

## *Guests visiting your wood*

One of the joys of your own woodland is welcoming visitors, showing them around, and sharing your plans and hopes for it. Many will be amused and bemused, if my experience is anything to go by! Why on earth did you buy a wood, what do you want it for, what do you do with it, how much work is it? Such questions pepper the conversation as you stroll from gate to ride to glade to the old oak to the thick stand of firs and back again. Sooner or later the question of making money arises if you have a forester with you, or its value as a pension, or hedge against inflation or inheritance tax if your friend is a city type! But all these reactions betray a curiosity, a touch of envy – at least I like to think so. Once your friends learn of your new acquisition you can expect a steady stream of visitors, always assuming you are happy to share the wood in this way.

Before looking at invited guests, we must mention the uninvited since every wood suffers trespass to a greater or lesser extent from those who have no right to be there. I will begin with a few comments about these first, so as to be rid of them before getting on to the fun bit.



## **Uninvited visitors**

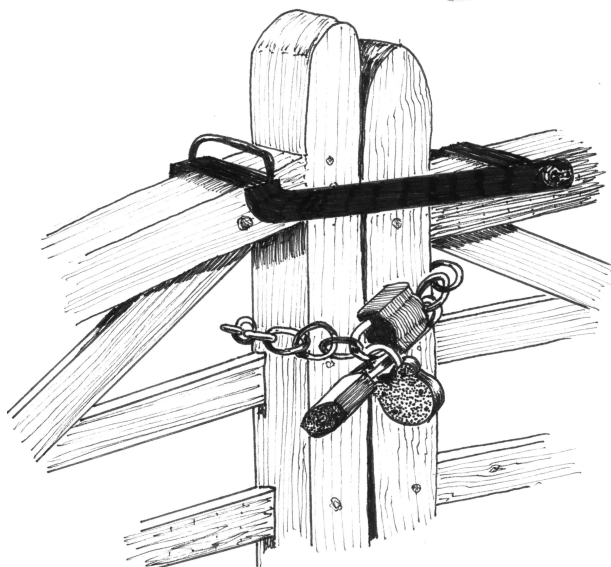
Because a wood is usually remote in the sense of not being near where you live and you can't watch over it easily, and because they are wonderful places where you aren't readily disturbed – that's may be why you have bought yours – they tend to attract the occasional uninvited visitor. It's rarely a big problem, more just something to be aware of.

### *Casual trespass and theft*

Most woodland entrances will be used by people to relieve themselves and, in a way, that is a facility the owner provides for the desperate – we've all, surely, had to respond to an urgent call of nature! More annoying is the person who hops over the gate to help themselves to some 'free' firewood, whether from scavenging or taking from a log pile, which is why the latter is best hidden from the entrance. Some people will go into the countryside to help themselves to bean poles and pea sticks or similar rustic items. All these trivial thefts are a nuisance though occasionally there may be a health and safety concern.

As an aside, these problems might increase. Since 'Right to Roam' can be exercised over large tracts of hillside, many people imagine that all countryside, including woodland, is now open access. Unless a wood was previously 'common land' no such right exists. So if a visitor is encountered you can politely put them right.

More significant theft may be of Christmas trees, holly, foliage, moss and other commodities used in floristry. Theft of logs when doing thinning or felling is rare, but kids climbing on stacks is not. A notice warning of the danger helps but may not stop children and may suggest to trespassers that they have a right to be there. Theft of or disturbance to grey squirrel hoppers, traps and other paraphernalia of pest control is a real nuisance, as are loss of tools and gear left in the wood overnight, or breaking into a shed. These problems are minimised by tidying up after work, taking home whenever possible, and disguising anything you must leave – I have a wheelbarrow covered over in black polythene and hidden behind a bush which has not been disturbed in the 10 years I've had it, as far as I know: as I write, it was still there last week!



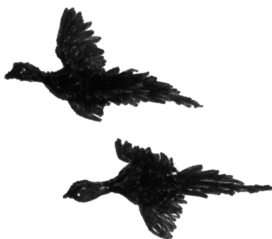
*Keep gates secure, but remember everyone's padlock must interlink!*

Other deterrents to trespass are a well-tended entrance with no litter, securely locked gates, and a freshly painted sign. Good neighbours are a blessing, so do encourage them to visit your woodland whenever they want to if they are happy to look around. My nearest neighbour walks his dog most days, or rather he walks and his dog, Mungo, scurries everywhere to investigate everything. Moreover, the owner of a small country estate a mile down the lane from my wood checks the banks and verges weekly to gather up litter – he always finds exactly enough lager or cider cans to match the days of the working week or since he last checked, but has never seen the culprit!

### *Poaching*

One perhaps shouldn't write about poaching and wildlife crime in a book about getting started and enjoying your own wood, but it's best to be realistic. Such crime is unlikely to be met with, but still occurs. In a nutshell, poaching, whether by day or night, is unlawful. Entering land to pursue or kill game (deer, hares, several species of bird) is illegal, both in the unlawful entry and in search and pursuit with or without a gun. The offence is more serious if trespass is by several persons together, or is at night.

You'll be pleased to know it is an offence to offer violence to an owner, gamekeeper or their assistants! Most police forces have a wildlife crime unit or a liaison officer responsible for such crime.



*The pheasants are yours if they are in your wood*

Legally taking game is restricted by close seasons that vary from species to species. And, personally, I think it is a good thing that no game may be hunted or shot on a Sunday or on Christmas day.

### *Other wildlife crime*

Special measures are in place to protect badgers, certain other mammals, rare birds, plants and flowers, special habitats and so on. They are covered by the Wildlife and Countryside Act though some wildlife is the subject of a specific act. Cruelty to animals has long been an offence and even when carrying out pest control, there are restrictions on how this may be done to ensure it is as humane as possible.

### *Rubbish and fly-tipping*

Few owners whose wood fronts a highway escape this curse. A well-tended entrance is the best means of avoidance, but it doesn't prevent it altogether, as my litany of numerous condoms, many magazines, occasional garden or builder's waste, 18 fire extinguishers, 3 computers, 2 washing machines, and 1 burnt-out car testify! But that's over 20 years; on most visits to the wood nothing at all is encountered.

If rubbish is dumped or fly-tipping occurs, contact your local authority. For serious fly tipping DEFRA have a number to ring: 0845 3000630 and the police will probably be interested in a car that's been dumped, especially if it's burnt i.e. to destroy evidence.



## **Very welcome visitors**

If you are as thrilled and excited by your wood as I was when I bought mine, you will be itching to show everyone your new purchase. A bit like a new house, it's a purchase you can show family and friends around. They can experience it, enjoy it, and share it with you in ways that almost nothing else equals. And that's not all. What about inviting local school children, or a natural history society, or holding a Sunday school picnic, or even an open day with a guided tour? But in all the fun and excitement you'll want to make sure that accidents are rare and that you are covered for unforeseen hurt in the litigious times in which we live.

### *Duty of care and public liability insurance*

Whether access is authorised or not, a landowner has a duty of care both to control it and to make risky features safe. With the earlier example of kids climbing stacks of wood, it is your responsibility to make it as safe as possible and comply with good practice. 'Managing Visitor Safety in the Countryside' provides excellent advice – see [www.vscg.co.uk](http://www.vscg.co.uk). If you've invited a party to your wood it's best to carry out a formal 'risk assessment'

Do take out public liability insurance to cover claims from unwitting accidents. The Small Woods Association have arranged for group cover and my annual premium through them comes to about £70 for cover for claims up to £5 million. This insurance does not cover you if the access or use is charged for, and may not do so if the wood is neglected with many leaning, hung-up trees or other self-evident hazards. A bit like failing to maintain your car in a roadworthy condition, a claim could be refused if you haven't taken reasonable steps to make things safe.

### *Visitor access*

Most visitors will arrive by car, so having somewhere to park off the public highway is a help. Inside a wood one can often park cars safely to the side of tracks, provided the ground is reasonably well-drained and it hasn't rained heavily in the last week. Of course you may need to liaise with neighbours if you have a shared access. A local farmer may be happy for you to use the corner of a meadow. In my own wood I can pack about 18 cars just



inside the entrance, any more than that and my kind neighbour provides an overflow.

All woods need at least one track and the secret to keeping tracks dry, in addition to being well drained, is for them to be open and not crowded in by trees. Glades beside the track, turning bays for vehicles, and an adjacent campsite or play area, all let in the sun and encourage airflow so the surface dries better: it's the same principle as hanging clothes out to dry on the washing line. The track surface itself can be mown grass or specially made up with chippings. If it has already been built for timber extraction it is likely to have a sound surface.

We mentioned before that the elderly need to know it's safe for them, in particular for paths to be even under foot so they won't trip or fall, and to have somewhere to sit. They will also be anxious about access to a toilet: where this can't be provided simply keep the visit short. Do warn them in advance about any lack of facilities.

We also mentioned before that most kids 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. The same kids, if they are local, are sure to know which mobile phones do work! Do everything to encourage children to enjoy your wood.

Just occasionally there may be specific things to warn visitors about. In my wood in the summer there are always ticks that get on to your clothes and then creep to a soft juicy part of your body, only to reveal their presence a couple of days later. There is a slight discomfort and a 'new' red freckle with a dark centre, namely the tick burrowing into your skin! As well as fever, the nasty Lyme's disease is a risk though I've not had either. In general snakes are rarely encountered. That said, it is probably best for children to wear shoes rather than sandals and for you to know where the nearest hospital A&E department is, and not only because of the faint risk of snake bites. Some berries are poisonous like those of yew and, of course, deadly nightshade. There is also the question of mushrooms and fungi and which are safe to eat.

### *Camping, caravans and fires*

No permission is needed for occasional camping and caravanning. In the case of the latter you can keep a caravan on site for



maximum of 28 days in any one year, so unfortunately your wood can't be a new home for the family trailer!



*Overnighting at least once in your own wood is a must*

If cooking by open fire appeals and you want to enjoy a good old sing-song in the gloaming, do take care with siting the fire.

- It should be at least 8 metres from the base of any tree.
- Whenever possible try and have open sky above the fire and not branches however high above it.
- Once you have found a good fire site, try to use the same one in the future; don't move around the wood with fires here and there.
- Always make sure that a fire is well extinguished, dowsing with water if necessary, before your leave. Forest fires are rare in woodlands in Britain except in densely packed young conifer plantations or where trees are in thick grass that is dead and dry in springtime.
- If you are into Ray Mears and 'Survival' and want to start your fire with one match, remember there is always dry material inside a holly bush, whilst the inside bark of birch will peel off like tissue paper. Over this fine dry material,



create a cone-shaped pile beginning with fine twigs, then thicker ones and then small sticks. Once lit, continuously tend the fire by adding more sticks. Only once a fire is really going should you start adding split logs. With the latter use dead wood that has preferably not been in ground contact. Even if it's raining, you will find the wood will be dry when you peel the bark off. If you have to use freshly felled wood, ash is much the best and burns quite well straight from the tree.

### *Invited parties*

I've had many groups visit my wood. The key to a successful visit is to plan where you will take the party and what you will show them that is of interest – what interests you will interest others. Plan for about 8–10 short stops which might take about an hour or hour-and-a-half to go round. Groups up to about 20 are a good size; more than this and the meandering crocodile takes a long time to assemble at each point and, of course, you have to raise your voice, especially on a windy day. Groups of more than 30 are best shown around by laying out a self-guided route, but this takes time and effort.

A visit to a woodland can bring alive any nature class for youngsters or interest teenagers doing biology. If possible show the teacher around first to assess the hazards – and so help with the school's risk assessment, and also to see how the visit will fit with the day's lesson plan. As Alex Argyropulo, one of the book's reviewers, said: 'it is sheer delight [to run a forest school] but one really has to return the children to parents in one piece!'

### *Open Days*

I mention this topic because I have now run several and they are greatly enjoyed. The idea began following publication of '*A Wood of Our Own*' when people began to ask if they could visit the wood in the story. So rather than ones or twos being shown around we decided to hold an Open Day with a laid out route of 12 stops and invited about 150 people – family, friends, folk from church and, of course, those who had specifically got in touch. It worked well and so far we have run seven such events. May Day or Spring Bank holiday weekends are good times with spring flowers at their best.





### *Working 'bees'*

I'm always surprised how keen people are to come and do woodland work for weekend relaxation. Groups like BTCV (British Trust for Conservation Volunteers) and local natural history societies have long known this. So if you have jobs needing doing – cutting a hedge, planting trees, coppicing, tidying up a track, gathering firewood – you will probably be swamped with offers once the word gets out! Do make sure that everyone comes well equipped for the conditions, that hazards are pointed out, tools are sharp, and any chainsaw is only used by a fully qualified operator. Indeed, it's probably best to stick with bowsaws.

For us, amongst many sorts of assistance, our church youth group have helped excavate a pond, our pastor has high pruned several trees and helped cut back hazel, the local doctor's family have spent several days coppicing. My Imperial College students have all tried their hand at thinning, pruning, stacking cords of firewood, clearing scrub, coppicing, burning lop and top – in fact having a whale of a time, but under strict supervision.

No payment should be made or else you get into the realms of entering into a contract with all the health and safety, insurance and employer liability implications this brings. Of course, a lovely meal at the end of the day, or toasted marsh mallows over an open fire – the choice of our church youth group(!) – will be appreciated, but even this should not be presented as payment in kind, otherwise you could be deemed to be their employer.

### *Pest control, shooting, hunting*

Sometimes a small wood may be part of a larger area where neighbouring landowners are keen to control pests, cull deer or shoot game. There is no requirement for you to give permission to enter your land. However rough shooting – rabbits, grey squirrels, wood pigeons, etc. – can be offered to a local group who may visit a couple of times a year to keep these pests under control. As we remarked in an earlier chapter, you could well end up with a haunch of venison in exchange for allowing a couple hours hunting on your land to help with the enormous and much needed task of deer control!



When you invite or allow such people into your wood, do check that they are properly qualified, have suitable insurance, a gun licence, and comply with the law concerning close seasons.



*As William Cobbett said in Rural Rides: 'What in vegetable creation is so delightful as the bed of coppice bespangled with primroses and bluebells?'*