

Living With Trees – Case Study

The Cherry Wood Project near Bath – *in which a plantation wood is inhabited by a new generation of woodland workers...*

Tim has been carving out a home and livelihood in Cherry Wood for the last 8 years. He has forged a track across the steep slopes, built yurts to live in, constructed timber-framed workshops and set up a green woodwork school.

He and fellow craft workers teach a wide range of skills, such as making green furniture, turning bowls, pole latheing, bushcraft, leatherwork and elm bark weaving. Some run for a weekend, others for a week and many are booked out early. The wood is off-grid, so no power tools, only hand tools and hand working. As a result, his enterprise here is 89% carbon neutral. He obtained retrospective planning permission for living and working in his woods, attracting numerous letters of support.



Because of the steep slope, all the buildings are strung out along the contour track, winding round the spurs and coombes. Built with the aid of volunteers and using mostly timber from the wood itself, there is a glorious array of quirky buildings – a generous deck supports a cluster of interconnected yurts for living; Hobbit-like wooden chalets for woodwork students; a bizarre high-level toilet accessed by aerial walkway; a geodesic polytunnel and numerous other wooden structures lovingly fashioned out of wood. These buildings are partly the result of longer volunteer project weeks.

When Tim came to the woods, they were made up of planted larch and spruce with some beech and ash, an industrial crop destined for some distant sawmill, but Tim is changing all that. He is re-imagining the wood as a place to live and work, rather than just a stock of timber. So he is cashing in the mature larch and building his many structures from the timber, then replanting with hazel coppice. The area of new coppice is carefully calculated to support one coppice worker on a 7 or 8 year rotation. It will not generate the volume of timber of the larch, but it will be a crop well suited to the steep slopes and provide a livelihood for another worker. This is aiming for a craft culture based on manual labour and native species, rather than an industrial culture based on machinery and plantations of exotic tree species. Tim explains: “For me it’s really important that woodlands are not only

part of the community but that they produce a product, conservation and diversity are the by-product of production rather than the end in itself”.

Volunteers are a key component of Cherry Wood. There is a volunteer day every Thursday and the day I visited in November there were ten of us. We gathered under the awning by the outdoor range sipping tea before heading off into the woods. Two were former apprentices here and now use their skills to make a living from the woods: one is looking for hazel coppicing opportunities near Stroud and the other has set himself up making bushcraft tools. The other volunteers were mostly regulars – including a biomass boiler fitter, a Forest School teacher, an arboricultural climber and an engineering student, all taking time out to work in the woods.



Today's task is clearing a recently felled area where once there was larch. Most of the timber has gone, but a few logs and off-cuts are left strewn up the hillside. This acre will be replanted with hazel. The slopes are too steep for forestry machinery to gather the logs and in any case human labour is the ethic here. So we skid the logs down-slope with ropes and tongs, heaping them up for collection later. The larger logs are dragged with help from a portable power winch.

This method of working is clearly beneficial for everyone involved – Tim gets to live here and make a living; apprentices are trained to build a skilled workforce; volunteers get to spend time in the woods on meaningful projects; the green woodwork punters learn skills and something of the life of the wood; a conifer plantation is restored to native species; future craft workers have a dedicated resource.

Lunch time interrupts our work and we head back to camp. Today it is chunky lasagne, shared out in steaming spoonfuls, which we eat under the awning. I needn't have made those sandwiches..... The morning sweat and hot food slowly gives way to the November chill and we begin to get up, make tea and gather ourselves for the afternoon's task.



Now the fence lines are cleared, the coup is ready for the temporary fencing round the edge. We carry the 6' fence posts up around the perimeter and thunk in posts ready for the plastic mesh. Without this six-foot high fence, everything growing up in the felled area would be nibbled by deer and checked at knee height. We add a line of barbed wire at ground level to keep the diminutive muntjac deer from squeezing under the mesh. The fence will stay up for a few years till the hazel has grown a couple of meters tall, safely out of reach of the deer. Then it will be taken down and used again to protect the next felled area.

The days are short and the light is going, so although we have not quite completed the full perimeter, we pack up the tools and head back. It will be done next time and well before the hazel is planted in the new year. As we exchange goodbyes and thanks, there is a feeling of time well-spent out here, engaged in a physical task with good company.

As I walk back to the car, I reflect on how Tim, the apprentices and the volunteers are *inhabiting* this wood in a fundamental sense - living *and* working here. Gradually the wood is supporting a cluster of people and activities and a new community has emerged where there was none before, breeding a new woodland culture.

Acknowledgement:

Photos from Cherry Wood Project website

Websites

Cherrywood

<http://www.cherrywoodproject.co.uk/>

