

## *How do you want to enjoy your wood?*

Twenty years ago I wrote a book for the Forestry Commission on how to grow and look after broadleaved woodlands<sup>1</sup>. In the book the question of what is the principal object of management was emphasised as the first thing to decide when considering what to do with a wood. This is still the case today. Although the title of this chapter is perhaps a rather odd question for a new owner to ponder, thinking about objectives or reasons for owning a wood, is constructive, even liberating.

We will look at the main ways any woodland can be enjoyed, highlight the issues, and suggest steps to take to get you started. But, as was emphasised in Chapter 1, different aims are rarely mutually exclusive, your wood can satisfy several at once, and no two woods are the same. What we tease out here are the main hopes you have to help decide what should take priority in the way you care for and look after your wood.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Silviculture of Broadleaved Woodland' Forestry Commission Bulletin 62, HMSO 1984 232pp.



## **To get away from it all**

For many owners enjoying their wood for walks, picnics, and simply to have fun is the main reason for buying somewhere in the countryside which is their very own. Getting away from it all and being able to relax are greatly valued in today's pressured times.

An attractive woodland for this purpose, what professionals call 'amenity', is one that has variety in tree sizes and ages, plenty of tracks and paths, and lots of open space. If you have a stream running through the wood so much the better, though do be careful with any watercourse and ponds if young children are about.

If peace and quiet are particularly sought after, then being some distance from a motorway, major arterial road, airport or railway line may be important. From experience if you can see from your wood where a major road is, even if 2 miles away, you are likely to hear a distant rumble of cars and lorries if the wind is coming from that direction. Of course, you will always have farm machinery and other countryside sounds: in our wood we have microlights buzzing overhead from a nearby airfield, not to mention the railway line at the bottom, but neither really intrude into our enjoyment – indeed, my boys when young loved to watch the trains.

It is also good if such woodlands are not too exposed, open and windy, though obviously you can choose when to picnic, after all you don't need to go on a stormy day or when a cold easterly wind is blowing!

Other points to think about – and we will return to this in Chapter 4 – are:

- elderly people like to feel safe, so for them in particular paths need to be even under foot so they won't trip or fall. They also need somewhere to sit;
- most children, even modern ones(!), will climb trees, make camps, gather sticks, and get stung as they muck about, so a first aid kit is essential and a mobile phone desirable assuming you get reception in your wood;
- fires should be restricted to a one or two safe locations well away from the base of a tree;
- glades make great picnic sites and double up well for wildlife;



- vistas need preserving and maintaining – a wonderful view from the wood may not last unless the opening between the trees or shrubs is kept cut back;
- tracks will need to be cut or mown once or twice each year;
- a small shed for gear, and if there's a sudden downpour, but don't store power tools and anything of value.



*'Rest awhile'*

If you plan to camp in the wood, then how easily you can get your gear to the chosen site may be important – is the track only adequate for fair weather use for the family car? There is the question of disposing of waste: taking it home usually being the best option.

#### *What to concentrate on*

If enjoying your wood as an amenity for recreation is your main aim, then the key things to concentrate on are providing good, safe access (tracks etc), knowing the dangers and hazards, and making



sure you have some means of communication in case of accident. Of course you will want, over time, to manage it in ways that keep or add to the wood's diversity and interest for old and young alike. We will look at the particular question of insurance and today's need for a risk assessment in Chapter 4.

### **A thing of beauty**

More often than one might think, a wood is bought to preserve it as part of the countryside. A farmer might buy a wood adjoining one of his fields (or plant one on his land) to improve or retain a particular view. Similarly, someone who has moved to the country may value the nearby spinney or copse simply for its place in the landscape or because it screens an eyesore, but not be greatly fussed about visiting it for walks or for having a picnic.

When you buy woodland to preserve the beauty of the countryside it may also be a good investment. A house or cottage in the country that is attractive with pleasing views and free of anything unsightly or smelly(!) nearby, will be worth far more than one overlooking (say) a transport yard. All that might be needed to make the difference is retention of a patch of woodland, even as small as a quarter of an acre. Unfortunately (or fortunately!) buying a woodland with the hope of building a house in it is virtually impossible planning-wise, though buying a cottage and later purchasing some adjoining land such as a wood is certainly feasible.

Maintaining the fabric of our lovely countryside is also the aim of bodies such as the National Trust, the Woodland Trust and the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). Our state forest service, the Forestry Commission, now takes great pains to blend their operations into the local landscape with carefully crafted forest design plans and expects others to do so too. Landscape architecture has come a long way in recent years and much sound advice is available.

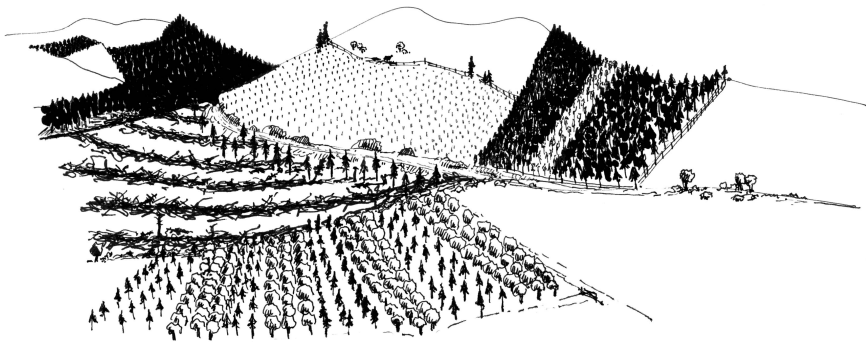
#### *Enhancing the attractiveness of woodland*

For the smaller wood, the following points should be born in mind where conserving beauty and being a feature in the landscape take



*Attractive landscape where trees and woodlands enhance the natural form*

first priority. Build on natural features and the form of the land such as rivers, streams, boggy patches and rocky places. Work with nature seeking to enhance your woodland's natural assets by not planting too close or by deliberately felling trees nearby to emphasise the feature. In general native species are preferred over exotics, but don't take this to extremes. A few pines, larches or Douglas firs in an otherwise broadleaved woodland usually add interest and certainly enhance the variety of habitats; what ecologists call 'niches'. Similarly, don't be over-zealous in removing sycamore; it looks good in the landscape and adds to biodiversity. And don't forget we have three native conifers: Scots pine, juniper, and yew. We return to these topics in chapter 8.



*Unsympathetic planting and felling that intrude into the countryside with harsh edges and unnatural, geometric shapes*



Think about the land form, and then manage the wood to be sympathetic to slopes, shapes and appearance of the local topography and texture of the landscape. A square block of dark conifers stuck on the side of any hill will generally offend and intrude: the same size of wood with two or three small patches of broadleaves in with the conifers, some open space, and boundaries that are not too geometric, usually will not. This is a generalisation, but I expect you get the point.

The same goes for the shape and size of openings made when felling trees. All woods need some tree felling to maintain them – long-term neglect is rarely the best option, but fell areas sensitively or explore continuous cover forestry options (page 74). As always the aim is simply to look part of and not intrude in the landscape.

John White has tried to illustrate the above points for us in the accompanying sketches (previous page).

The internal landscape of a wood is important too. Rides and tracks that curve, have scalloped edges i.e. have occasional glades to one side, and have vistas – like the cover illustration – all add interest and are generally good for wildlife.

## **Paintballing and related activities**

I am not sure this topic should follow ‘beauty’ quite so closely(!), but it did so in my thinking so let’s run with the juxtaposition. Clearly buying a woodland for activities like paintball games, for motocross rallies, or for off-road 4 × 4 training as Landrover have, bring different management priorities. Key among these will be access rights, insurance cover for groups, prior permission from the local police for the traffic levels expected, in many cases planning permission from local authorities, and avoiding nuisance to your neighbours. Obviously one wouldn’t buy a wood of special conservation merit for these inherently more destructive uses, but, even so, a wildlife survey and full, transparent discussions about intentions will mollify neighbours and complaints from locals about the inevitable noise as well as allow special habitats to be avoided. It all makes for good public relations and is good stewardship.

Many owners or prospective purchasers of small woods will have no interest in these sorts of activities, but this does make the point that woodlands of all types are great places for fun and games.



## **Game and hunting**

For many small woodland owners game shooting and hunting will not figure at all, but it's as well to be aware that woods, including small ones, are valued by these very common countryside sports. Many woods on estates and farms are managed for game such as pheasants and the steadily rising numbers of deer bring a need to stalk and hunt. For game birds a wood provides somewhere to rear them, cover and warmth for the birds in winter, whilst areas of young growth and shrubs create flushing cover to help the birds rise to the guns. Keepers may put down supplementary feed in a wood to attract birds in from the surrounding fields and improve numbers that beaters subsequently encourage into flight.

The management of woodlands for game is straightforward and the Game Conservancy at Fordingbridge is undoubtedly the best point of contact for those newly interested.

Rough shooting for rabbits, wood pigeons, grey squirrels and other wildlife officially designated as 'vermin' is hardly likely to be a major management aim, though a local shoot might acquire a wood with this purpose in mind. As with all shooting, compliance with gun licensing laws and exercising of very great care when in your wood are essential.

Deer stalking and culling is a matter for experts. Make local enquiries about who might be suitable, agree terms with them, and from time to time you may enjoy a haunch of venison from your own patch. Have no qualms about culling: deer numbers are at an all time high and are doing serious damage not only to woodlands but many national nature reserves owing to excessive browsing and grazing.

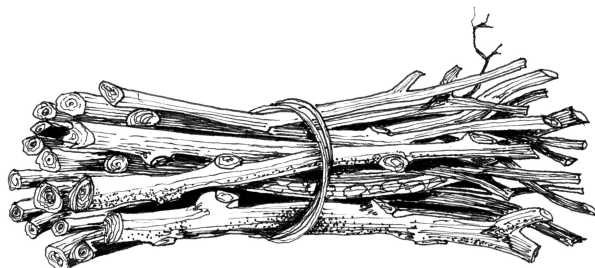
## **Your own firewood supply**

Any woodland, except a new planting, can provide firewood. In these times of energy concerns and the need to consume less coal, oil, and gas, using firewood for heating (and cooking if you have a suitable Aga or Rayburn) makes sense. Firewood is best obtained from thinning out the poorest trees, from the debris left over after any tree felling, and directly from coppicing operations. The key point is that the shape and, to some extent, the size of the tree is largely irrelevant: everything can be used. This distinguishes

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firewood from all other timber products where straight, defect free trunks are usually essential.



*Faggots once fuelled our hearths, a return to burning firewood helps the planet*

*How much woodland do you need?*

This obviously depends on how much firewood you plan to use. If you want to heat your whole house, a 3 bedroom semi would require about 5 tons of air dry wood each year. This quantity can be obtained in perpetuity from about 5 acres (2 hectares) of moderately vigorous, but well stocked broadleaved woodlands.

*What trees makes good firewood?*

In general, all broadleaved species are good. Ash is the best because it can be burnt straight from tree but, like all firewood, it does best only when thoroughly dry. Oak, hornbeam, beech and sycamore are all good: logs of the first two burn steadily and slowly. Wood from apple and pear trees give off a lovely fragrance.

Trees to avoid are poplar, willow and birch because they burn so quickly and conifers because their resin makes them 'spit', though some are worse than others. That said, Esmond Harris, who kindly reviewed this book in draft, finds very dry willow excellent for starting a fire though, as with conifers, it does spit.

The above remarks apply when burning wood in an open hearth. If you have a wood burning stove – and today's designs are remarkably efficient in terms of energy output and very little ash – then just about any truly dry wood will do.





### *Getting firewood from tree to grate*

The crucial maxim is: cut firewood one winter and burn it no sooner than the next i.e. firewood should be well seasoned before burning so that it is properly air dry.

We will touch on the business of tree felling in Chapter 6. Here it is worth noting that usually logs for firewood are cut to 1.2 m (4 ft) lengths and stacked 1.2 m high. These dimensions are the basis of a 'cord' a stack of wood 4 x 4 x 8 ft in dimension, and make for easy handling. The stacks should be beside a track with vehicle access, but if possible not visible from the entrance to reduce theft.

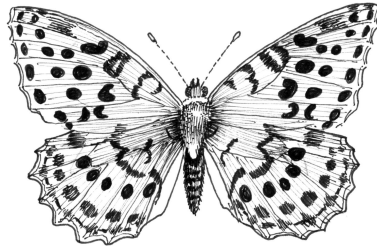
You can cut and split firewood logs – remember most grates require 8" or 9" lengths – in your wood and transport them when you need them, or do this job at home. It doesn't matter and simply depends on need and circumstances.

### **A haven for wildlife**

Chapter 8 is devoted to this topic, but if protecting or enhancing wildlife in a wood is your main interest, the key issue, beyond finding out what is already present as we noted in Chapter 2, is understanding woodland ecology. Plants and animals all interact – the web of life – and your interventions should be informed by what we know. For example the fabulous fritillary butterflies, which can be so helped by timely coppicing, need a continuous supply of new, open spaces every few years since the plants they feed on mainly inhabit glades and warm sunny patches. So maintaining a wood for its fritillaries should really be seen as a commitment to coppicing or felling openings perhaps every other year. I've over-simplified the matter, but it's fun becoming a real wildlife 'anorak' and reversing the downward trend so apparent with so much of Britain's flora and fauna.

Of course, you won't always succeed first time. Margaret and Alistair, who are supporting this book, told me of a delightful occasion when they set up a hide in their own wood one night to watch badgers. Let me relate it in their own words.

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*Silver-washed fritillaries can be seen in open woodland in high Summer, their larvae feed on violets in the Spring*

'We set up a hide one night, with a cotton sheet, which we put in place during the afternoon. At nightfall we crept along and stationed ourselves on the chairs we had made ready, and sat stock still peering through holes in the sheet for an hour or more. Not so much as a black snout appeared from the sett. At last, Alastair said ... "I'm feeling terribly sleepy" but the only answer was a muffled snore from his wife.

The next weekend some friends camped in our clearing. They reported that while they were frying up their supper they received a most surprising visit ... from one of our black and white friends ... not too shy to enjoy the proffered titbits of bacon!'

Some people have all the luck!

## **Christmas trees**

I do hope you haven't bought a wood just to grow Christmas trees, but I do hope you remember to have a patch of them somewhere in your wood! Prices of real ones today are exorbitant, while plastic ones are made from non-renewable oil. So grow your own.

Plants of the commonly used species, Norway spruce, (never use Sitka spruce) can be bought from a forest nursery for 20–50 p each and should make usable size in 5 years. If you can't wait and have a patch of conifers already in your wood, the tops of slower growing trees will often be suitable – fast growing ones will look very leggy as Christmas trees with widely spaced whorls of branches. Don't be afraid to cut a tree just for its top 4–8ft of



Christmas tree: what you save in money terms will be far, far more than you are ever likely to make from selling the timber!

Christmas trees that don't drop their needles are becoming much more popular and the main species are Nordmann's (Caucasian) fir, noble fir and Fraser fir. A bushy, slow grown specimen of our own Scots pine always makes a good Christmas tree.

Although we will look at tree planting in Chapter 6, if you want to get started with a patch of Christmas trees the key things to note are:

- use land that may be unsuitable for other purposes, say because of a powerline overhead;
- keep the patch hidden from the entrance to avoid theft;
- fence the patch against rabbits and deer;
- space trees about 1 m apart, on the triangle if you can to make more even contact with neighbouring ones;
- keep weeds under control;
- just help yourself to the biggest as they reach the right size, then restock when two or more adjacent ones have gone and there is a gap of 3 m across.

### **Even timber production!**

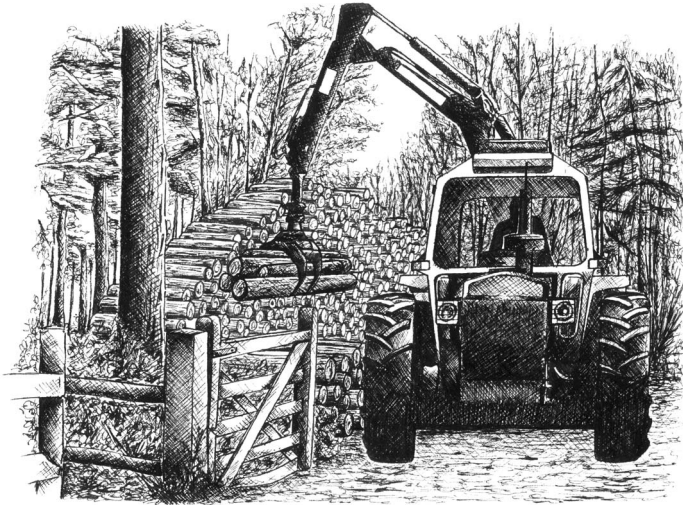
Here is my son's sketch of the time we extracted over 600 tons of pine from our 30 acre wood. By 'we' I mean the contractor we sold them to! The pine trees themselves were 35-years-old and the contractor felled the trees, extracted the logs, and hauled them to market. What we got from the sale almost equalled the price we had paid for the wood seven years before.

Since then we have thinned out the beech trees twice but we got nothing like so much either in total quantity of timber harvested or in price per ton. Mid-term (mid-rotation) beech has few markets and ours went to a mill at Sudbrook in Gloucestershire for pulping though this mill has just closed.

If timber production is one of your aims, then it's best to get an expert to cast a professional eye over your woodland. An hour or two of their time will soon tell you whether you have some commercial potential, when returns can be expected, and tell you how to go about the business of marketing the wood. I have



stressed before that management for this purpose need not exclude other objectives.



*My son Stephen's sketch of the tractor with its grapple stacking logs at our wood's entrance when we sold the pines in 1992*

In Chapter 7 we look at several topics relating to timber production to give you a feel of the possibilities you might have, though don't be optimistic; prices are at rock bottom at present (2006). There we look at: (1) the rewards of using you own timber whenever you can; (2) how to sell trees to contactors; (3) advertising trees for sale in magazines, such as *Woodlots*, and via websites; (4) how to assess quality and quantity of timber; and (5) typical prices for timber.

### **What else might you enjoy your wood for?**

The website <[www.woodlands.co.uk](http://www.woodlands.co.uk)> has a splendid list of things to enjoy in your wood. Obviously not all woods are suitable for everything listed, but here is a flavour to round off this chapter nicely (I've added a few of my own):

exploring, barbeques, picnics and parties, map-making, creating tracks and paths, constructing benches, building secret dens, hanging a swing, orienteering, scout and guide wide



games, charcoal making, bodging and turning green wood, photography for a Christmas card or calendar or just snaps, sketching, nature trails – including a hide to watch birds or badgers, developing a forest school, putting up bird and bat boxes, gathering wild foods such as blackberries and some fungi, bee-keeping, harvesting nuts, Christmas decorations, and acquiring blisters!

Happy wooding.