



Tales of TWO WOODLANDS

Whether you manage five acres or 4,000 acres of woodland, balancing commercial and environmental concerns is crucial to a sustainable future, Siân Ellis discovers

WORDS: Siân Ellis

An estimated 14–15% (c. 30,000ha) of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is woodland, of which some 9,485ha are on Ancient Woodland Sites (AWS) – 6,192ha being Ancient & Semi-Natural Woodland (ASNW) and 3,292ha being Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS).

“Some estates actively manage their woodland but most woodland across the AONB is not actively managed. However, there is evidence of change,” says Mark Connelly, Land Management Officer for the Cotswolds Conservation Board. Ash dieback is prompting felling and



Parachute canopies at West Rugger's Green, used for woodland events

restocking programmes across many areas (see *Cotswold Life*, November 2019 issue) while increasing numbers of woodlands have also come into Countryside Stewardship schemes.

So what's it like to look after woodlands?

WEST RUGGER'S GREEN

Estelle and Antony St John-Smith bought a five-acre parcel of woodland at West Rugger's Green on the edge of Avening in March 2017. During WW2 the woodland had been clear felled to plant quick-growing larch to supply timber for the war effort, but it later became neglected; tightly packed trees were starving the forest floor of light, stifling under-storey growth and biodiversity.

“We wanted to regenerate it and bring it back to native woodland,” Estelle says. “It also has to pay for itself, so as well as restoring – it's designated as PAWS – we began Wild Woodland Celebrations, offering a venue for rustic wedding celebrations, naming ceremonies and eco-friendly children's parties. We want

to make wedding celebrations affordable, in a natural setting, and we've parachute canopies we can suspend around the glade, plus we work with Cotswold Tipis, who are down the road in Nailsworth, as well as eco-suppliers who do food.”

Estelle had previously worked on farms and in veterinary nursing, but she had no experience of forestry management and sought “all the advice I could get from the experts”. She obtained a thinning licence from the Forestry Commission, and a local forester surveyed her trees and helped her to create a Forestry Commission Management Plan. She has been on horse-logging, coppicing and hedge-laying courses with Cotswolds Rural Skills, and she plans to take a chainsaw course: “At the moment I am doing everything by hand, which is hard work!”

Ash affected by dieback is being removed and Estelle is replanting with species like hawthorn, with a view to possibly adding sweet chestnut coppice – “the timber has many uses.” She has acquired a cob, Wispa, to do horse-logging to keep activities low impact, and she has sold handcrafted woodland gifts, sycamore stakes for hedge-laying and larch for making climbing frames.

She recently bought a charcoal kiln using a Caring for the Cotswolds grant (from funds raised by tourism businesses for environmental and landscape projects www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk) in order to turn sycamore thinnings into charcoal to sell locally. The Cotswolds Conservation Board's Rural Skills & Grants Officer Ed Bonn “has been a star”, she says, not only advising on coppicing and charcoal making but also providing “emotional support and encouragement that has been invaluable.”

It has been a steep learning curve and the temporary interruption of the Wild



Habitat pile at West Rugger's Green

Woodland Celebrations visitor business by the coronavirus outbreak has been unwelcome. But Estelle remains busy and upbeat. “Already there is more light coming through onto the woodland floor and there’s always something new to see: wild garlic, bluebells, a buzzard’s nest, a woodpecker’s nest, owls. We are taking things slowly and carefully, so people can enjoy the woods without harming them. I am really excited to see what happens over the next couple of years.”

THE BATHURST ESTATE

The Bathurst Estate, owned by the Bathurst family since the 17th century, has woodlands on a somewhat larger scale, covering more than 4,000 acres with the core found in Hailey, Oakley and Overley woods: among the largest tracts of privately owned Ancient Woodlands (ASNW and AWS) in the UK.

Cirencester Park with its network of grassy rides, a Grade I Registered Park and Garden of international importance, has seen many changes; just this last February replanting of a section of the Broad Avenue, replacing aged and diseased horse chestnut trees with small-leaved lime trees, began.

More generally, following extensive felling of trees for timber during WW2, replanting of the woodlands – much of it broadleaf but also conifer and mixed – has made them a valuable commercial and recreational resource, as well as an important natural habitat. The woodlands are managed in accordance with UK Forestry Standard Guidelines



Handmade crafts at West Rugger’s Green



The Bathurst Estate with Cirencester beyond

and are Forestry Stewardship Council® certified.

“The main market for timber right now is firewood,” says Keith Mills, contract Forest Manager for the Estate for 21 years (with experience contract working on the Estate stretching back 40 years). “A lot of oak will go for furniture, and we sell larch for garden furniture and making boats.” The Estate recently benefited from a Cotswolds LEADER grant to help with buying equipment that has contributed to increased efficiency in firewood output.

Keith talks enthusiastically about the sustainable processes involved in looking after the woodlands: from thinning over a decades-long rotation to replanting as many trees as are taken each year.

“Pest and disease is the biggest challenge,” he says. Ash dieback, for example, has led to increased felling of ash to be used for firewood, while some goes to make hurleys (sticks for the Irish sport of hurling).

There’s lots of careful monitoring of flora and fauna in the woodlands, with help from groups like Butterfly Conservation. A wide range of creatures thrives there including rare and uncommon species like dormice (whose habitat benefits from regular coppicing activities) and the pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly. “They are quite a temperamental butterfly in terms of

lifestyle: they like to go from one clearing to another,” Keith says, explaining how they occupy transitional habitat following coppicing or clear felling. Volunteers recently planted some 1,700 dog-violets – the food plant of pearl-bordered fritillary larvae – along Overley Ride.

“We also have in excess of 500 veteran trees,” Keith continues. “Many mosses, lichens and invertebrates are particularly associated with them and we specifically select trees that we will allow to grow into veteran trees.”

Other notable trees include registered seed stands: two of beech and one of sycamore. “These are trees that we grow purely to produce seeds that are then sold. [To meet registration criteria] the trees have to be of a very strict form, which means they have to have good posture, minimal branching, good shape, be tall, without defects, and you have to grow them away from other trees that might cross-pollinate.

“Growing seed for collection is my main objective in British forestry,” Keith adds. “A lot of work is being done, especially in the light of climate change and thinking about the best trees to grow for the future.” ♦

Grateful thanks to Lord Bathurst for our behind-the-scenes insights into forestry work on the Estate.

FIND OUT MORE

The Bathurst Estate bathurstestate.co.uk/forestry

Wild Woodland Celebrations

wildwoodlandcelebrations.co.uk

Learn woodland crafts like coppicing or horse logging with Cotswolds Rural Skills (availability subject to any Covid-19 restrictions). See cotswoldsruralskills.org.uk



For further information on the Cotswolds AONB and the Cotswolds Conservation Board:

Cotswolds Conservation Board

The Old Prison, Fosse Way, Northleach, Gloucestershire, GL54 3JH. Tel: 01451 862000 www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk