resident in the host community over extended periods.
-  Creative, arts-based methodologies are an effective method of engaging with communities.
-  Ensure you have the right skills and knowledge for the project by partnering with external organizations with the necessary expertise.

