

# Community Trees Handbook

**Case Study 2: Examples from West Yorkshire** – in which folk from one valley have been devotedly planting trees for decades, whilst folk from another valley have been sowing the seeds of social change.

## The story so far...

There is something about a deep, well-defined valley that fosters a strong sense of place and the people in it – the embrace of the land, the clear boundaries of here and there, the enforced linearity of activity and movement. With steep valley sides, the land beyond can be clearly seen and dwells more in everyday life.



There is also something about towns which have experienced intensive industry, which have grown up in thrall to one giant enterprise, such as the wool industry here. The concentration of energy and materials gleaned from the land, together with the human ingenuity and graft required, have left a tangible legacy. Most palaces of production are now quiet; the land bears the marks of our shaping; and the people still seem to share a commonality.

The towns nestle down by the river, with road, rail and canal weaving their way along the valleys, often over and under each other. Beside this a bright green fringe of worked land reaching up the slopes; then poorer land too steep for much soil, some crags and the open tops. This land has long been stripped and kept open by grazing sheep.

How might these towns and land be reshaped today?

## What's happening in the Colne Valley

Saturday morning in a valley west of Huddersfield and a dozen or more cars arrive at the appointed place. People get out, clad in waterproofs and woolly hats, bearing spades, mattocks and club hammers; cursory greetings are muttered and a gentle banter begins. Trays of little oak, pine, alder and rowan are already waiting, as are bundles of sawn stakes and green protective tubes – the paraphernalia of planting.

This is the weekly session of the **Colne Valley Tree Society** (CVTS), which has been quietly getting on with planting up and down the valley for nearly 50 years. Founded in 1964, the Society aims *“to advance the education of the public in the appreciation of the ecological indispensability of trees and their amenity value and to encourage planting and protection of trees in the Colne Valley area.”* Their focus on this task has so far covered 286 patches of land with over 400,000 trees.



Today's job is continuing work at Scammonden Water, a reservoir created in the 1960s along with the M62 across the dam. Yorkshire Water owns the land, the Woodland Trust are supporting this project and the Society also receives funds from Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council. Twenty hectares of woodland were planted soon after the reservoir was made with another eighteen hectares in recent years. Ramsay Bloom, retired Kirklees Forestry Officer, planted the original trees and now works with CVTS.

Long service seems to be a feature of the Society: members dedicate themselves to their task over decades; there is a 'senior section' who arrive after the others, having partaken of breakfast in the local caf. Winters are busy with weekly planting on a Saturday morning, but even the summer months have fortnightly sessions maintaining their growing legacy.



Guy Thompson, former Society Chairman and now with White Rose Forest, particularly likes pruning their maturing woods to improve the timber value. Another member is a local Parks Operations Manager whose job involves too much office time, so he sees this as away of getting out again, keeping fit and seeing his work survive and thrive on a large scale, rather than suffer the vandalism of many trees in towns. The group has also managed to attract new members, one of whom recently picked wild hazel nuts for the first time in his life, from one of their woods. Throughout its history, the Society has benefited from new leadership at crucial moments, taking up the challenge and adapting to new opportunities.

The Colne Valley is dotted with trees planted over the years. Current chairman Philip Baxter knows them all after twenty years' work – a farmer's field here, a hedgerow there, successive plantings near the golf course, a fire-woodlot, a

quarry's scar now soothed by green growth again – each patch of land has its history, its current owner and is now part of a greater emerging forest of the future. The Society has won several prizes for services to wildlife and community. There is a sense of their really *inhabiting* this valley, making a home in it, caring for it and taking responsibility for its future.

However, not everyone is happy with the return of woods to the area. Ornithologists are concerned about losing habitat for the twite, a red-listed bird which nests in heather and bracken close to farmland; there are also sheep farmers who want to maintain their traditional grazing land; and some naturalists question their use of non-native species. But the CVTS are bullish about their mission, regularly chase sheep out of their planted woods and defend their use of nurse species to aid establishment.

Though they are single-minded, the Society do work with other groups: local school kids, teachers and parents, the Colne Valley Lions and several companies pursuing corporate social responsibility schemes (CSR). One office worker described tree planting as a 'yinyang thing', giving something back to the land for all its bounty. Another said: *"Knowing that the oak trees might be standing there in 500 years' time is quite humbling. Maybe some record or one of the photos will survive showing our generation cared."*



### **What's happening in the Calder Valley**

Meanwhile over in the nearby valley of **Calderdale**, there is a network of groups involved in social change and trees in various combinations.

**Treesresponsibility** might look like a tree planting project, but it is just one facet of this diverse climate-change action group. For example, they have just run one of their residential weekends for 21 primary school kids from nearby Halifax. First they go on a big walk round the National Trust's Hardcastle Craggs with a visit to Gibson Mill, a cotton mill from Calderdale's industrial past, now re-engineered to be self-sufficient in renewable energy. In the evening there is an introductory talk on climate change. The next day the kids see how Knott Wood is managed and get to plant some trees, now with more awareness of why this is important and how it fits into the local landscape. The third day looks back at the pre-industrial history of Heptonstall with its weaving crafts and considers how we might live low carbon lives again after the industrial era has passed.

They run five of these weekends each year and also host a dozen or more school planting events. The varied work of the group supports seven people part-time. They also work with offenders on community payback, university students, Quaker groups, CSR teams and even a wedding party, who celebrated nuptials on the Saturday then planted trees on the Sunday!





The flash floods in the Calder Valley in June 2000 added urgency to the climate-change message and they launched 'After the Flood, the Forest', a project to slow down run-off, reduce erosion and increase absorbency in the catchment. Work began on Midgelden Wood, site of a former pipework factory on severely degraded land. The quarrying scars and bare shale are now greening over with trees and grass and the footprint of the factory building has been broken up and planted with a fire-woodlot. This has developed into the 'Source Partnership' working to conserve the headwaters of the Calder.

Climate education is Treesresponsibility's real goal and they work through the medium of trees, rather than CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This work requires three pillars of support: land to plant, funding and people, like three legs of a stool. They appeal to local owners for land, offering a free planting service with their groups, funded from many sources, including the Environment Agency, local councils, Woodland Trust

and Suma Wholefoods in Halifax. As Dongria Kondh, stalwart of the group, says, every combination of these factors is different, which makes the work so interesting.

Some members of Treesresponsibility have joined with others to form **Blackbark Woodland Management**, a workers' co-operative aiming to bring the woods of Calderdale into active management and build a woodland economy. Private owners did not respond, but Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council saw this as an opportunity to attend to their 550 hectares of steep and neglected woodland. Arrangements have been made for Blackbark to undertake a first thin for firewood and fence where necessary to protect coppice regrowth.

They have recently launched their pioneering 'Fire Box Scheme' of community supported forestry. Rather like a veg box scheme, participants are invited to place orders for next winter's firewood and pay in advance to secure supply. In return they are guaranteed delivered loads of locally-sourced well-seasoned firewood. They can even visit the woods where it was cut to find out more about sustainable woodland management. The wood-yard is at Hardcastle Crags, courtesy of the National Trust, in return for some work in the woods.

There is so much to do that Blackbark take on apprentices and also offer skill-share days where people can come to brush up their forestry skills under supervision. These have proved to be very popular, touching on a latent local desire to get out into the woods.

They are particularly keen on coppice working, which has the advantage of being human-scale, craft-based and suitable for steep inaccessible places. It also seeks to add value to every last twig, surely a hallmark of respectful working practice.



All of this is thirsty work, so fortunately the **Calderdale Local Orchard Group (CLOG)** has recently been set up by some cider drinkers. In their first winter they planted three orchards and have plans for many more. A grafting course proved popular and raised funds as well. When it came to harvest time, juice presses were set up and a newspaper appeal for people to bring their spare fruit was very well attended. There are links with nearby Incredible Edible Todmorden, but that is another story...

## **Websites**

### **Colne Valley Tree Society**

<http://www.colnevalleytreesociety.blogspot.co.uk/>

### **White Rose Forest in Kirklees**

<http://whiteroseforest.org.uk/Explore-The-WRF/Kirklees.aspx>

### **Treesponsibility**

<http://www.treesponsibility.com/>

### **Black Bark Woodland Management**

<http://blackbark.co.uk/>

### **Calderdale Local Orchard Group**

<http://calderclog.wordpress.com/>

### **Knott Wood Coppicers**

<http://www.radicalroutes.org.uk/list-of-members/worker-co-ops/knott-wood-coppicers.html>