

Report

Improving Accessibility and Visitor experience at Golitha Falls

Prepared by the Sensory Trust for Natural England

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Introduction

Golitha Falls is a beautiful wooded river valley on the edge of Bodmin Moor. It is a SSSI site due to the presence of rare species of bryophytes. The site covers 18 hectares although the vast majority of visitors congregate around the river. The site receives between 70,000 and 80,000 visitors a year.

This work was commissioned because of the aspiration of Martin Davey, on behalf of Natural England, to improve the accessibility of the Golitha Falls site so that all visitors can use and enjoy this special place.

The work involved site reviews to identify existing barriers to access at Golitha Falls and local consultation to gain a better understanding of how people want to use and enjoy the site. The findings build on valuable work previously undertaken by Martin in liaison with a range of local organisations and groups including Panic and Vitalise.

Enriching the visitor experience, and ensuring good access to the range of experiences on offer, requires an understanding of the qualities that a site offers and the different ways in which people want to use it. This is particularly valuable for people who rely on particular senses to navigate and experience the place, for example those with sensory impairments. It also enhances the experience for all visitors. The overall aim of this report is to establish the highlights of the site and suggest ways to improve access to them.

The project involved consultation with the local community, disability groups and other potential site users to help assess the sensory qualities and attractions of the Golitha Falls site. The ultimate aim of the assessment process was to confirm the location of sensory highlights and to identify ways to overcome the barriers preventing access to them.

We worked with representative community groups at the site and, using mapping techniques, developed a picture of the locations of visitors' highlights. Groups included older and disabled people, young people and people with learning disabilities. Mapping was undertaken over a period of several days with different groups.

The results of the mapping exercises have been collated and form a large part of this report. The report identifies actions and priorities to improve the visitor experience at Golitha Falls and includes a prioritised list of access and experience improvements.

It is understood that the car park is owned and managed by Caradon Borough Council, however a key recommendation for this report concerns the provision of accessible toilets in the car park because of the significance of such facilities to many disabled people.

About the Process

The report has been created from the results of user and non-user consultation, and site assessments by the Sensory Trust. It also builds on work already undertaken by Martin Davey and groups such as PANIC and Vitalise

The consultations, questionnaires and site inspections took place between February and June 2008. The activities that form the basis of this report were:

- 5 consultation days with practitioners, disabled people and representatives of disability organisations
- 2 Site assessments by Sensory Trust staff
- Non-user questionnaire survey

Techniques included sensory mapping, where groups would move through the site and identify points of sensory interest – the sound of the river, a mossy bank and so on. The results were aggregated to identify areas of sensory richness. These areas should be the focus of access work, in particular seating and shelter.

Groups included in the sensory mapping exercises included people with learning disabilities, wheelchair users, older people with mobility difficulties, people with dementia and people with visual and hearing impairments. The groups also included carers and companions who were also asked to participate and to share their views.

Alongside the sensory mapping we also ran less formal “walk and talk” sessions in parallel and at other times when the weather was too inclement. By allowing visitors to experience the site and describe how they experience it we were able to form clear impressions of many access issues, notably wayfinding at different points. We were also able to observe the relative distances many less mobile visitors would travel into the site.

Further to that we surveyed a number of older and disabled people who did not use the site to find out their reasons for not doing so.

The results from the consultation are reviewed under the following two sections. ‘Barriers to access’ identifies issues relating to the challenges people found in getting to and around the site, and ‘sensory highlights’ outlines aspects that relate to quality of experience. In combination, these form the basis of the recommendations outlined in the final section of the report.

Barriers to Access

Many of the access issues at the Golitha Falls site are unique. The prime area - that of the falls themselves - is situated at the furthest distance from the car park and is consequently difficult to access for many people with limited stamina. In many sites that offer a richness of experience across the whole site, this would be acceptable, and it would be deemed too expensive and intrusive to contemplate building some form of access trail to the falls. The unique element of the Golitha Falls site is the old copper mining leat, which *could* provide an ideal access to the falls with minimal impact on the landscape and without detracting from the experience of the rest of the site. For this reason, improvements to the leat are included as a priority recommendation.

The lack of provision of an accessible toilet is another major barrier to access and enjoyment of the site. The existing toilets, in the car park owned and run by Caradon District Council, fail to provide an equal level of service to people with disabilities. An accessible toilet is a fundamental requirement for many disabled people for any visit to the countryside and consequently the toilets at Golitha are a high priority for improvement.

Another significant barrier to access is the difficulty many people have in finding the site. During the consultation sessions several people became lost on their way to the site. Improved road signage and the provision of pre-visit information that is up to date and details access conditions is therefore a high priority.

The final major barrier to many people's enjoyment of the site is the lack of seating or perching opportunities. This is one of the easiest aspects to improve. As detailed in the recommendations below, there should be an increased provision at frequent places along the route to assist people with limited stamina and mobility and encourage them to go further into the site.

The difficulty of following a route within the site was highlighted as a problem by many people. The initial stretch of hard-surfaced path provides an intuitive route into the site but after it finishes it is unclear which route people should follow, particularly as a variety of informal 'paths' have been created by visitors taking different routes around the site. This is especially significant for visitors with limited mobility and stamina.

There are a number of other access issues which we have prioritised as medium or low. These are detailed in the recommendations below.

Sensory Highlights

Why visitors visit

There were different reasons why visitors chose to visit the Golitha Falls site. For many locals it was simply a place to walk, particularly if they had dogs to exercise. For other groups there were sociable reasons such as family picnics, while the Vitalise Group from Churchtown (an outdoor adventure group of disabled young people) use the site for various outdoor activities that require a natural, attractive and dramatic environment.

The river

Despite the presence of the falls (and the name of the site itself) the river is the main draw for the many of the visitors to the Golitha Falls site. Its presence is heard and seen throughout the majority of the site. For able-bodied people, there is access to the river along its whole length. For people with reduced mobility or for wheelchair users, access is more limited and is only realistically achieved in the first section of the path before it turns up to the leat.

“We wound our way right along the river enjoying the way it changed from fast flowing to slower and then picking up speed again”

The falls

The falls are the most dramatic area of the site. The sound of the water is much louder here and the valley sides become steeper. Also at this point is the ruins of a mill house, which adds heritage value to the place. Due to the more rugged terrain at this point, access to the edge of the river and the falls is limited to the very mobile. However, many of our volunteers who were able to reach the falls were disappointed, as they expected a high waterfall.

“Is that it?”

The woods

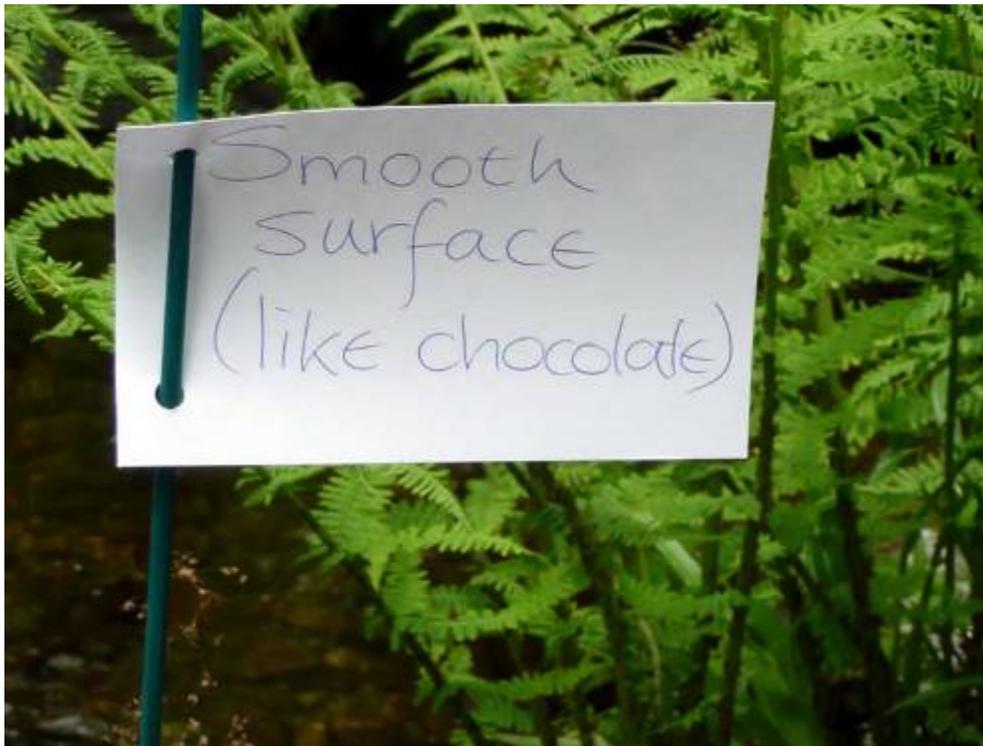
The woods that cover the whole site provide a pleasant environment to walk or picnic in. The woods closest to the car park are more open than those further into the site and are substantial enough to provide an immersive experience for those who can only venture a few yards into the site.

“Golitha has a relaxing / ethereal feeling to it, which is an area that is often over looked.”

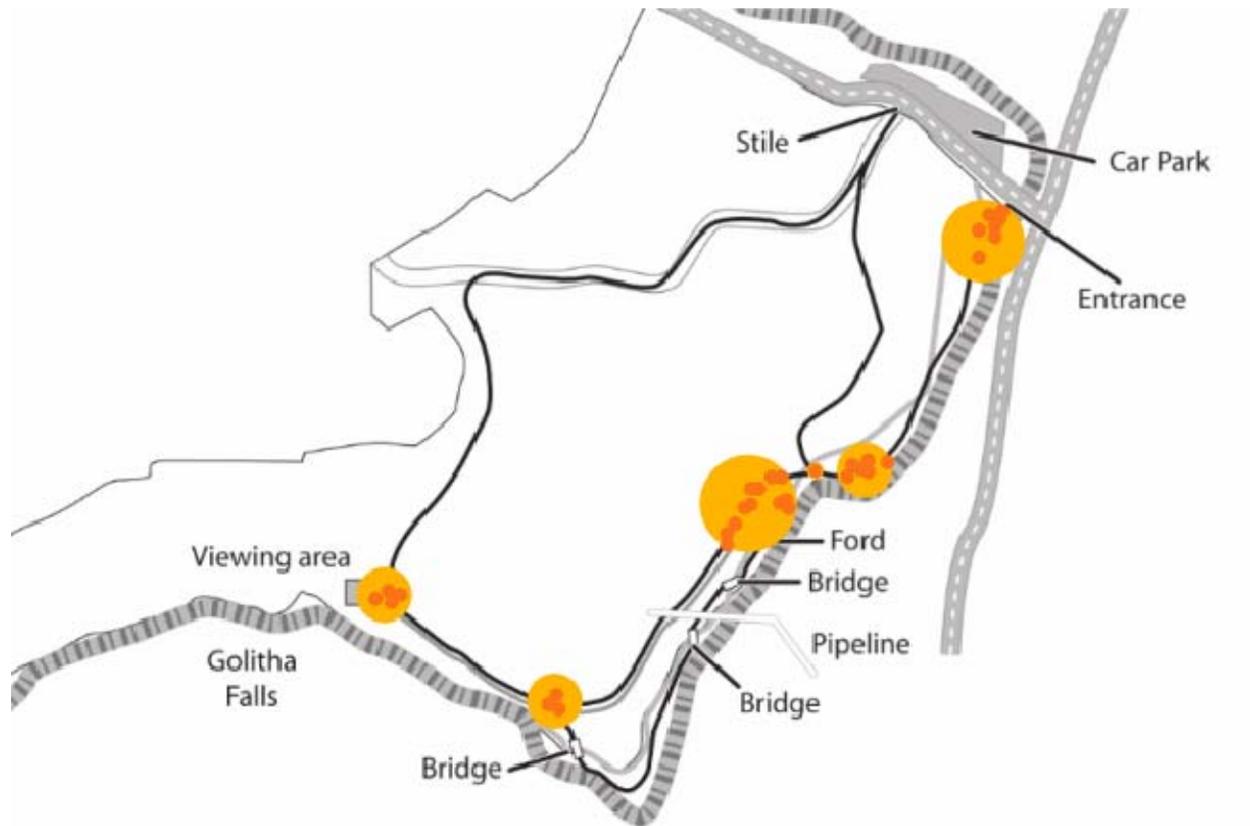
The leat

The leat provides a unique experience for many people. The high banks and narrow width of the leat mean that moss, ferns and other plants, tree roots and rocks are within easy reach and can be touched and smelled by people as they pass along. The leat offers a ready-made and naturalised “raised bed” for

wheelchair users and others who have difficulty bending down to experience low-growing plants and other objects on the ground.



Sensory Highlights Map



The areas of greatest concentration of sensory experience are represented on the map above. Experiences such as dappled light through trees or smell of leaves are not recorded here as they occur throughout the site. Hence some areas of the site appear bare on this map, although they still provide sensory experience.

Clearly the leat and the riverside are major draws. For many people, especially those with limited mobility, wheelchair users and those with a sensory impairment, the leat offers access to a rich range of sensory experiences.

The other major concentration is at the entrance. This is usual, as most sensory experiences are registered for the first time here. The sensory experiences we have recorded on the map are ones unique to this area of the site. It is positive to see such a concentration here as it means that people with limited mobility will have access to a rich collection of experiences without having to reach the more distant parts of the site. The addition of seating in this area is therefore identified as high priority.

The viewing area, the junction at a break in the leat, and the landing are also sensory hotspots. Fewer of our volunteers were able to experience the viewing area because of access difficulties and it is likely that the numbers of hits at this spot may be higher if more people could access it.



Recommendations

High Priority

1. Accessible toilet

Currently there is no accessible toilet provision for the Golitha Falls site. An accessible toilet is the number one recommendation for this site. Many of the visitors during our consultation commented on this absence. Due to the site's location, remote from pub, cafe or any other facility that might otherwise serve, the lack of an accessible toilet is a significant barrier to many people who would otherwise visit.

Recommendation: Create accessible toilet facilities as part of the existing toilet facilities in the car park.

We are aware that the car park is outside the remit of Natural England but we have included the recommendation as it has such significance for improving access. We hope there is scope to liaise with the local authority responsible for the car park provision.

In the interim, it would be helpful to provide information (on the website and on site) identifying where the nearest accessible toilets are located.

Cost: high

2. Provide pre-visit access information

Currently no access information exists for the Golitha Falls site. Access information, covering likely conditions and lengths of routes, accessibility of toilets and other facilities is a vital step in broadening the range of visitors to the site.

Recommendation: Create a document that can be distributed via the web and print that contains accurate and up-to-date access information. Proactively distribute this information to likely user groups such as care homes, special schools and day centres in the area, through your web site and through tourist offices.

Cost: low

3. Increase seating opportunities

Older visitors with reduced mobility and stamina expressed doubts that they could reach the landing (and return to the car park). More seating would provide resting places, and would make people with less stamina more confident that they can go further into the site if they can see a place to rest ahead.

Recommendation: Seating opportunities, both formal with a range of heights and armrests, and informal such as logs and rocks, would provide resting points along the route. This is most appropriate on the early stages of the route (and within sight of the car park) as this is where most people with

limited stamina will spend time, and is appropriate on all routes across the site. Provide at least three more opportunities to rest between the entrance and the landing.

Cost: medium

4. Make the leat passable and useable as a trail

The leat can provide a level access route deep into the site. Even for those with limited stamina who may not manage the whole route, the rock walls, tree routes, moss and plants that are brought into touching and smelling range by the walls of the leat provide an attractive and valuable experience for many visitors, especially those with visual impairment, wheelchair users and children. The cost of this work is high, but it should be set against the fact that the leat is both a route to the falls and an experience in itself.

Currently the leat is waterlogged in many places and made impassable for many people by fallen rocks and trees.

Recommendation: The leat should be cleared to provide a route wide enough and firm enough for people with wheelchairs and others with mobility impairments to be able to use it. Further ground investigation is required to establish the best option for creating a more accessible route – whether to create a perched ‘board walk’ or a ground-level drained surface.

Cost: high

5. Finding the site

Several of our testing groups had difficulty finding the site by car. The maze of lanes leading from the A38 can make finding the site difficult even for previous visitors.

Recommendation: consider improving the signage to the site (in liaison with Highways).

Cost: medium

Recommendation: provide map and directions via the web site, and make sure this is accessible.

Cost: low

“There is something magical about this place; there’s something atmospheric. I would come again providing I could find it again!”

6. Wayfinding

The most popular area of the site is criss-crossed by a network of paths that wind and cross the river and neighbouring stream. Navigation over the main part of the site is straightforward as the river is always to one side, and all paths lead to the falls and back again. Distances can be a problem for those that do not know the site and dog walkers and other regulars report often being asked how far the falls were. However, the site does not require much in the way of navigational signage and the natural qualities of the site would be compromised by unnecessary signage.

Some confusion was experienced by some of our volunteers at the area at the beginning of the leat. They were unsure if the leat was a route, and many doubled back towards the car park. If the leat is cleared and levelled it is unlikely that there will continue to be confusion about the route.

Recommendation: An improved map at the entrance that clearly identifies distances and path conditions would enable those with less mobility to make some choices about how much of the site they can visit.

Cost: low

Recommendation: Some form of sign indicating the direction and distance to the falls should be considered. It would be appropriate to consider the least intrusive type of hardware for this site – for example, indicating routes by simple directional indicators painted on rocks. A sign indicating the direction of the falls from the car park (see below) will help many visitors. However, a sign at this junction point will benefit people with learning disabilities who may have trouble understanding or remembering a map provided at the entrance.

Cost: low

Recommendation: A sign that identifies the main entrance more clearly and is visible from the car park would help visitors navigate. A significant number of our consultation group did not see the main (and accessible) entrance and believed that the entrance was through the stile opposite the car park, and consequently the entire site was inaccessible.

Cost: low

Medium Priority

7. Access to the river

The leat offers occasional opportunities for more active people to descend to the river. These routes are currently ad hoc and potentially hazardous, with risks of tripping over roots, slipping on mud and falling into the river or more likely the adjacent stream. This is particularly an issue for visually impaired people who may mistake gaps in the leat wall as intentional routes to the river.

Recommendation: create a safe route to the river from one of the gaps in the leat wall. For visitors with limited mobility, and who will be unable to venture far into the site, create an opportunity to access the river within reasonable distance from the car park.

Cost: medium

8. Develop a viewing platform overlooking the falls

The leat ends near the head of the falls. A viewing area here, with seating, tables and room enough to allow people to linger without feeling uncomfortable, would be an ideal destination point at the end of the leat.

Recommendation: develop a level area to act as a viewing spot for people who are unable to go further. The area should include seating and perching opportunities and possibly a table with room for wheelchair users. Note that some seating should be of sufficient height and with armrest to allow older users to sit and stand comfortably. Other seating and perching (resting) options can be provided informally through the placing of boulders and tree trunks.

Cost: high

Recommendation: Consider a shelter structure that enhances the experience of the falls from a distance. An example of this is the circular chamber overlooking the falls at the Hermitage site near Dunkeld (see Appendix 2 for photographs)

Cost: high

9. Develop a circular walk

The layout of the site would lend itself to the creation of a short circular walk from the entrance to the head of the leat and back out beside the stile. A circular walk offers people with limited stamina or mobility a fuller experience than a walk which retraces the same path, and the same experiences.

Recommendation: Consider making the entrance near the stile accessible and improve the surface on the path from the leat to the stile to create a fully accessible circular walk.

Cost: medium - high

10. Develop a picnic and seating area beside the bridge

Many of the older people who visited the site with us were reluctant to move very far into the site. A few were happy to linger near the bridge just inside the site, as it is within sight of the car park and toilet. There is an area beside the bridge between the path and the river that could benefit from some seating to allow older people with limited mobility to enjoy what is still an immersive experience. This area has a rich variety of experiences to offer, close to the river, the old bridge and the path.

The idea of a picnic area was unpopular with local dog walkers and it may be that simple seating would meet with less resistance, and that the picnic area could be created in the car park. [see 12].

Recommendation: Provide an access ramp to the lower area beside the bridge. Provide seating and perching opportunities to invite people to linger.

Cost: medium - high

“A visit to Golitha is usually part of a larger visit to Bodmin Moor and is often our stop for lunch. What a dining room it is!”

11. Transport links

Currently no public transport serves the site.

Recommendation: explore with Western Greyhound the possibility of including the site on the route of the 574 Callington to Liskeard.

Cost: low

Lower priority

12. Create a picnic area, cafe or refreshment stand in the car park

There are currently no refreshment facilities at the site. Unlike the absence of an accessible toilet, the lack of refreshment facilities is not a significant barrier to visiting the site. However, the provision of refreshments will make the visit more comfortable for many people who may not venture further than the first few yards of path, or indeed the car park itself. The car park also suffers from a high degree of car crime and a facility that encourages people to linger within site of the cars will dramatically cut this.

Recommendation: Create a grassed, level picnic area with tables that allow use by wheelchair users.

Cost: high

Recommendation: Consider finding out if the mobile catering van that currently services the site in the summer could assess the likely success of a permanent venture.

Cost: low

13. Interpretation

Visitors’ reactions to the existing interpretation were lukewarm. The tactile posts were seen as “okay”, but merely acted as a distraction from the natural environment. Visually impaired users found the tactile interpretation “interesting”, but inaccessible as the images are not designed with visually impaired people in mind. The interpretation panel at the entrance was confusing to some and some felt it to be “out of place”, “expensive”, “unwanted” and “unhelpful”.

Recommendation: reserve interpretation for the entrance board.

Cost: low

Recommendation: some visitors reported that the actual falls were disappointing after the effort of getting there. The addition of a photograph of the falls to the main sign board may make expectations more realistic!

Cost: low

“We would welcome interpretation boards but we prefer opportunities to interact with this unique environment – often the simpler the better.”

“It’s difficult to interpret what the artist is trying to say [on the carved bench]. You can see the lighthouse and the salmon but it would take you a month of Sundays to work it out.”



Appendix 1 - example non-user questionnaire



Golitha Falls

Questions if you have never visited

About You

Male Female

What is your age group?

- 15 and under 16 - 25 26 - 35 36 - 45
 46 - 55 56 - 65 65+

Where do you live?

About Golitha Falls

Would you know how to find Golitha Falls or where to go for information on how to find it? Yes No

Other comments:

What has stopped you from visiting Golitha Falls?

What would help you to visit Golitha Falls?

Do you look for information before you visit a place? Yes

No

Where do you look for this information?

What sort of information do you look for before choosing a place to visit?

Appendix 2 – examples of sensory shelter structures

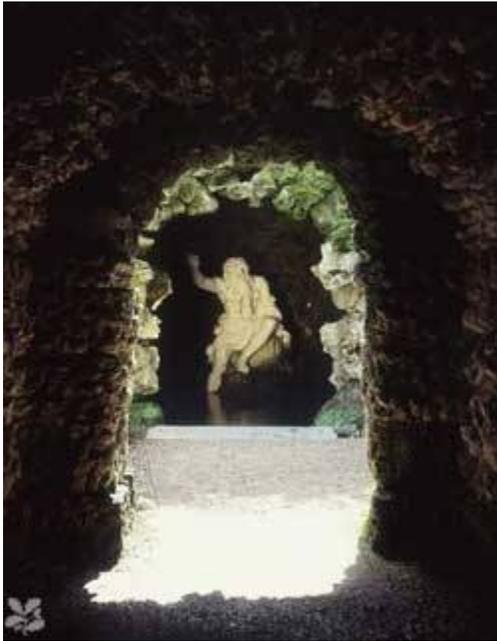


The interior of the shelter at the Hermitage.

Structures that shelter visitors and also add to the sensory experience have precedents that stretch far back in the history of outdoor design and are common in outdoor sites. This example from the Hermitage site near Dunkeld in Scotland provides shelter, enables excellent views, and the circular viewing area echoes wonderfully with the roar of the falls below. The effect is similar to that of the echoing sea when entering the rotunda at Tate St. Ives.



The Hermitage



The River God's cave seen from The Grotto at Stourhead Gardens. The interior is cool and damp, providing a strong sensory contrast to the heat of the sun outside. An 18th Century example of shelter and sensory experience rolled into one. (Photo courtesy of the National Trust)



Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate in Chicago. The sculpture is forged of polished stainless steel plates, which reflect the city's famous skyline and the clouds above. A 12-foot-high arch provides a "gate" to the concave chamber beneath the sculpture, inviting visitors to touch its mirror-like surface and see their image reflected back from a variety of perspectives. A contemporary example of sensory experience and shelter combined.