

Community Trees Handbook

Case Study: Hazel Hill Wood in Wiltshire – *in which a nature sanctuary and retreat centre offers opportunities to 'find yourself in a wood'...*

Woods are known as places of transformation. When a character in a story enters a wood, they will seldom emerge unchanged. Some acquire wisdom, others power, others are lost and found. Our woods offer an alternative arena in which we can play out our human dramas.

As Robert Pogue Harrison points out in 'Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation', forests are outside the ambit of civilisation: places of enigma and paradox; places of profanity but also sacred; places of lawlessness but also natural justice; places of danger and abandonment but also enchantment and recovery.

So a wood is a fine place to embark on a journey of self-discovery. Hazel Hill Wood offers just this facility to the many groups who come here. This 70 acre wood describes itself as “a unique combination of nature reserve, retreat centre and productive woodland”. Among its intentions is “to offer a place of peace and privacy where everyone can deepen their connection with the land, themselves and each other”.

This year the programme of events includes conservation days, celebrations of the celtic calendar, a visiting buddhist monk, an eco-building workshop, an elders group called Men Beyond 50, green woodworking, a vision quest, as well as regular new moon groups, men's groups and women's groups. There have also been nature-based retreats, sacred voice camps, Dances of Universal Peace, army cadet training and business workshops held here.

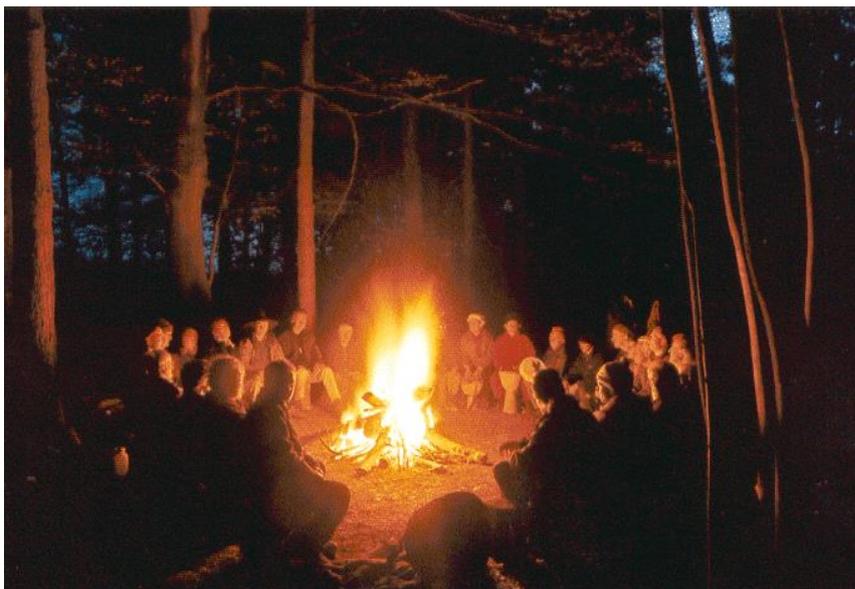


Alan Heeks, the owner, says: *“My own relationship with the wood came to life in 1993, when I first led a retreat group there. It was a vision quest for teenagers, and this was my first experience of Hazel Hill as a living entity whose wisdom and healing were being offered to people who would slow down enough to listen. Since then I have obtained planning permission for educational use of the wood, and for simple buildings to support this.”*



Over the last 20 years there has been a series of buildings constructed in the woods, all with the help of volunteers. A simple open roundhouse with earth floor was followed by a two-storey long house, then the large Oakhouse and most recently the ultra-eco Forest Ark, a “largely self-sustaining off-grid building”.

Groups can enjoy the woods whilst having a comfy bed for the night and a hot meal. Solar power provides hot water and trickling electricity for LED bulbs. Sometimes they fire up the wood-fired sauna and the hot tub. As well as buildings, several camp circles have emerged in favourite spots, each with its open fire and assorted logs for sitting round. Some are further adorned with little natural shrines of stones, upturned stumps and gathered woodland flowers.



The wood itself was a Plantation on Ancient Woodland Site when Alan bought it. Since then he has been gradually changing its regimented grid of compartments into a more organic network of trees and glades, a warren of paths and special places. The open white flowers of wood anemone grow abundantly in early spring, followed by crowds of bluebells and vivid green woodspurge poking through; then in summer the deep shade of towering beech in the 'heartwood'.

Orthodox conifer forestry crops are being allowed to succumb to nature in places. Over the last 20 years it has been astonishing to see the gushing forth of natural tree regeneration – any open area has been seized by birch and some clumps are now 20 feet high. In other places it is hornbeam regeneration which dominates, rather unusually, and elsewhere thickets of sycamore. Other conifers are being thinned to allow more light into their densely shaded stands, or whittled away to allow native broadleaves to emerge. Some conifer will be grown on for timber, either for use on site or for sale. The clay soils here grow good oak and this is the long-term goal for much of the wood.



But this is not orthodox conservation either. There is no plan to return the whole wood to native broadleaf, but rather to retain a commercial conifer element and manage it with conservation in mind – so no extensive blankets of shade. To some extent the forestry work of cutting and planting is to service the visiting groups' needs for open spaces or shelter or screening. There is always a ready use for cut wood on the many camp fires and in wood stoves.

Visitors love their time at Hazel Hill Wood and are keen to share their thoughts:

“Good woody vibes again”

“A beautiful site for powerful work”

“contained and nourished by trees allows nature to do its stuff”

“Magical, scary, transformative, blessed, honoured”



Perhaps we are freer in the woods, less inhibited, at once both more expansive and more intimate than in our daily lives or in a village hall. A good teacher and a supportive group can clearly conjure opportunities for personal journeys.

In our everyday lives, woods are popular for relaxation and recreation, particularly favoured by walkers, with and without dogs, and there are thousands of woods offering such secluded walks.

What is different about Hazel Hill Wood is the possibility of deeper immersion in nature, sitting out the long summer evenings, hearing the owls at night, feeling the morning dew on naked feet. There is also the sense of permission here, to do things which might seem odd in the local wood – dancing to drums or simply sitting quietly on a log in the sun.

When the groups have left, the wood is still and quiet again, just another wood in the landscape with the odd deer passing through...



Acknowledgement:

Photos from Hazel Hill Wood

Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation, Robert Pogue Harrison, 1992, The University of Chicago Press

Websites

Hazel Hill Wood

<http://www.hazelhill.org.uk/>

Hazel Hill Wood on YouTube

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guybKcmOXv0>