A Story of Place

North-West Plymouth, Devon, England

Written by Isabel Carlisle, slide show/video design by Jane Brady. A Bioregional Learning Centre publication as part of the Plymouth River Keepers project delivered in partnership with Westcountry Rivers Trust

Why Story of Place?

This Story of Place was created as part of Plymouth River Keepers, a pioneering three-year project in north-west Plymouth delivered by a joint team from Westcountry Rivers Trust and Bioregional Learning Centre. The project was designed to reconnect local people to their urban streams and create a culture of caring. Blue-green infrastructure repair, environmental restoration to bring fish back into the streams and community engagement were linked together.

The Story of Place reveals the long timeline of the land and its people, the patterns that shaped them and their future potential. It is a process that sits within regenerative development and design. The slide deck that BLC created can be viewed on BLC's website ("An Edge Place" post in News & Views). Due to the restriction around living with Covid 19 it was not possible to take this presentation out into the communities and invite an open conversation about the lived experience of NW Plymouth, which is how Story of Place evolves. We did however manage two days on the land in the summer of 2020 and visited Ernesettle, Whitleigh Woods and Widewell and walked and talked with local people.

The NW Plymouth Story of Place is by no means a finished product, instead it is offered as the beginning of a process of reconnecting people to place. Nor is it rocket science. The questions used for the interviews were as simple as 'what do you love about this place?', 'when people come to visit, where do you take them?' and 'do you take your kids to play in the streams?'. The conversations were intended to get people curious and excited, and to build an energy field of possibility. Our ambition was for the people of NW Plymouth to recognise their place as special and unique and the role of Riverkeeper…. caring for the urban streams…. as a valued role.

About Bioregional Learning Centre

The Bioregional Learning Centre (BLC) is a community-facing learning lab for climate resilience and regeneration. It came into being in early 2017, co-founded by experts in collaborative design, learning for sustainability, community empowerment, regenerative economies and environmental science.

As a backbone organisation we join up organisations, communities and individuals across South Devon, our bioregion. In order to support, grow and connect all the innovation already going on to prepare for the impacts of climate change. The declarations of Climate Emergencies by Devon County Council, district councils and many town and parish councils form part of the context. Working at bioregional scale enables place-based collaboration in a learning region. Regeneration means working with place-sourced potential to raise aspirations and bring out the vitality in people and places so that we can all thrive amidst profound change.

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THE BIOREGIONAL LEARNING CENTRE

Interreg France (Channel Manche) England
European Regional Development Fund

PREVENTING PLASTIC POLLUTION

PLYMOUTH RIVER KEEPERS
CONNECTING WATER, PEOPLE AND PLACE

PREFACE

The Story of Place process

Story of Place enquires into 'who' a place is and how it functions, from the beginning of geological time to the present day. The outcomes are specific to each bounded place while the way of looking for layered patterns that repeat and are coherent remains the same. The local people who live and work in that place are the experts in understanding how their place has shaped them and how people have shaped that place for millennia. Alongside those conversations on the ground goes a good deal of research into the local social and political history as well as the changing ecology.

As the Story builds, four essential patterns come into focus, supported by past events and what is currently happening on the ground. These patterns are Core Process, Core Purpose, Core Value, and Place Vocation [see graphic on page 4]. Together they express the uniqueness of the workings of a place, or its essence, and point the way to how to unlock meaning which in turns unlocks future potential. The aim of Story of Place is to make it possible for a project (such as River Keepers) or other interventions (like a housing development) to contribute towards the regeneration of people and place together. The place and the people become the clients and are enrolled in the developmental steps and final product as much as the teams delivering the project.

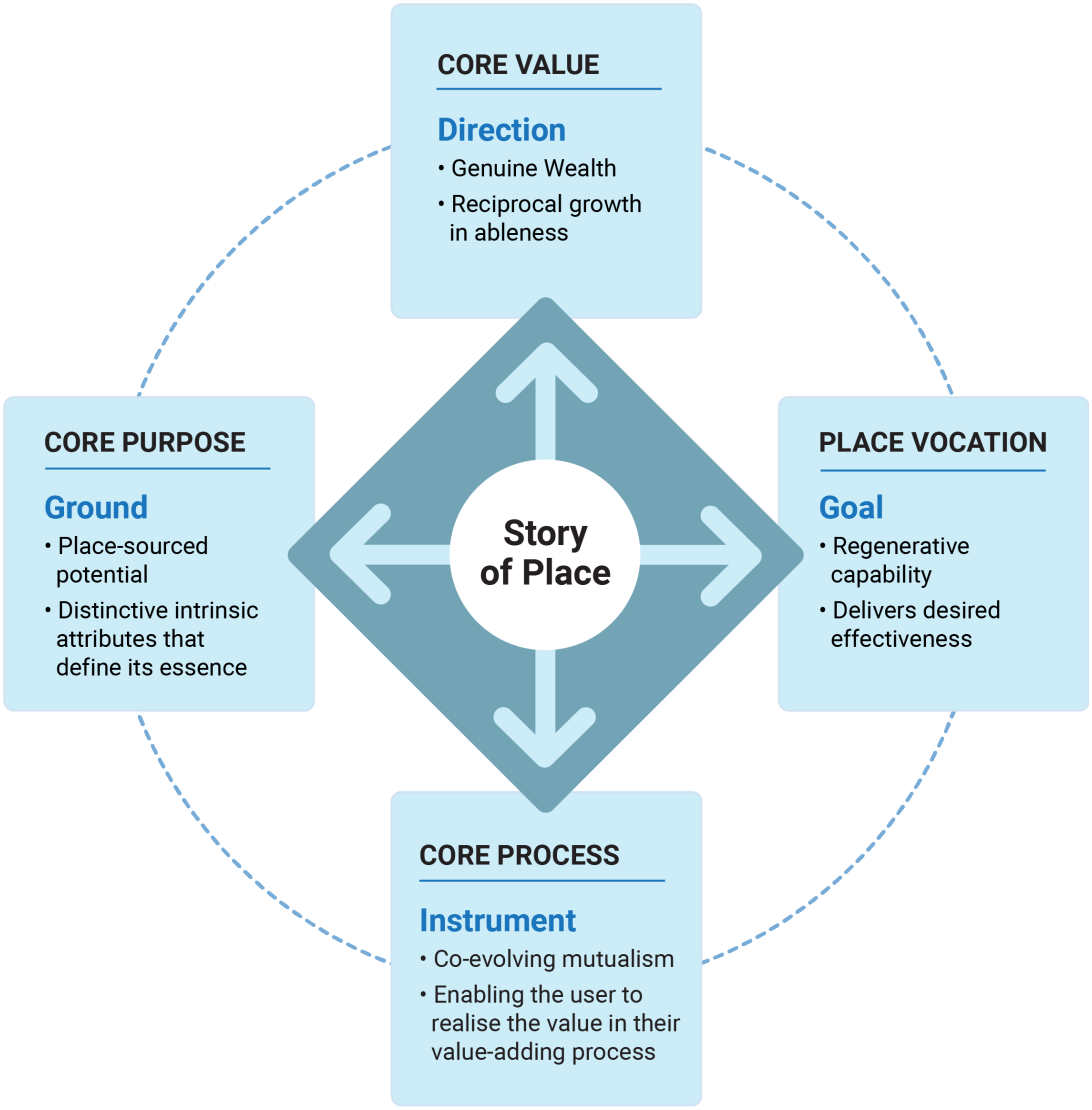
All places are unique and are in a dynamic relationship with their surrounding region and the country they sit within. When we work through the patterns we start with Core Process and ask 'how does this place, the centre of our enquiry, process the living world?' And 'how has it done this from the beginning of geological time'? That offers a clue to who this place (the whole) is, how it works on people and its potential for regeneration in the future. In Story of Place, when we look for a Core Process pattern, we can often find it in the geology and deep time systems such as climate or water.

Core Purpose describes how our place relates to the region around it (the proximate whole). This pattern reveals the value the place holds for its neighbours and begins to suggest our place's vocation or purpose in the socio-cultural fabric of the region. Core Value is about the role our place has played in the life of the country and its people since the earliest days. In other words, the value it contributes to the 'greater whole'. Place Vocation is the direction of travel: if this place was functioning at its best, this is the goal that is pulling it forward.

Of course, these nested patterns are living systems and have experienced changes in geographical and physical boundaries, as well as human culture and ecology, over the long periods of time we are looking at. Even so, experience of doing this work shows that the patterns are surprisingly constant and that working with the patterns, rather than against them, inspires local people to 'own' their future, builds energy and collective will and leads to regenerative outcomes. Energetic interventions such as Story of Place, alongside structural interventions, can create the behaviour change that enables a narrative of hope and possibility to emerge.

We want to convey that Story of Place is an ongoing process of dialogue and enquiry as well as published words and images. As that process deepens, people start to feel a greater connection with the landscape they inhabit. In the words of Pamela Mang, one of the founders of the Regenesis Group that has pioneered Story of Place: "Place is a doorway into caring. Love of place unleashes the personal and political will needed to make profound change. It can also unite people because place is what we all share: it is the commons that allows people to call themselves a community."

How the elements of Story of Place interact and amplify each other



Section 1

INTRODUCTION

A brief introduction to the landscape and context of NW Plymouth

A note before we begin: This section on is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the area. Instead it is meant to provide context, a big picture idea of the flow and patterns of change through time. It begins by looking at how geology and climate have laid down the bones of this place, then looks at how this has informed and shaped local ecology. Taken together, these forces have in their turn shaped human experience and culture. The relationships among these different factors are what reveal the recurring patterns and essential qualities of a place.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The area of NW Plymouth that we are engaged with borders on the west with the estuary of the Tamar, and the River Tavy that flows from North Devon. To the east is the River Plym, to the north the granite upland of Dartmoor and to the south the city of Plymouth itself and the sea. Small streams run south down deep wooded valleys to meet in Tamerton Lake and flow into the Tamar. From west to east, these streams are the Tamerton Stream, the nameless stream that flows through Whitleigh, and Budshead Creek.

Map of Ernesettle, Tamerton Foliot, Southway, Whitleigh, Widewell, Honicknowle, Derriford West and Crownhill, and Manadon and Widey.

The rocks that give the place its shape and character were formed around 370 million years ago when Devon was on the equator and the basin that is now NW Plymouth became filled with green, slatey mud that was compressed into stone. The mud in the Tavy Formation piled up as sediment when oceans covered 85 percent of the globe and fish life was abundant. This era of warm climate, the Devonian, is known as the Age of Fishes. Alongside an explosion of life there were extinctions when the levels of oxygen dissolved in the water dropped. These extinctions made way for new species as the descendants of surviving organisms colonised the ecosystem gaps once oxygen returned.

Although it is generally agreed that Wales was the southern limit of glaciers during the last ice age, the BRITICE project found that Dartmoor did hold some small, thin ice caps. In our area the run-off water from melting glaciers around 12,000 years ago carved out deep valleys, or rias, much larger than the rivers that now run in them. The sea level rose by around 150 metres to bring what we today call Plymouth to the edge of the sea. Knowledge of agriculture arrived from across the Channel around 4500 to 3500 BC when Bronze Age people divided up plots of land on Dartmoor for grazing cattle and growing crops. These people also brought mining technology for digging out and smelting tin and

copper to make robust bronze weapons, tools, containers and ornaments. These were traded across the Channel as well as used at home.

Following the Norman Conquest the Domesday Book of 1086 lists just four estates here, all of them small and with mixed farming. This pattern of a landscape divided among farms (some with big houses like Budshead Manor and Whitleigh Manor) plus small-scale mining, mills on the streams and estuary, import and export via water and early rail (both before steam and after), with some employment coming from the docks and the naval base, continued pretty much until the Second World War. People lived close to the land, working with the resources it had to offer with ingenuity and skill.

Pirates, Celtic saints and sailors, immigrants from over the sea, merchants and slave-traders came and went through Plymouth from prehistory onwards. A few stayed such as St Budoc from Brittany who arrived in AD 480 and put down roots at Budshead. Others like the Pilgrim Fathers passed through: The Mayflower set off from Plymouth in 1620 for America and may have carried barrels of drinking water filled from the new Plymouth Leat (in operation from 1591) that runs down the east side of Southway and Whitleigh. Shortly after that Sir Ferdinando Gorges, who lived in Budshead Manor and was governor of Plymouth, left to found the settlement of New Plymouth in New England in 1628 and became the first Governor of Maine in 1635.

The Plymouth area was no stranger to conflict, frequently being the first defence against sea raids from the West. The Royal Naval base and dockyard was founded in Devonport in 1691 as the most westerly and southerly concentration of military might in the British Isles. During the Spanish Armada of 1588 (spearheading an invasion to overthrow Elizabeth I) the British fleet, commanded by Sir Francis Drake, routed the Spanish off Eddystone Rocks. But this level of aggression was nothing compared to the destruction unleashed by German bombers on the naval base, royal dockyard and port, the city of Plymouth and its citizens in March and April 1941.

During the war the farms of NW Plymouth, up to the edge of Dartmoor, gave shelter to Plymouthians escaping the night bombing raids, and supplied meat, milk and vegetables into the city. After the war, as part of the rapid and comprehensive re-build of the city, many of those farms were purchased by the City Council and became housing and industrial estates. Families that lost their homes in the Blitz were offered new, modern houses around greens in what was then still a rural area. People came from all over England to be part of the new communities. ‘Jobs for life’ in newly-built factories were with pioneering firms like Bush TV and Radio. Jobs were also on offer in the dockyard or with Babcock Marine engineering down in Devonport.

Over the last fifty years the advance of the global economy with cheap manufacturing abroad, long supply lines and rapid innovation has changed the local economic landscape. While some of the pioneering factories have closed, many smaller enterprises have moved in, colonising the vacant spaces much as happened beneath the waves millions of years ago. Much of the agricultural land has now been built on, but the streams and their valleys remain untouched. They carry much of the history of the place and the eels and fish in them are the descendants of the Age of Fishes.

Section 2

CORE PATTERNS AND PROCESSES

How does this place work?

Pattern One:

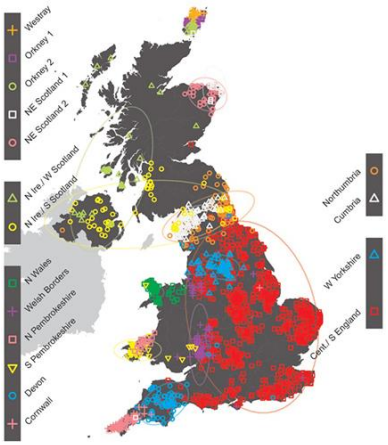
Core process: Edge and Exchange

Edge places learn to live within the limits of their natural boundaries. While exchange and flow across edges is vital to keep things alive

This extreme SW corner of Devon has been an edge place since the retreat of the last ice age brought Plymouth to the shore of the English Channel. The meltwater carved out the great valley and estuary of the Tamar. This river was established as the western boundary with Cornwall by King Æthelstan, the first King of England, in 936. More recently the Tamerton Stream has defined part of the western boundary between the City of Plymouth and the County of Devon.

In 2015 a Joint UCL and Wellcome Trust survey of the DNA of the UK was published in Nature with an accompanying map. The patterns, the result of 1000s of years of history, showed a startling division along the Tamar. The individuals chosen to take part in the survey were of European ancestry, lived in rural areas and knew that their four grandparents were all born within 80 kilometres of each other. The fact that there are separate genetic groups in Cornwall and Devon, with a division almost exactly along the modern county boundary, reinforces this edge pattern in a land of that shelters indigeneity.[1]

Water is also a form of energy exchange. The Budshead Mill that closed in 1924 was built on the edge of the Tamerton Lake, within the Tamar Esturary and was a tidal mill. It ground grain transported from Plymouth docks in barges. George Ide, who worked there, said: 'Large doors were fitted in concrete in the river bank. These were opened automatically when the tide came in and closed when the tide receded, thus enclosing a large volume of water to run the mill. At spring tides the full mill pond worked the undershot wheels for about four hours during the day and four hours at night, but at neap tides the mill worked for shorter periods'. Today, food is supplied by around 12 big food stores for the roughly 52,000 people in N.W. Plymouth.



[1] Joint UCL and Wellcome Trust survey of the DNA of the UK https://www.nature.com/news/british-isles-mapped-out-by-genetic-ancestry-1.17136

Also in the here and now, Ernesettle Community Solar—a big solar array on infertile land by the Tamar—is exchanging sunlight for electricity. Owned by Plymouth Energy Community, it is generating rental income for the land owners, the Four Greens Community Trust. With that revenue, Four Greens have created allotments in Ernesettle and built a community wellbeing centre to tackle issues such as diabetes and loneliness. Recovering 'edge' land back to health boosts community wellbeing when done as a win-win exchange.

Teams of people working in regenerative development and design are coming to see that it is in-between places, that sit between urban and rural and where large numbers of people live close to nature, from which a new understanding of how to live within natural limits is arising. In that way edge places are becoming a new kind of frontier, a new definition of pioneering, that helps us return to the living landscape and the fabric of the natural world. During the lockdown periods in the Covid 19 pandemic many more people have been driving in from the surrounding area to visit the woods and streams of NW Plymouth.

Pattern 2:

Core purpose: Welcoming Home

Defining what it means to belong: a place of slowing down and sinking in

Since the last ice age the lowlands of NW Plymouth have played the role of a buffer zone between the exposed high moor and the coast. Historically, as water flowed off the high ground in streams or leats and slowed through the lowlands to water cattle, people and crops it was not stopping but passing through. Without that drinking water the people of Plymouth and Devonport would not have been able to remain on the coast. Without the streams, the salmon and other fish would not have had spawning grounds. On the nearby mudflats and marshes of the Tamar Estuary and River Tavy, rich in nutrients for birds, native British breeding birds like avocets, black-tailed godwits, whimbrels and greenshanks have been over-wintering here for millennia.

NW Plymouth has hosted ever-evolving living communities for millennia. Given the evidence from Kent's Cavern, around 30 miles up the coast to the east as the crow flies, homo sapiens was present in this part of Devon at least 44,000 years ago and lived as hunter-gatherers. At the end of the last ice age, as the climate warmed, new species of birds, trees, flowers, animals, reptiles and insects arrived over the land bridge from Europe and then became trapped by rising waters. Here they became established as natives before migrating further north. With climate change once again present in our lives, local species of flora and fauna are pushed higher up and further north to find the temperatures they are used to. The gaps that are left in our eco-systems are likely once again to find occupants from across the Channel.

The Domesday book of 1086 is a record of land-division following the Norman conquest. Budshead, Tamerton and Blaxton Manors were owned by Alfred the Breton, while Whitleigh was divided between Lord Robert of Aumale and Iudhael of Totnes. This pattern of a landscape divided among farms (some with big houses like Budshead Manor and Whitleigh Manor) lasted for nine centuries until compulsory purchase by Plymouth City Council from 1944.

The pattern of the 11th-century estates endured in the planning of modern estates for houses and industry, offering new homes here after the dislocation of the Second World War. Most were permanent Council homes but some estates were built by the Admiralty for naval employees (Widewell for example). Schools, shops, health centres, community centres, churches, libraries, bus routes took a while to arrive but were part of the vision. NW Plymouth led the way on post-war reconstruction, prototyping the garden cities that would soon be built around London.

Pattern 3:

Core value: Resourcefulness and Resourcing

Finding quick and clever ways to overcome difficulties while making space for and embracing the new

When we look for this pattern we find technology as an enabler of resource production and value creation. A more straightforward way of saying this is that technology enables life. Back in the Age of Fishes, the evolution of motor skills in the form of legs took life from sea onto the land. In human history technology is found in ploughs for tilling the land drawn by oxen, horses and then tractors; mining and smelting technology that goes back to the Bronze Age 4000 years ago; small railways with horse-pulled trucks to take silver, lead and copper ore from local mines to the coast; leats to transport water from Dartmoor to drinking troughs, homes, mines and mills. None of this local technology was sophisticated, most of it was make-shift, its role was to keep people alive and thriving.

Without water there is no life and water has always been a resource here in the shape of springs, streams, leats, rivers and the tidal estuary. Water was used for drinking, crops and farm animals. Water was energy for mining, transport and milling. In the rainy climate of Devon, green lanes were often too muddy in the winter to be passable so transport was mainly by sea and river with Tamar river barges carrying supplies in and out. River access was vital for travel in early times. An 1842 map of the area shows three limekilns on the shoreline with quays nearby to receive the heavy limestone brought in by boats. They were burning lime to spread on the acidic soil of the fields and make it possible to grow crops on this land.

A few miles south, Plymouth Docks was a major import-export centre for England, resourcing the nation. In 1878 (as part of a long list of imports), 4,350 head of oxen arrived from Spain; 16,000 tons of guano from Peru; and 10,870 barrels of petroleum from New York. NW Plymouth supplied human labour for the Plymouth docks, oak and hornbeam for shipbuilding, food and water for sea voyages and for Plymouth residents.

Cutting-edge technology arrived at Ernesettle post war in the shape of the Bush Radio and TV factory. It is no longer in existence but in 1978, when it had become Rank Toshiba, it was employing 2000 workers on a shift system. Browne and Sharp engineers also took up residence as part of the post-war development, now Kawasaki Precision Machinery. Vi-Spring, the leading bed and mattress manufacturers formerly named Clatworthys and then Slumberland, now exports all over the world. At Whitleigh, Clark's Shoe Factory pioneered a new technique for softening leather and employed many residents 'for life' but as the economic climate landscape became more global it was forced to close in 1996. The estate where the Clark's factories were located is now the Christian Mill business park.

Pattern 4:

Place Vocation: Remembering we are part of the Whole

We started this work with the question 'How could the blue-green infrastructure interventions of the Plymouth Riverkeeper project catalyse the urban streams becoming an active and alive part of the community?'. As the research and interviews for Story of Place progressed, and the three core patterns emerged, the potential of this place to have a greater ambition became clearer. It was as if, as we got to know NW Plymouth and its essence, we entered a process of recovery and remembering.

Walking along Tamerton Lake and the banks of the Tamar, and in Budshead, Whitleigh and Widewell valleys and woods we chatted with local people who know the place well. With them, we visited the neglected, hidden urban streams and springs (as well as the sewage pipes and storm drains). Sunk in deep and sometimes inaccessible valleys, crossed by lost country lanes and tracks, the streams are part of an ancient communications and transport network. Not just for humans, but for wildlife and water life.

We came to see that suburban places, with dense populations living closer to nature than in inner cities, can help people remember we are still on the living earth and that the living earth supports our lives. The long-term direction of Story of Place work is health, in the way that a salmon-spawning stream that is brought back to life brings health and wellbeing to people and nature. If Plymouth River Keepers can be the catalyst for that, we thought, then could it work with the core patterns to kick-start a national movement of River Keepers? A flowing together of many similar initiatives all around the UK?

Remembering we are Part of the Whole emerged as the Place Vocation: the potential we were hoping to release. Welcoming Home (core purpose) suggested the possibility of grounding the project here first with local people as active participants. Edge and Exchange (core process) showed the possibility of this edge place evolving River Keepers and then sharing it elsewhere. While Resourcing and Resourcefulness (core value) suggested quick and clever technology could be developed to join up NW Plymouth and its River Keeper with many other keepers of rivers and streams around the country.