

First steps

To care for a wood, indeed to enjoy it to the full, you need to get to know its ins and outs, literally as well as figuratively! Like a new house it's more than knowing the number of bedrooms or how modern the kitchen is: just as you would look into hidden corners, poke into places not usually probed and actually investigate what's behind the garden shed, it is good to take time to become familiar with your wood. Of course, it is possible to ask a forestry consultant to prepare a report, like a surveyor evaluating a house, and the Forestry Commission may grant aid this and their professional descriptions and judgements are particularly valuable for matters of commerce, law or safety, but that's not quite what I mean. It is hugely rewarding to gather firsthand knowledge about your new wood: here we look at the basics. Even so, however long you own it you will always be finding new things.

Getting there

By getting there I don't mean are you making progress(!), but the business of getting to and from your wood. One of the essentials before purchase I hope you checked are your rights of access from a public highway – and we will come back to that, but as well as this there is the simple question of how far you



live from your wood? It is a more interesting matter than you might think.

If your wood is next to your home or only a mile or two distant, you can pop over at whim, walk the dog, or enjoy a picnic as fancy takes you. And it's easy to check the entrance for rubbish. The converse is that you might find yourself spending many more hours there than intended and your partner or family become whatever is the silvicultural¹ equivalent of a 'golfing widow'. Also a wood that is nearby can be readily inspected after a storm or when heavy snow has fallen, which can be important if it enjoys roadside frontage or there is a right of way through it and some clearing up is needed.

When a wood is a long way away, say 30 miles or more, then the time taken to get there becomes significant. You can't so easily make a quick visit, it is more of a planned outing or even a day trip. Now, this is not all bad since the visit takes you away from home and away from the familiar: it is more of an expedition for the kids, it is more like going on holiday. So there are pros and cons and this will, in part at least, inform the ways you intend to enjoy your wood.

There is, too, the extreme where woodland or forest has been purchased purely as an investment. It doesn't matter where it is, you can still camp there or take a caravan – assuming acres of Sitka spruce are as congenial to you as, with luck, your bank balance.

For many years my own wood was about 15 miles from my home in Alton, though in 2005 I moved house and it is now only 8 miles away. I've found that the distance of 15 miles means that you can get there in under half-an-hour, do a decent morning's or afternoon's work, and still have the rest of the day for other things. It was far enough away when going for a picnic to make you feel it was a proper outing without the boys getting tetchy in the car, but not so far that the visit had to be planned in advance. It was a nice compromise and, for me, a bonus was that my work often took me past the wood *en route* to Oxford or the West Country so I could quickly check it then as well.

¹ 'Silviculture' is the forestry equivalent of agriculture: 'agri' is from the Latin for field, 'silvi' for woodland, so silviculture is everything to do with the care, husbandry and growing of woodlands.



So, how good is the access?

The distance to your wood is a matter of convenience, getting in and out of it from a public highway is a necessity. There's obviously little point owning a wood in the middle of a field if the farmer only allows access, other than perhaps on foot, in the couple weeks in September between his harvesting one crop and sowing the next – and I am not exaggerating this has happened to some unwitting owners. To be able to manage and enjoy your wood you need good access, but what does that mean?

- First, good access means you have comprehensive rights. You should have the right to use the access road or track unhindered and uninterrupted whenever you need to. It also means you can use any kind of vehicle you might conceivably want to, such as laden timber lorries of up to 30 or 40 tons. Even if you yourself don't intend to work your wood commercially, future owners might, so securing this right of access is important.
- Secondly, good access means a track that is wide enough and without sharp bends that are tricky to negotiate. Its formation should be sufficiently load-bearing to support the biggest vehicles ever likely to use it.
- Thirdly, good access means a wide and generous entrance on to the public highway, either where your wood fronts on to it directly or where the track you have rights over meets it. Articulated lorries, or a car and caravan, cannot turn in easily. From a lane the gates need to be well set back, gate posts at least 6 m apart and the whole entrance bell-mouth opening out to perhaps 30 m across – see the illustration at end of the chapter.

I know all this is the counsel of perfection, but hopefully it will help you think what you have got at the moment and what improvements may be needed one day.

Lastly, good access means good internal access within your wood: a desirable rather than essential feature. Are there tracks and rides – these words are often used interchangeably – which allow access to all parts? Is there a turning area and loading bay beside or at the end of the main access track from the public highway where logs can be stacked or a caravan or visitors' cars



parked safely? In general, the wider the track the better. Wide tracks dry out more quickly, offer more 'edge effect' for wildlife, and are great places for kids to play.



My own entrance before it was renewed to the standard outlined here

As you get to know your wood, note these features about access and why not also think about a new footpath, perhaps with a little mystery, that wends its way passed an old wizened tree, brings you to a view, or takes you to a secret glade? I have one in my own wood, not so much by design, but the route I usually take with first time visitors or when we have an Open Day.

Public access and anyone else with rights

Your deeds should show whether there are public rights of way across your land as should the appropriate Ordnance Survey map, but the definitive statement is held at the County Record Office. I assume you have already bought the OS 1:25 000 scale (Explorer series) that covers your wood, but don't forget the larger scale 1:10 000 maps if available and even the 1:1250 as a basis for a



woodland plan or map. As an aside, you can get your very own Ordnance Survey plan from Stanfords for a basic fee of £30 with grid lines, and with contours for an extra fee. Your County Record Office will let you have copies of earlier maps – the fabulously detailed 1870 series is a must if you have an interest in your wood's history. Returning to the question of public access, whether footpath, bridleway, or byway such as a green lane, there are attendant duties on the landowner which should be checked.

However, you may discover that others have access rights either specified in the deeds or when strangers start exercising them, as happened to us! These are mostly of three kinds:

- rights to sporting, such as rearing and shooting pheasants and other game birds, taking of deer, and even rough shooting – rabbits, pigeons etc;
- where a utility crosses the land, such as electricity or telephone, and a 'wayleave' has been granted, known legally as an 'easement', which may have a few restrictions;
- specific provision for access – in my own wood Network Rail have the right at all times to visit their electricity transformer and gain access to the railway track at the bottom of the wood. They provide one of the locks on the gate and from time to time contribute to upkeep of the main track. For my part I must ensure that this track is never obstructed.

Many woods have none of these additional rights and some rights, such as sporting, may only be for a period and you, as the new owner, can usually change the terms or stop their exercise altogether.

Locks, gates and names

A gated entrance that looks tidy and well kept conveys a sense of pride, care and regular usage, all of which will help to deter fly-tipping and other rural crime. The type of gate is unimportant, but the common metal or wooden 'five-bar' gates are very serviceable and rarely appear out of place in the countryside. To deter theft, particularly of new gates, use one hinge upside down so that the gate can't simply be lifted off. A substantial lock and chain add to



security and give a business-like impression, but do make sure that all who have a right of access have a key for your lock! It's not uncommon for several owners to share access and a locked gate. Do try and get everyone zealous in keeping it locked.

If your wood has a name you can attach a board or plate to the gate, or erect a free-standing sign. Of course if you use a shared entrance this might not be possible. And there's no reason why you can't name parts of the wood inside. We now have a 'Taid's Wood' and a 'Nain's Copse' in our 30 acres named, incidentally, after my parents. 'Taid' is Welsh for grandfather, 'nain' for grandmother: the story behind these namings are in the two books I've written '*A Wood of Our Own*' and '*What Happened to Our Wood*'.

Personally I dislike signs like 'Private', 'Keep out' and the asinine 'You are being watched'. We no longer see so much the more threatening 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' apart, of course, from the pages of *Winnie-the-Pooh* and Piglet's pride in his grandfather 'Trespassers Will ...'!

Sheds and things

You don't need to have a shed in your wood since saws, axes, spades, garden chairs and other paraphernalia are all easily carried in the boot of a car. If you are there daily then a shed is convenient, but it is debateable whether it is worth locking since someone will doubtless find it and doubtless want to break in, so don't keep anything of value in it. Arguably a trailer for your car is a better investment if you are planning to do a lot of work in your wood.

That said, if you plan to spend a good deal of time at your wood, some furniture is useful. Old tables and chairs are handy, but can quickly turn a pleasant glade into a slum. Despite what I have said, it is neater to keep them in a small shed along with kettles and dishes, spare Wellingtons, tarpaulins etc. Fasten the door, but don't waste money on an expensive lock, it will simply attract not deter interest. Thieves are looking for power tools, not your old furniture!

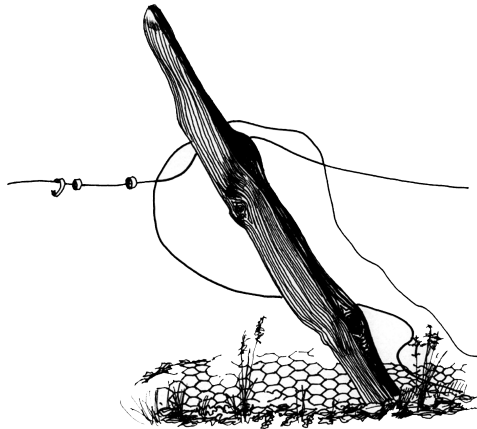
Remember that if you are planning to use herbicides or poisons, say for weed or rabbit control, then a secure, lockable safe may be required by law and is probably best kept at home in the garage.



Boundaries

Walking the entire perimeter of your new wood is one of the first things to do. It's fun. Apart from discovering remote corners, defiantly inaccessible bits, patches of nettles, and doubtless some rubbish, it will alert you to several things: what the state of the fencing is, where animals (and people) may be gaining unwanted access, any trees next to a highway that may look unsafe, whether a neighbour is using your land, and, of course, whether the line on the deeds matches where your boundary appears to be! Wear tough clothes and be prepared to fight through undergrowth in order to follow the exact course. There's no need to do it all in one go.

Maintenance of fencing will depend on need and whether your wood has a covenant requiring you to do this. This is more common than you might think since in the 1930s and 1940s, when the Forestry Commission was acquiring much land and some already established woods, as a gesture of good will it agreed to fence out a neighbouring farmers' livestock and so take on the job of fencing. It's back-to-front, after all it is the farmer's sheep and cows that move about and not trees, but quite often today part of a wood's boundary may still have a fencing covenant to be met by the owner. This may have lapsed or a change of neighbour extinguished it, but it's worth checking.



Old oak post with remnants of rabbit netting – only maintain a fence while the wood is at risk; remove if it becomes unsightly



Fencing is an interesting countryside skill. It is one that can, in time, be learned by almost anyone, but is also one where there are many contractors who will come and do a thoroughly professional job. Your main decision is whether the fence is purely for demarcation, where an attractive post and rail or simple strand wire will do, or one that is to keep out livestock, deer or rabbits in which case wire netting of suitable mesh size will be required – we go into more detail in Chapter 6. Doing your own fencing from coppice products can be very rewarding but make sure stakes are durable, either treated softwood or, better, sweet chestnut, oak, or even Lawson cypress from an unwanted garden hedge.

What is the woodland like?

This chapter is almost finished, and we haven't got round to talking about the trees themselves and discovering what they and your wood as a whole are like. I expect your vendor's particulars told you the basics, and perhaps that is what most interested you anyway. We will look at five questions.

'All sorts' or one sort?

I'm not referring to Bassett's lovely liquorice sweets, but is your woodland diverse or fairly uniform? Do you have young and old trees, dark and dense stands and light sunny gaps, wet places and dry slopes, and many kinds of tree species, or is there little variety with perhaps one or two stands of, say, Scots pine all of the same age? We British have been great planters of trees over the centuries and one result is that we have created woods and forests that tend to be uniform – stands that are even-aged and of only one or two species.

The importance of this question, what we call the structure of a woodland, is the potential it offers as an amenity or for wildlife – generally the more diverse the better; or for commercial use when less diversity usually has the edge economically. Of course, your management over time can coax a wood towards either more or less variety.



Is it an 'ancient' woodland?

By ancient is meant: has the land always been wooded? It is considered to be so if early maps or other records show it to have been continuously woodland from before 1600. If it was then it almost certainly always has been.

The importance of the question, quite apart from the piece of living history you might own, is that ancient woodlands are limited in extent and are usually the richest in wildlife. Indeed, some woodland flowers such as anemone, yellow archangel and oxlip are confined to them and help indicate this special status. For this reason your management options may be curtailed somewhat. For example, as a condition of tree felling you will usually be allowed only to plant or regenerate native tree species.

We return to the question of 'ancient' in later chapters because it is important, it affects what you can do, and as relicts of our past woodland type they are to be treasured.

How has the woodland been managed in the past?

Is your wood a plantation, a coppice, or coppice with standards, or neglected wood pasture, perhaps with pollards etc? It is not always easy to tell, especially when a wood has lacked management for many years or even many decades. Knowing its silvicultural history will help you since most coppices can be restored to working in this way (see page 75) while woodlands that have been planted probably need to be regenerated in the same way.

At the end of the chapter, the main woodland types and their tell-tale signs are illustrated so that you can be your own detective.

What are the main species?

I expect the vendor's particulars will have answered this, but any good tree identification book will help with the commoner species. One reminder for the uninitiated is that all conifers are known as 'softwoods' in the timber trade and all broadleaved tree species as 'hardwoods'. The terms have nothing to do with how hard or dense the actual timber is: yew is a conifer and is a 'softwood'; birch, poplar, and even the tropical 'balsa', are broadleaved species and are 'hardwoods'!



What commercial potential might it have?

The best way to answer this question is to invite a professional forester to visit your wood for an hour or two. He will look at the species, the ages and size of trees, how many hectares are ready for thinning, felling or coppicing and so on. For example, one or two high quality trunks of broadleaves (oak, ash, wild cherry etc.) can be worth enough for a merchant to buy as individual trees or logs. In this instance 'high quality' is a straight, defect free trunk of large diameter (50+ cm) able to produce a log of 3–6 metres in length. More usually, however, in any wood including plantations of pine, spruce or beech, being able to make up one load (15–20 tons) is the very minimum that might attract a purchaser – we return to this topic in Chapter 7.

In coppiced woodlands it should be more obvious whether it has recently been worked and the vendors, your neighbours or local forestry people can probably tell you. This is revealed in the wood itself by a patch (0.2–1 ha) of young growth next to older coppice – again, refer to the illustration at the end of the chapter.

Remember though, as we noted earlier, as well as the trees themselves, commercial potential will be dictated by the question of accessibility.

Wildlife surveys, archaeology, and censuses

For me one of the pleasures of owning woodland is finding out about wildlife, archaeological features, and how the wood has changed over time.

For recent history the 19th Century tithe maps, old records and early aerial photographs are invaluable. A trip to the local County Record Office is a must. However, I wonder how many people know that every piece of woodland in Britain over 5 acres was inspected for the Forestry Commission's 1947 census of forests and woodlands. You can inspect the original report on your wood at the Public Record Office at Kew. Mine was visited on 19 June 1947 and was described as 'devastated' (thanks to wartime fellings) and, rather quaintly, suitable for 'economic management'.

Surveys of wildlife are on-going and in one sense are never complete and always bring surprises. You can simply enjoy spotting wildflowers, butterflies and birds and build your own



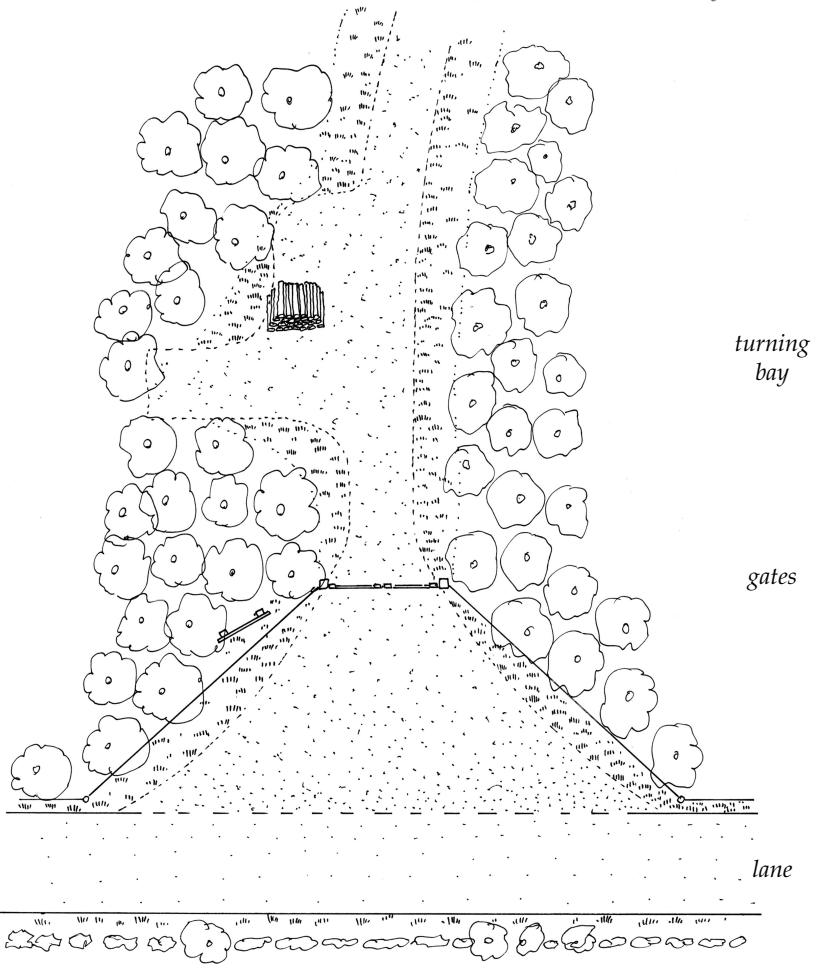
nature notes as season follow season. All of us probably know a 'twitcher' or two who will identify this bird song and that type of nest, even if not up to Bill Oddie's standards.



"That's never a golden oriole!"

There is much history to be discerned from archaeological features, such as banks and ditches, and of the woodland itself from the appearance of the trees. Numerous local societies will be more than keen to visit your patch and provide advice and information.

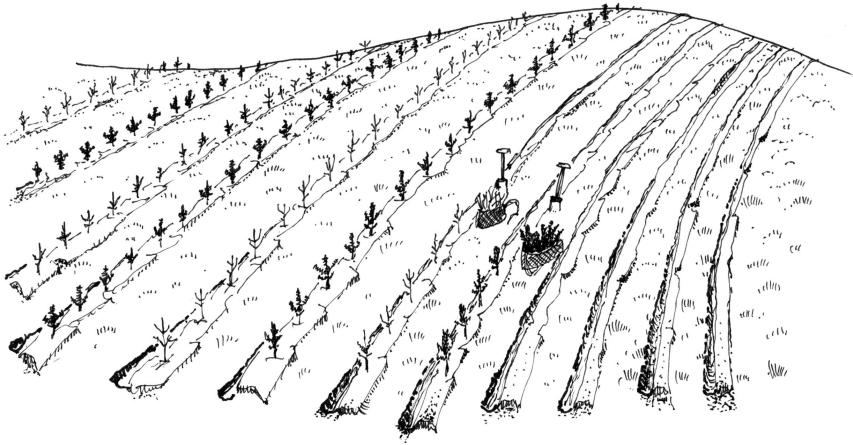
My records are quite informal, just a few jottings in a notebook, but only yesterday I found the first ever ragged robin flowering among nettles in damp ground right beside the main track. My wife, Margaret, had sown wild seed and planted a few tiny seedlings the previous July, and if I hadn't been doing ride-side maintenance it would not have been seen. But enough: do record what you find whenever you can, note any hazards and dangers that need attending to, and do rope in friends and relatives and their knowledge to enrich yours.



A well proportioned woodland entrance. Gates should be set at least 6 m back from a highway, but check local planning guidelines first, and the frontage about 30 m across to allow large vehicles to turn. The gates themselves should provide an opening of at least 5 m



The main types of woodland



A young plantation. Trees evenly spaced in rows and all of much the same size



Weeding and cleaning a plantation to stop it being overgrown



Thinning a plantation to give space to the best trees and yield some produce



Clearfelling underway (right) and replanting (left)

First steps



Coppice with standards



Wood pasture – these are the kinds of trees found but are farther apart – more scattered – than John White's delightful frieze suggests



Standard

Tall

Lapsed/Ancient

Willow

Pollards you might see. From left to right: managed, neglected, ancient, and riverside willow



Continuous cover forestry – new name for an old system which ensures that woodland is never completely cleared