

## **Who remembers the 'Laverstock Panda', carved into the chalk on Cockey Down almost 50 years ago?**

Below is the start of the story of how it came about, as retold by David McCreadie (one of the creators), to Ian McLennan for the Parish Newsletter.

### **Pandemonium!**

The 1969 Rag Week of University College North Wales left an imprint on Cockey Down, which hit the national newspapers. Early Sunday morning 26th January 1969, Laverstock woke up to a new friend on the side of its downs – a giant panda had mysteriously appeared. The only clue was the letters UCNW carved out by the side of Wiltshire's newest, 55 x 40 foot, chalk figure, which became known as Laverstock Panda. The story of our panda, the characters that produced it and the connection to a world historical event, which led police detectives to Bangor, will continue in future issues.

It was late 1968 and the Rag Committee were in the student bar, brainstorming ideas to make their impact on the world. Their slogan 'Pandemonium' was derived from London Zoo's new celebrity incumbents, Giant Panda's Chi Chi and An An, who were watched by the world to see if they would mate (they didn't).

Good things had already been planned and were accomplished – a road race from Rhyl to Bangor, with female students on brass bedsteads and a race from the top of the student union building in Bangor to the top of the Marquis of Anglesey Column, across the Menai Bridge.

However, this was 1968 – the year of student protests across the globe. As the beer flowed, so the extreme ideas burst forth, for 'the big stunt'. "Let's paint the early warning balls at Fylingdales, North Yorkshire". Countered by – "How could we get up them?" "How could we afford the paint?" "...and they would probably shoot us!" Another brainwave – "Let's go to Fastlane and paint RAG on a nuclear submarine!" Again, easily countered. "How would we get in?" "...and they would probably shoot us!"

Eventually, John Coppock, studying Marine Zoology and formerly at Bishop Wordsworth school, Salisbury, came up with the chalk Panda idea and knew just the place for it!

John's core team comprised David McCreadie, who has supplied the detail for the story, Chris Campbell and his girlfriend Gill Gold, the lone female and Bob Lord, an electronics student, who said he could use the university computer and write a Fortran program which could show various slope and viewing positions! The rest of the 'operation squad' were mostly, press ganged, beefy rugby players – a hard night's labour was envisaged. A coach was hired from Purple Motors of Bethesda, in the name of the 'Rural Action Group' (the police did not make the connection!) and set off for Salisbury to arrive in the evening.

However, this was a well planned and executed project and David McCreadie, who was also doing a Geology module, 'borrowed' an auger from Earth Sciences and together with John and Bob, set off in his old F reg (the first kind) Morris Traveller to do a recce. David was concerned about chalk depths! This turned out to be a wise move as you will see, as Panda becomes real.

## A new face on the Wiltshire Downs



The Times 27th Jan 1969

### Panda is Born

Earlier, we learned how the idea for the Laverstock Panda was conceived by the creative rag week committee of University College of North Wales, located in Bangor, with its local connection being former Bishop Wordsworth pupil John Coppock. David McCreddie, a key member of the plot, has described how Panda was created. However, first just a factual update on their Rag race, mentioned last time, from the **top** of the student union building in Bangor to the **top** of the Marquis of Anglesey Column, across the Menai Bridge. These were the rules and the winner's ingenuity. Contestants could not use the stairs or lifts in Student's Union, nor either of the bridges! David McCreddie's team won by abseiling down the Union building onto an 850 Norton motorbike down to the Strait under the Britannia Bridge. There they used an inflatable Zodiac boat to cross the straits. Finally, a scrambles motorbike, through the woods and then a race up the steps to the top of the column!

The prowess of our intrepid Panda people, shines once more, as Panda unfolds. David McCreddie was worried about how deep they would have to dig to get to the chalk. With his borrowed auger, the recce group tested their number one site – Cockey Down. The chalk was 4 foot six inches down! Oops! Off to Fovant Badges site - that that too was 4 foot six inches. Oh dear! However, they discovered depressions on top of the slope – that's where the chalk is mined! At that moment, Land Rovers and farmers with sickles appeared.... time to speed off in their Morris Minor! Pewsey was their third choice and at the site of the White Horse....4 foot six inches with the same, top of the slope, depressions!

Laverstock was back to number one. The coach and Morris Minor group met at the Pheasant in

Salisbury for one pint and a quick briefing, as it would be a long night. The coach was parked in Church Road and the occupants had been told to, 'Leave all means of identification in the coach and walk nonchalantly to the site with your shovels etc'. The leaders were already, by now, onsite. "It was like watching the seven dwarves approach!" said David McCreadie. David, John Coppock and Bob Lord, the mathematician, started to create a grid using a large ball of string... which kept rolling down the slope! David then organised the Rugby team strong men into two digging teams, on top of the down. In the meantime, grid completed, Bob instructed John and David in 'joining the dots'.

Once they were in place, the grid was removed and a team tasked to remove the sods – in complete darkness! "Not that bit, this bit!" It started to rain on this dark January night!

Back at the top and the diggers were considering mutiny – 4 foot six down is a lot of digging! Then, as David describes it, "One team struck flint with a pick. It was like finding snow in a coal mine". The chalk was dug and bagged and passed, by another team, down the slope to the creation team, who back filled the cut-out sections. Down in the village, the farmer's dog barked incessantly and people continued about their business. The group remained quiet.

Alongside Panda's ear, they carved UCNW, as their signature. David describes the site as a muddy field, when standing next to it. Just before dawn, they despatched the coach and teams back to Wales, whilst the Morris Minor organisers waited below, to get their first glimpse. A welcome milk float appeared and the group flagged down the driver and purchased milk to quench their thirst. The milkman drove off and very soon they heard smashing bottles, as he had driven off road and into a ditch. He was the first person to see Panda! The students looked back to the downs and there they saw – a smiling Panda!



Now it was light, they returned to scour the down and copse for any property left behind – beer and cider tins and a student's wallet, containing his union card and a love letter from his girlfriend! Something to pull his leg about back in Bangor! A final look from the road and a chance to take the very first pictures, with David McCreadie's new Practica camera – a Christmas present from his parents. The Laverstock Panda was born!

### **Publicity and Pandemonium!**

The last Parish newsletter described the creation of the Laverstock Panda, by a group of students from University College North Wales in Bangor. It was a RAG Week stunt and their theme for the year was Pandemonium. Our Panda was the culmination of meticulous planning. However, like all RAG stunts, a Panda without publicity is pointless.

David McCreadie, tells how he took those first black and white (how fitting) pictures of the smiling Panda, at dawn and then he, John Coppock (formerly of Bishop Wordsworth Grammar School) and Bob Lord, the mathematician who had plotted the Panda on the university computer, all jumped in David's old F Reg Morris Minor and headed for Fleet Street, to try and sell the pictures for the RAG fund.

The journey was eventful. Approaching the traffic lights at the Heathrow junction, the throttle was stuck open.... lights at red. Quick thinking – turn off the ignition. A bolt had sheared, so progress was made minus an air filter. The Daily Telegraph kindly developed the photographs, as the mud and chalk covered students stood waiting. “We just happened to be passing and saw this Panda”!

Unfortunately, a Czech student had grabbed all the headlines by setting fire to himself, in Prague. “Enough student stories”, all the newspapers said. Back to Bangor without success.

However, a half page photo and story appeared in the Times and several other newspapers. They all concluded that UCNW was something to do with the Russians! NOYA CCP.

Then suddenly, the Student’s Union was filled with police – they had found a wallet on Cockey Down! Gill Gold said her father would kill her if she got expelled. The rest of the group pleaded with her to keep quiet...or they would have to kill her!

The situation deteriorated and the University solicitor got involved. He told them that the field and down belonged to Sir Richard Hunt...and it would be on the ITN 6 o’clock news!

Sir Richard had climbed Everest with Sir Edmund Hillary, Sherpa Tensing and Sir Charles Evans...who just happened to be the UCNW Chancellor!

David McCreadie’s comment: “Of all the fields, in all the lands, we picked the one owned by the Chancellor’s mate!”

A packed refectory heard newscaster Reginald Bosanquet say: “These terrible Welsh students - trespass with intent, removal of sod and a string of other offences – surely, Sir Richard, you will be prosecuting?”

"Certainly not--if only I could get my farm workers to work that hard at the end of January, overnight, I'd be an even richer man...I think it is superb !!!!!"

The Panda team members were now the heroes of the RAG and the newspapers were full of ‘Panda Mystery Solved’ articles.

The team returned one or two years later and re chalked Panda in the daylight - much harder than the first dig - as the sheep had walked all over it. They were told that the boy scouts were selling postcards of it for charity!

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