

BikePark Wales Environmental Statement Vol.1

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Chapter 3: Site Description

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CHAPTER 3

SITE DESCRIPTION

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3 SITE DESCRIPTION

3.1 Introduction

- 3.1.1 This chapter describes the site location, the site and the area surrounding the site. It also provides an overview of relevant planning history. The site location and key features of the site and surrounding area are identified in the Chapter 3 Figures.

3.2 Site Location

- 3.2.1 The site to consists of an area of woodland with open areas and access tracks running through it. Parts of the site are designated as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCS), namely Abercarnaid Fields and Craig Gethin. The site is bounded to the west by the existing BikePark Wales site, to the north by woodland, to the east by grassland and woodland, and to the south by woodland. The wider area includes a mix of woodland types on the valley sides above the River Taff. The A470 runs north west southeast past the site to the east, and the settlements of Abercarnaid and Pentrebach are found to the east, with industrial, retail, residential and public spaces present.

3.3 Site Description

Current Land Use

- 3.3.1 The site is being used as a Mountain Bike Park that is classed as Sui Generis under the Use Classes Order 1987 (as amended). BikePark Wales's opening times are seasonal. Between April and September (summer) the site is open and operational between 9am and 6pm (7 days a week) and some days is open until 9pm (depending on light). Between October and March (winter) the site is open between 9am and 5pm (7 days a week).
- 3.3.2 The facilities at the existing BikePark include a visitor center, which incorporates bike hire, a café and a shop. The trails (43 types) are predominantly located to the west of the center. The exception is a pump track, which is located in the center area and a beginner trail, which is located to the east.
- 3.3.3 Visitors to the site typically access the site by private vehicle, use the parking facilities provided, before using the uplift system run by BikePark Wales. This system is comprised of mini-buses with trailers and vans that ferry visitors from the welcome center area to the valley top.

Site Boundaries

- 3.3.4 The main site area boundaries are characterized by vegetation consisting of scrub, mature trees and shrubs. The vegetation is particularly dense along the boundary of the A470, which runs adjacent to the site. Consequently, the core of the site, which includes a welcome center and associated structures is not widely visible and is well enclosed by planting.

Access

- 3.3.5 The site is accessed directly from the A470 which is a key strategic route spanning the entire length of Wales from north to south. The Welsh Government is responsible for the maintenance and operation of the A470. More locally the A470 provides a connection from the site to the surrounding communities

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including the Brecon Beacons, Merthyr Tydfil, Pontypridd and Cardiff as well as the M4 motorway. The A470 is a dual carriageway road with two lanes in each direction. It is generally well lit but does not make any provision for pedestrian movements.

- 3.3.6 The access measures approximately 3.5 to 6 metres in width and has a tarmac surface for approximately its first 500 metres. Following this, the road turns to gravel surfacing and leads directly to BikePark Wales's facilities. There are seven passing places along this road, all of which benefit from good forward visibility to allow potential conflict between vehicular movements to be identified early.

Topography

- 3.3.7 The site slopes west to east and comprises a mix of open and wooded areas with paths and trails connecting them. The site is bounded to the west by the existing BikePark Wales site, to the north by woodland, to the east by grassland and woodland, and to the south by woodland. The wider area includes a mix of woodland types on the valley sides above the River Taff.

Ecology

- 3.3.8 There are two Sites of Special Nature Conservation (SINCS) present within the boundary of BikePark Wales.
- 3.3.9 Firstly, the Abercanaid Fields SINC is designated due to the species-rich semi-improved grasslands and marshy grasslands. Secondly, the Craig Gethin SINC is designated due to the ffridd habitat and semi-natural woodland.
- 3.3.10 Furthermore, the following priority species (as listed in Section 7 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016) were present or likely to be present on the site or the surrounding area: bats (common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle, brown long-eared bat, noctule, *Myotis sp*), hedgehog, polecat, otter, brown hare, tree pipit, kestrel, pied flycatcher, spotted flycatcher, dunnock, wood warbler and song thrush. Additionally, European nightjar were heard chirring to the southwest, but were not recorded onsite.
- 3.3.11 The Ecology Chapter of the EIA fully assesses the likely impacts of the proposed development and recommends mitigation measures reduce impacts upon the SINCS and protected species.

Landscape

- 3.3.12 BikePark Wales is located on the western slope of the Taff Valley around 110m above the riverbed. Above the visitor center, the land rises steeply towards the summit of Mynydd Gethin at 491m OD c.1km to the south-west.
- 3.3.13 The main building is immediately to the southeast of Gethin Woodland Park and is set above the car parks at around 258m OD. The two main car-parking areas are situated on terraces separated vertically by around 6m.
- 3.3.14 The lowest point of the car parks is c.237m OD. The boundaries of the existing area of BPW are not clearly defined on the ground. The land beyond the long southwestern boundary rises steeply and supports a patchwork of scrub and established deciduous woodland.

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- 3.3.15 The short northwestern boundary is reasonably well defined by a mature riparian woodland strip (which follows a small stream, Nant Graig). The very short southeastern boundary is within deciduous woodland.
- 3.3.16 Downhill from the site, beyond the northeastern boundary, is an area of mature deciduous woodland, scrub and rough pasture which gives on to the A470 around 400m from the visitor center. Beyond the A470 is Abercanaid and an area of large, modern, industrial/commercial, low-rise buildings.
- 3.3.17 The general area of BPW has previously been used for mining and associated tipping though evidence on the ground is largely obscured by woodland and groundcover.

Cultural Heritage

- 3.3.18 The site is not part of a conservation area, world heritage site, historic battlefield site or archaeological priority area. There are no scheduled monuments, no grade I, grade 1* or grade II buildings and no locally listed buildings on the site. The site is located within registered protected historical landscape.
- 3.3.19 The Cultural Heritage chapter of the EIA fully assesses any impacts of the proposed development upon the cultural heritage of the site and the surrounding area.

3.4 Surrounding Area Description

Local Highway and Transport Network

- 3.4.1 The site is accessed directly from the A470. The A470 provides a connection from the site to the surrounding communities including the Brecon Beacons, Merthyr Tydfil, Pontypridd and Cardiff.
- 3.4.2 There are numerous pedestrian access points to BikePark Wales via Public Rights of Way routes. These connect to the surrounding residential areas such as Abercanaid, Pentre Bach and Troed-y-Rhiw. These pedestrian routes are considered to be in keeping with the rural nature of the site and are located within an area owned and maintained by the Woodland Trust.
- 3.4.3 The site has good linkages to cycling infrastructure (including the Taff Trail) within the vicinity of the site via existing byways and bridleways. Due to the nature of the site the majority of the users are likely to be confident and competent cyclists. It is therefore considered that these routes provide good accessibility to the site.
- 3.4.4 The site is considered accessible to public transport facilities. Pentrebach railway station is the closest to BikePark Wales, whilst the larger Merthyr Tydfil railway station and bus station is located less than 4 miles away. These public transport stops provide moderate frequency connections by bus and rail to the surrounding area including the key economic center of Cardiff.

3.5 Statutory and Local Designations

- 3.5.1 Parts of two statutory sites are present within the development area. These are identified below:

Abercanaid Fields and Craig Gethin Sites of Important Nature Conservation (SINCS)

- 3.5.2 The Abercanaid Fields SINCS is comprised of a series of fields lying either side of the A470 containing mainly species-rich semi-improved grasslands and marshy grasslands. Within it, there are also some

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small areas of semi-natural oak/birch woodland, scattered scrub and trees. Furthermore, the features of the SINC includes Webber's pond, a private nature reserve with well-developed marginal emergent vegetation, a section of the Glamorganshire Canal and an adjacent disused railway embankment which supports unimproved and semi-improved acid grassland along with bracken slopes and trees.

- 3.5.3 The Craig Gethin SINC comprises wooded ffridd slopes, which supports extensive ancient semi-natural woodland and bracken slopes with large trees, together with some scree areas supporting lichen heath. The bracken slopes are also known to support abundant bluebell. Craig Gethin also includes an area of wet heathland, which extends along a ride within a conifer plantation.

Merthyr Tydfil Historic Landscape

- 3.5.4 The main settlement of Merthyr Tydfil is a landscape of outstanding historic interest situated in a natural basin at the head of the Taff valley, containing an internationally renowned iron and coal industrial landscape of the 18th and 19th centuries. The area includes large ironworks and associated coal mining industry remains, waste tips, power and transportation systems, terraced industrial housing, Cyfarthfa Castle ironmaster's house and gardens, and important related historical, religious, literary and political associations.

Surrounding Designations

- 3.5.5 There are a number of statutory and local designated sites located within close proximity to the site. Those closest are identified below:

Rhydyar West

- 3.5.6 This SINC comprises a very extensive mosaic of ffridd enclosures supporting complex of semi-upland and lowland habitats, partly contained within a conifer plantation. Its main components are the presence of ancient semi-natural woodland fragments, other semi-natural woodlands, wet heathland, dry heathland, marshy grassland and semi-improved neutral grasslands. Furthermore, there are some bracken slopes, scrub, small ponds, streams and sections of dismantled railway present. There are areas of semi-improved acid grasslands to the south especially. The habitats integrate to form a complex mosaic, and may therefore also include some small areas of improved or low diversity semi-improved grassland. Great crested newt occur in small pools and noctule and pipstrelle bats have both been recorded. Nationally rare and scarce invertebrates are varied and common throughout the SINC

Gethin Forest

- 3.5.7 This SINC includes a mosaic of upland and semi upland habitats comprising conifer plantation, semi natural broad leaved, wet and replanted ancient woodland, heathland, acid grassland, water courses, stading open water, flushes and supporting scrub, neutral grassland and ffridd.

Cwm Woods

- 3.5.8 This SINC is an area of ancient semi-natural woodland within a much larger conifer plantation. The grassy field layer has locally abundant bluebell. The SINC also includes some associated areas of bracken, dry heathland, scrub, marshy grassland and acid grassland. A range of localised bird and moth species have also been recorded.

Buarth-Waunydd

- 3.5.9 The SINC comprises a series of semi-upland ffridd fields containing a mosaic of several locally important habitats, notably acid and marshy grasslands, wet heaths, acid flushes, bracken slopes and semi-natural broadleaved woodlands. There are also areas of neutral grassland and scrub.

Afon Taf

- 3.5.10 This SINC is home to the major river in the County Borough. Includes areas of bankside habitats, particularly towards the south where the river corridor is less industrialised than further north. Associated habitats are predominately semi-natural woodland, including areas of ancient semi-natural woodland and linear wet woodlands. There are also numerous neutral grasslands, scrub patches and bracken stands, as well as small areas of marshy grassland and tall herb vegetation. Notable features of the river course include cobble banks, which support localised plants. The Otter species occurs throughout the length of the river, which is known to be of value to a wide variety of birds, fish, bats and reptiles.

Cwm Glo a Glyndyrys

- 3.5.11 The Cwm Glo a Glyndyrys SINC is of special interest for its extensive areas of marshy grassland, species-rich neutral grassland and acid grassland, and for the association of these habitats with others including woodland and heath. Furthermore, it is of special interest for its outstandingly diverse assemblage of grassland fungi, including 32 species of waxcap *Hygrocybe* spp, making it one of the best sites in Britain.

3.6 Relevant Planning History

- 3.6.1 The relevant planning history for the site is set out in detail in the Planning Statement, which accompanies the planning application. An overview of the key permissions is also provided here for convenience. There are the recent unimplemented permissions of relevance:

Table 3.1: Planning history

Application	Location	Summary
Application P/12/0235	BikePark Wales, Gethin Woodland Centre , Abercanaid, Merthyr Tydfil	The planning permission for the original BikePark Wales facilities. Decision: Approved
Application P/13/0214	BikePark Wales, Gethin Woodland Centre , Abercanaid, Merthyr Tydfil	Erection of single story extension to visitor centre to accommodate plant room. Decision: Approved
Application P/15/0385	BikePark Wales, Gethin Woodland Centre , Abercanaid, Merthyr Tydfil	Construction of 23 additional mountain bike trails to expand the existing facility. Decision: Approved
Application P/16/0055	BikePark Wales, Gethin Woodland Centre , Abercanaid, Merthyr Tydfil	Retention of revised car paring layout, including the provision of additional car parking spaces and the erection of two

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		wood clad huts. Decision: Approved
Application P/17/0367	BikePark Wales, Gethin Woodland Centre , Abercanaid, Merthyr Tydfil	Construction of a new access track and widening of existing forest roads to be used as uplift route by BikePark Wales. Decision: Approved
Application P/18/0335	BikePark Wales, Gethin Woodland Centre , Abercanaid, Merthyr Tydfil	Erection of new bike hire centre with associated bike washing facilities and storage areas. Erection of new catering unit and staff office building. Decision: Approved

3.7 Cumulative Development

- 3.7.1 The development that is described in the above planning history summary is the development that will be considered in the cumulative assessment of each technical chapter. To clarify, this consists of the existing BikePark visitor centre (visitor building with associated working yards, parking areas and access roads), trails and access track to the west of the centre, and the new visitor centre, office building and catering facility that has been granted permission (19/0335) but which has not yet been constructed.