

Planting – A Defining Act of Intent (2013)

I love planting. Planting on an open field is a defining act – this land will be treed from now on. There is a simple intention, a clear plan and a series of steps to achieve it. It feels like a new beginning – it *is* a new beginning – and it is a privilege to take part.

It is also an act of faith. Planting is the start of a tree's long static journey through time, rooted in this particular soil, weather, place. It also tells us something about ourselves, our aspirations and our values.

On this Dorset farm, Sara and Andrew have been thinking about planting more trees for some years. They are understandably cautious. Planting trees is effectively irreversible, taking land out of agriculture forever; there is a large capital cost and only dim prospects of return years later. They are considering this new planting as a step towards self-sufficiency in wood fuel. They hope to provide logs, using their own land and labour, for their home and various farm buildings.

The fields to be planted have always been marginal for agriculture. Down towards the river, they are heavy clay, waterlogged in winter, difficult to cultivate and prone to poaching when grazed. The smaller field is closest to the neighbouring houses and has a well-used permissive footpath running along the edge. The fields are now used as rough grazing for occasional sheep from a neighbouring farm. Docks, nettles, thistles and rank grasses grow well however, which is an additional problem on this organic farm. So the contribution of these fields to the farm business is minimal.



What has tipped the balance in favour of planting now is a particularly favourable grant regime from the Forestry Commission. They have increased the basic rate for planting broadleaves and introduced additional contributions for planting in desirable locations. Being near a river prone to flooding, this planting is considered to be a public benefit as the trees will help to moderate water movements in the catchment. Trees enable more water to be absorbed into the ground, their roots burrowing down and improving soil structure, stability and organic matter. They reduce erosion and slow run-off into watercourses after heavy rain and also hold back flood waters to some extent. So encouraging planting in these sensitive catchments should bring benefits to people downstream too.

So, what to plant? Sara & Andrew live and work on the family farm and they want the new plantation to fit comfortably within their patchwork of small fields, woods and hedgerows. So intensive high-yielding systems like willow coppice or eucalyptus are ruled out!



I suggested using Short Rotation Forestry, where you grow familiar trees like oak and ash for 15 to 20 years, then fell them and start again. The second rotation could be coppice shoots from the felled trees, or newly planted trees. So this method looks like a young native woodland, or a coppice, and fits well with these surroundings.

Ash is the obvious choice for growing your own woodfuel – a native tree, fast-growing, good to coppice, unpalatable to squirrels, its clean stem yielding easily worked poles, its low moisture content making it the best hardwood for burning. My plan included a high proportion of ash, but just as the plan was being approved, the *Chalara fraxinea* catastrophe unfolded. Ash dieback had been discovered in planting stock in Britain and all new planting of ash was now banned! This was a sobering moment for anyone working in forestry.

I remember the skeletal hedgerows left by Dutch Elm Disease and the trees felled at my parents' house – in particular the extreme difficulty of splitting the logs – but I was too young to remember a landscape populated with mature elms. Will this be repeated now, where chancing upon a mature ash in a remote wood will be a source of surprise and wonder?

So I had to find other species to replace the doomed ash. We decided on a mixture of oak, cherry, field maple, birch, sycamore, alder, Italian alder, small-leafed lime and hornbeam, with some hazel, hawthorn and guelder rose on the edges and along the

rides. Ash will be sorely missed in planting schemes like this, but in its place we have a wider diversity of trees. This may confer some resilience should future pests and diseases decimate our tree population still further. Some will do better than others and, as we are working on fairly short rotations here, we can adjust the species when felling and restocking.

By far the most expensive element of the whole scheme is tree protection – from deer and rabbits. In this part of Dorset, roe deer are endemic and fallow deer also pass through. They browse the tops off young trees, leaving them forked and stunted at ankle height. I have opted for small rabbit spirals on each tree – a clear plastic spiral tube held up by a bamboo cane. These will also make the trees easier to find for tending.

The approved grant scheme came through from the Forestry Commission in December, so we were ready to start. First job is to get the fence up. The fencing contractors arrive in early January in very wet conditions. Watching the fencing contractors work is a joy – fixing the strainer post in the corners, laying out the intermediate posts, running a line wire as guide, thumping in the posts to just the right height - easy in this soft soil. The roll of wire itself is reeled out upright from the back of the tractor and pulled tight on each span. Within a few days the fields are enclosed in this protective membrane and we are ready to plant.



Our rows will be gently curving, following the course of the ride down the middle, leading to an older plantation beyond. Andrew has called on his neighbour, who has a four-wheel drive tractor, to scrape out these lines so the planters can follow them. We peg out the ride first, leaving it a good ten meters wide so there is room for clumps of shrubs along the edge. Then I walk along in front of the tractor, showing where to make the first scrape. The tractor has a vertical metal bar poking down to an inch or two below ground level, so as it drives along, it scrapes off the grass and leaves a smooth strip of mud. Once the first scrape is done, he can gauge the rest himself by following the last set of tyre tracks. Before long the hedge to hedge, is already bearing the marks of its future shape.

The trees arrive in mid January from a nursery in the west country. As the planting will take several weeks, Andrew unpacks some bags and heels them into one of their vegetable beds. Now the rain of the last few months has turned to snow and frost, so it is important to prevent the roots from getting frozen. The trees range in size from rather small oaks some 12 inches tall (there has been high demand this year, what with the ban on ash), to very leggy birch about two to three foot tall. The cherry are slender little stems with a single root, ideal for planting, whilst the guelder rose have several stems and a sprawling root system, making them much harder work.



Rather unusually, Andrew & Sara want to do the planting themselves. This is quite an undertaking for nine thousand trees, but it will save them quite a bit. It is a relatively quiet time of year on the farm and they have family, friends and some apprentice farm workers to help. My job is to train them up to plant properly, supervise the project and also plant a few myself .

The first day of planting arrives and we gather in the farmyard with spades and gloves ready for work – me Andrew, Sara and the two young apprentice lads. There is still snow on the ground, but the soil itself is not frozen, so we can make a start. The tractor has left a lovely clear strip to plant in, though grass still needs to be screefed off by spade in places. Reducing the competition from grass for moisture and nutrients will give the

young trees the best chance of survival come spring.

Planting small trees like these, you do not need to dig a pit for each one, just open up an L-shaped slot with two digs of the spade. On this clay soil it is very important to close the slot, otherwise it could open up again as it dries out in hot weather.

Following on from the planters, we take it in turns to push in a bamboo cane next to each tree. They sink down into the soil with a satisfying slow glide. Then come the spirals. With the narrow oaks and sycamore you can just slip the spiral tube straight over, but with the branched alders and lime you have to wrap them round and round to make sure all branches are enclosed. The hornbeam are particularly spreading and awkward.

The planting lines in the centre of the big field curve elegantly into the distance, so when the trees grow up they will not hit the eye with geometric lines. We gradually fill line after line with spindly trees, then cane each one, and when the spirals are fitted there is a real sense of satisfaction as the field is transformed into a newly planted woodland.

The days are short and although the morning is a perfect balance of crisp chill air, golden sunshine and the zest of new beginnings, the afternoon is dull. The morning's sweat has turned cold and it feels like enough for Day 1.

The following days see a variety of workers down at the field. Sara and Andrew are up and down between other farm jobs, tending the shop and running the market stall; one of their sons comes down with a friend; some local friends join in; even grandparents can put out the bamboo canes.

To my manager's eye, the planting is of variable quality – spacing is so erratic in places I can plant an extra tree in the gaps; quite a few have fine roots showing above ground level; some planting slots are wide open to the elements; some of those canes are not pressed in far enough... But for the most part the planting is fine.

Now the gang has been trained up, I have more time for planting myself. I am glad I no longer have to make a living from manual forestry work like planting or chainsawing, but a few days on a project like this is immensely satisfying. It also reminds me of all the little technical details of the job, like getting the spiral the right way up. I set myself little targets, planting 50 in one go, followed by canes and spirals. That takes about an hour. You cannot rush this work, it is just a steady plod, focussed on getting each little tree bedded down just right. Each action – screefing off grass, driving down the spade, levering up the sod, bending down to slip in the tree, firming down the sod, pacing onward – has its little rhythms and each is honed with repetition and in response to each tree, each patch of soil and each ache of my body.



As planting progresses over the weeks of February, the stocks of trees gradually run down. We keep some alder back to fill the waterlogged parts of the small field when they dry out, but we run out of field maple well before the end. By early March it is all done. They can now send off the grant claim form to the Forestry Commission and within a month they will be back in the black.

I am quite attached to this planting and I am keen to follow its progress through the establishment phase. So in a scorching July I go back to see how it is getting on. My nine-year-old son is with me and I assure him it will be really interesting looking at Dad's handiwork. He is not convinced.

The field looks quite different now – lush grass, patches of nettles, widespread thistles and docks up to chest height in places, with the lines of bright spirals mostly visible and even some leafy tree tops protruding through the mass of vegetation. The herbicide spots we did in spring have worked well, giving each tree a grace period of a few vital months in spring to establish itself in this new environment. These patches of bare ground are only temporary however; the bare earth is an invitation to colonisers and is already strewn with pale grass seeds.

You can assess survival rate by counting a sample of trees and noting any dead ones. I go up and down a few rows counting and the overall mortality stands at about 5% - very pleasing. I suspect this may rise to around 10% by autumn, so we had better check again. Then we will beat up – replace dead trees – next winter, weed again and that will probably be enough to get this plantation going.

