

Wood be good

Gary Cook meets former tree surgeon turned activist Robin Walter

“You learn a lot about conflict when you’re thirty foot up a tree, with a chainsaw,” Robin Walter reflects with a rueful smile.

Walter spent the early nineties in London’s leafy suburban gardens, working as a tree surgeon and gaining a rather unusual perspective on human nature. He would often have pulled the cord, unleashed the saw’s terrifying burr and be about to start pruning when a neighbour of the tree’s ‘owner’ would appear, followed by another and another. From his bird’s-eye vantage, he could see them – they usually couldn’t see each other over their garden walls – and they often wouldn’t see eye to eye on the impending surgery either.

Dorset. “A productive conifer plantation would have about 2,500 trees per hectare, whereas a wood planted for diversity might have only 1,100 trees per hectare.”

Walter, who moved to Dorset in 1996, questions our status quo. “Should we be planting on degraded highland landscapes? Do lowland heaths, created by our past tree-clearing actions, deserve more protection? There are so many conflicting claims on land. How do we reconcile those?”

Fortunately, he has an answer. “Imagine the British Isles with large forests, small woods and a countryside dotted with trees, covering a third of our land. Some of these forests are hard-working and productive, supplying timber for building, carpentry and home heating; others might emerge from the return of wild Nature and native trees. Small community woods could be gently managed for wildlife and people, or planted to hold back flood waters. Exhausted farmland could relax and welcome back its protective mantle of trees and scrub.”

He sets out these ideas in his book *Living with Trees*, published by Little Toller Books for Common Ground. The book exudes the charity’s trademark style of considered arguments layered with various design catnip distractions by internationally renowned environmental artists such as David Nash, Kurt Jackson and Ackroyd & Harvey. After a foreword by Judi Dench and introduction by Richard Mabey, Walter’s enquiring mind reaches like tree roots, extending into every aspect of arborealism from architecture to education, rewilding to agroforestry, interwoven with practical answers for how to reconnect with trees.

The stats are intriguing and depressing by turn. We in the UK covet wood almost as much as we love our pets. As the second-biggest importer, behind China, we spend £7.6 billion a year on forest products. About 80% of the 56 million cubic metres of wood we use is imported. Of the 11 million cubic metres of timber we produce ourselves, it is shocking to discover that 10% is made into plain old MDF and panelboard.

Stints as a Woodland Trust manager and an auditor for the Soil Association, coupled with his tree surgeon days, have led Walter to conclude that we need to redress the fundamental imbalance in our relationship with Nature. He fears we are on the brink of disaster.



City Tree by Rommy Blümel, 2016
Commissioned for LEAF! a Common Ground newspaper

“Ideally, every parish and town should be encouraged to develop a vision for trees in their locality”

We need more trees in towns and a more diverse farmed landscape. Modern forestry has cleaned up its act and he believes we should be using more home-grown timber to lock carbon into wooden buildings. “Ideally, every parish and town should be encouraged to develop a vision for trees in their locality.” His book leads us through the tricky decisions we all need to ponder to make these things happen.

He’s walking the talk too. He is a committed XR activist and looks vaguely revolutionary, tall, slim and dressed in a battered leather jacket. He is also a central force in the Shaftesbury Tree Group, along with ecological visionaries Angela King and Sue Clifford – founders of Common Ground and Apple Day. Together they are greening the hilltop town. The group has produced two tree walk maps (which I helped create)

and has an ambitious five-year tree-planting scheme. Covid has curtailed the plan to involve the whole community in planting for the moment, but Walter and a small team still managed to get nearly 1,000 trees and saplings into the ground last winter.

Inevitably, a few of them were uprooted by late-night park users almost immediately. Walter shrugs and takes on the expression I imagine is that of a man dangling from a tree again. “We need a situation where everybody wants trees and that’s the norm. Sadly we’re a long way from that.” But he’s ready to dust down his negotiating skills if need be.

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Dangling from a rope, Walter would then enter into some delicate negotiations, balancing his client’s wishes to reduce the crown with an onslaught of conflicting requests, from “Take it down. We’re always in its shadow” to “It’s my favourite. Don’t touch a branch.”

Finding empathy with every standpoint is what helped Walter develop his unique arboreal nous and an open-minded realism that we need more of today. Politicians of every hue are falling over themselves to quote ever more ambitious plans to plant millions of saplings to improve the UK’s pitifully poor tree cover, which currently stands at a sparse 13% compared with a healthier European average of 38%. But Walter is well aware that even this seemingly innocuous and virtuous aim comes with trap doors of controversy.

For a start, within that 13% we have too many monocrop plantations, so we need to be wary about being seduced by the vote-garnering pledges. “We have to spend more time asking what sort of trees we need to plant, and where,” explains Walter in his calm voice as we chat on a park bench overlooking the gentle folds of the Blackmore Vale near the town of Shaftesbury in