



Volunteers planting mixed hardwood trees in Lower Vert Woods, East Sussex

Pasteur, one of the organisers, thinks woods offer a more permeable setting for groups: 'It is easier to drop into an informal group in the wood than it is to walk through the doors of a village hall,' she says. 'There is less of a barrier and people feel more relaxed.'

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted organised activities in the wood, and it has been a constant challenge to keep up with the regulations on what is permitted for groups, bubbles, exercise, support and the like. The wood was closed during the first lockdown in spring 2020, and with many activities taking a break over the summer anyway, it was not until the autumn that groups could get back into their beloved woodland setting.

Kath has found the toddler group 'a lifeline' when restrictions allowed for meet-ups, since many of the other local facilities for kids have been closed: 'I have been able to meet other parents, at a distance, and our kids can go on walks, toast marshmallows and even hunt round the woods for ingredients for a witch's cauldron!'

The eco-therapy sessions now run online, turning participants' attention to the beauty of nature in their own surroundings – sunrises, bird-spotting, sharing photos, nature writing – but the absence of actually meeting in the woods has been keenly felt.

Kath hopes the wood will gradually be able to return to normal this spring: 'The pandemic has had a profound impact on mental health and we expect to be busier than ever as we come out of lockdown,' she says. 'There has been financial hardship, unemployment, social isolation; and people will need support more than ever.' Foundry Wood is one wild oasis where people can gather to work it all out.

Find out more about Foundry Wood at foundrywood.co.uk



Cheshire's Friends of Spud Wood in action in pre-pandemic times, thinning out trees

NEIL OXLEY

The wood that does takeaways

You can really get down to some hands-on work at Spud Wood in Lymm, Cheshire. Planted on a former potato field around 1998, this green space was part of the Woodland Trust's 'Woods on Your Doorstep' project to mark the millennium. The local community was involved from the outset, as Nick Storer, who was also there at the beginning, explains: 'The village got together to raise matched funds for the project, and there was a village design conference,' he recalls. 'We also had to choose a name and the kids came up with "Spud Wood". Not everyone liked it, but the name stuck!'

There are many such woods across the country, but what makes Spud Wood rather special is its 'woodland allotment' scheme, by which the Friends of Spud Wood (FoSW) can cut and remove their own firewood.

'The wood was originally planted in quite close rows, over 18 hectares,' explains Nick. 'Now there is an opportunity to thin out the trees, to give the better stems more space.' This removal is carefully controlled by the Woodland Trust site manager, who either marks whole rows for removal, paints spots on individual trees, or designates small areas for 'coup felling'.

Rather more hands-on than the average volunteer group, FoSW is also very well organised. After starting out working through The Conservation Volunteers, the group became a community interest company in 2014. 'We now have a three-year licence and contract with the Woodland Trust, who have been very supportive,' explains FoSW director Jo Yellen. 'We have our own insurance, write our own risk assessments, and have a membership of about 40 "allotmenters", sharing some 25 allotments.'

All allotmenters undergo felling and first-aid training, and their work is carried out with hand tools. A small amount of chainsaw work is also done by arrangement with the Woodland Trust.



Socially distanced activities have continued when possible in Foundry Wood, Warwickshire

KATH PASTEUR

Into the woods

Our forests and woods are special places – and community woodlands offer us unique opportunities to gather for companionship, solace and meaningful work, says Robin Walter

Set in the very centre of Leamington Spa, Foundry Wood used to be railway sidings next to the Ford motor factory. Since the 1960s, the land had been left undisturbed (some might say derelict) and it returned to its natural state as woodland – mostly self-sown hawthorn and sycamore, with a few mature trees on the edges. For 60 years this triangle of land, barely two acres, had been quietly rewilding; reclothing itself in a green mantle of trees and shrubs, and gathering wild creatures into its fold.

Then in 2011, the community organisation ARC (Achieving Results in Communities) engaged with the owner and local people

to open up this neglected space to promote wildlife and environmental education. They removed rubbish, made paths, dug a pond and constructed an outdoor classroom.

Now this little triangle of scrubby woodland is a magnet for community activities, from toddler groups to mental health drop-ins and Forest Schools to choirs.

In the distant, carefree days before coronavirus, the eco-therapy group for mental health would attract 30-plus people over the course of the day, peaking around lunchtime. Anyone was welcome to drop in, to take part in gentle activities and a chat.

Why woodland? What is it that makes woods so appealing for these activities? Kath



Robin Walter is a forester and writer based in Dorset. His work seeks to restore the web of life, and our place in it, starting with trees – as described in his book *Living With Trees (Little Toller Books)*.

STEWART BOYLE



Members of the Laughton Greenwood community group on a work day in the woods before lockdown restrictions

TOM OTTAWAY

Woods you can find wild service trees and a host of other ancient woodland indicator species such as bluebell, anemone, butcher's broom and yellow archangel.

Unfortunately, a lot of this native woodland was planted over in the 1960s with commercial Scots pine and Corsican pine. Much of the original wildlife value still remains, however, and these woods can be restored to native broadleaf. One of the main tasks for the Laughton Greenwood society is to thin out the conifers and restock with native broadleaf trees appropriate to the area – namely oak, birch, hazel and hornbeam.

Tom Ottaway is the group's community forester: 'The wood was under-thinned when we started, so we have been catching up with that and opening out the rides to benefit invertebrates,' he says. 'We have a 20-year management plan and we received grants for some of this work, and for 200m of track and a loading bay for timber.'

Works continued last year, with some 20 lorry-loads of timber being extracted and sold as logs and biomass, some to local users.

When setting up the project, the Laughton Greenwood group asked itself, 'What is our community?'. The wood is close to a few small villages, and well used by locals and dog walkers, but the group is also reaching out beyond this, to nearby Hailsham, Uckfield and Lewes. Co-chair Marina, an experienced health and education practitioner who also runs an outdoor learning organisation, Circle of Life Rediscovery, believes Laughton Greenwood has much to offer the wider community: 'We have run John Muir Trust awards for the community college with Year 9 students facing exclusion; we offer chainsaw training facilities to Plumpton College; we welcome groups from CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services], and dementia clients,' she says. 'We also run community events like the popular new year walk, bird-spotting and a project building "leaky dams" to slow the flow of floodwaters.'

Marina is keen to stress that none of this happens on its own: 'We need support and funding, and most of all we need people to get involved, join the committee and help to make this wood work for the community.'

The same could be said for all these woods – they only work as community woodlands because people have stepped up to make them happen.

Visit laughtongreenwood.co.uk to learn more about Laughton Greenwood

STEWART BOYLE

Jo tells me about this year's work: 'Because the ash trees are dying, a "coup fell" has been marked to remove all of them in one area – but we are leaving any oaks we find in among them. So we had to do some training for members on identifying tree species in winter.'

Like other social groups, FoSW has been hit by coronavirus restrictions. 'Our volunteer work was stopped completely last March as the lockdown was announced, leaving the hedge half cut, and a lot of cut wood lying around where we'd been coppicing and hedge-laying,' says Nick. 'The cut branches were promptly turned into dens by the kids!'

'The wood became incredibly popular during the lockdown and has been ever since, especially with dog walkers, and people discovering the wood and travelling from Altrincham and further to visit.' In autumn, volunteer activities resumed under the 'rule of six', only to be restricted to basic maintenance in the winter.

Both Jo and Nick have done volunteer leader training, and their skills have been put to good use in many other activities in the wood. There have been tree-planting days for local children, to fill some of the gaps left by felling. This is also a chance to widen the species mix to make the wood more diverse and resilient.

Find out more about Friends of Spud Wood at lowcarbonlymm.org.uk/fosw

Restoring ancient woodland

Community woodlands are not all small pockets tucked away, or newly planted projects. Near Lewes in East Sussex, one community group has taken on the management of a 171-acre wood dating from medieval times. Vert Woods and its adjoining woods form one of the largest tracts of ancient woodland in the Low Weald of Sussex, and

They only work as community woodlands because people have made them happen

was owned by the Pelham family for nearly 700 years, according to archaeological volunteer Hilary Hinks's research, until it was divided up for sale in the 1960s. Then the largest remaining piece of the woods came onto the market again in 2016. 'Rather than let the wood become still further fragmented, we wondered how we could secure it for community use,' says Marina Robb, co-chair of the community benefit society caring for the woodland. 'To our joy, a local benefactor stepped up, bought the wood, and now leases it to us for a peppercorn rent.' Vert Woods is now part of the newly coined 'Laughton Greenwood', under the management of the society, which in better times ran all kinds of events to connect people with nature, from work days and tree planting to bird walks and storytelling.

Ancient woodland is special because it retains undisturbed forest soils that support unique ground flora and wildlife. Here at Vert



Learning about birch tapping in Vert Woods