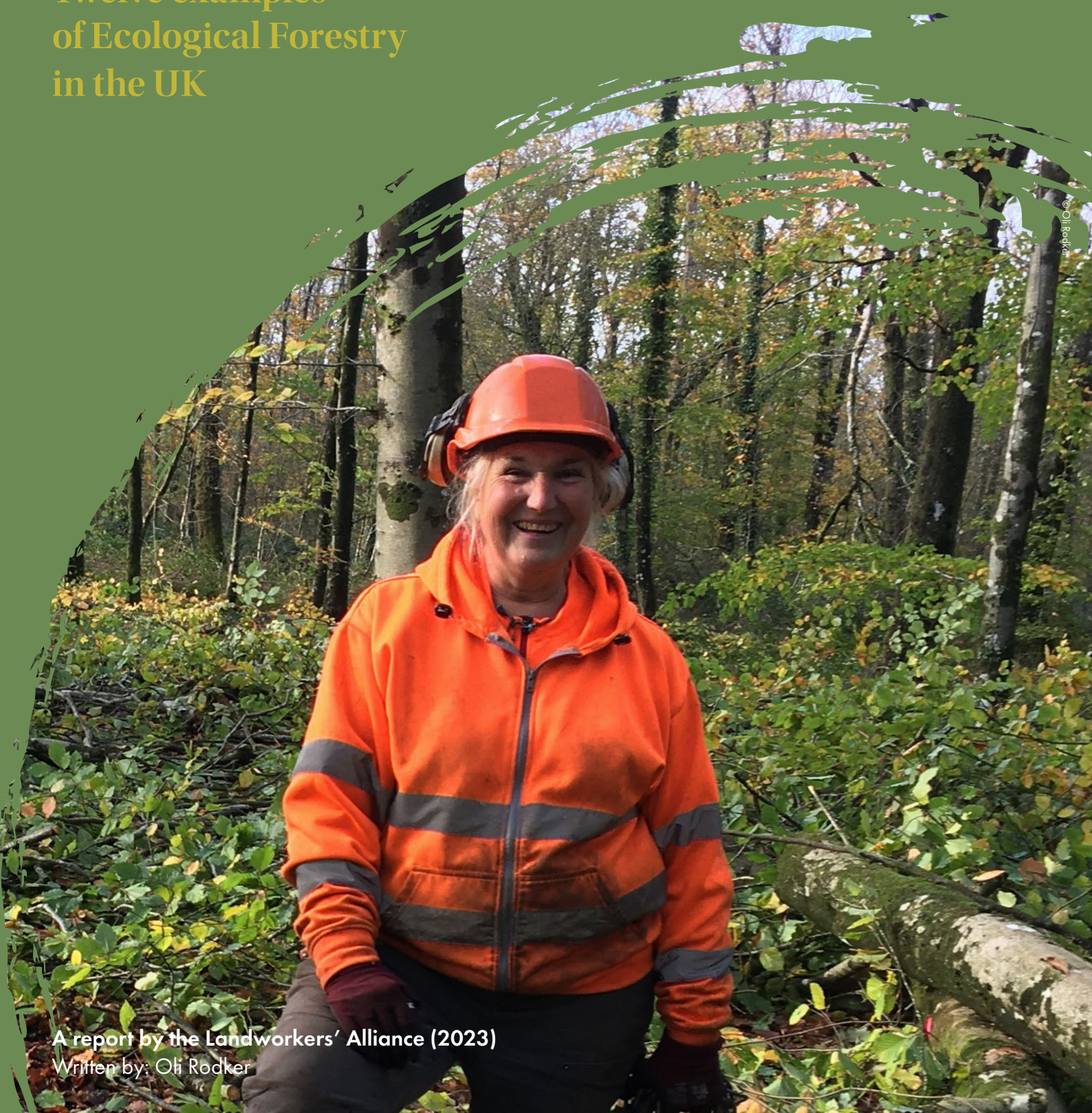


The Cutting Edge

Twelve examples
of Ecological Forestry
in the UK



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A report by the Landworkers' Alliance (2023)
Written by: Oli Rodker

The Landworkers' Alliance Forestry Sector represents forestry workers working within a sustainable, regenerative, and ecological framework.

This report showcases twelve businesses – including LWA Forestry Sector members and similar enterprises – demonstrating the great work that they do, the benefits they create, and the barriers they currently face. This research couldn't have taken place without the generous support and contributions from all the participating businesses, for which we offer our thanks and appreciation.

We are at the cutting edge. Join us!



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Introduction

The role of trees and forests is absolutely crucial in how our land functions.

Managed properly, our forests and woodlands can play an important role in tackling the climate and biodiversity crises, increasing our self-sufficiency in timber products, while also helping to build social wellbeing and rural employment. With the right support, the UK ecological forestry and woodland sector could provide a multitude of benefits to nature and society. It's time we recognised the public goods that ecological woodland businesses provide and enabled them to grow and thrive.

Yet the politics of land use and forests remains at a crossroads in the UK. Despite the recent shift in narrative around land use to one that considers biodiversity, carbon sequestration and habitat creation, policy and public finance remain wedded to a production model that is literally squeezing life from the earth. This report serves to highlight an alternative model, in which forestry businesses can work for both people and planet.

The report focuses on twelve case studies of ecological forestry and woodland management – seven in England, four in Wales and one in Scotland – proving that sustainable and regenerative forestry businesses not only exist in the UK, but that they are also economically viable and are actively benefiting their local landscapes and communities in multiple ways.

With greater political support and deeper public understanding, these businesses could all be scaled up



and replicated. Together that would create a large and vibrant, ecological forestry sector for the UK.

By exploring best practice we can develop a positive plan for the future of forestry in the UK. By highlighting successes and looking at the barriers to upscaling and expanding ecological forestry businesses and projects, we can identify gaps and learn what needs to be done.

Relevant industries and government bodies should seek out these great examples and use them to help shape policy which would support similar forestry enterprises and allow the sector to reach its full potential.

What is Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF)?

Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF) is a forestry system that avoids large clearfells and the associated detrimental effects that they have on forest soils and ecosystems. CCF builds resilient forests with irregular structure and a range of different aged trees, which also

contain high value older trees which can be harvested as required. This produces structurally, visually and biologically diverse forests, which provide quality timber alongside a wide range of ecosystem services including soil protection and carbon sequestration.

The 2019 LWA Forestry Manifesto set out that:

“The Landworkers’ Alliance vision is one of well managed, diverse and resilient, multi-purpose forests. Our forests will deliver a range of ecological services without compromising the ability to yield good quality timber. With good planning and investment the UK’s forests can address the climate challenge, restore nature and boost UK employment and rural regeneration. A triple win-win-win.”

That vision remains, and is consistently backed up by the work and experiences of our members.

Our members’ work is associated with the following benefits:

- Biodiversity is protected and enhanced through habitat creation and sensitive management that responds to local conditions and the needs of a diversity of species
- Carbon sequestration occurs in tree biomass and soil – trees are natural ‘Carbon Capture and Storage’ systems!

- Communities benefit from recreational access to nature and from social, health and educational opportunities
- Communities benefit from increased employment and rural regeneration, as economies that are rooted in local production are able to thrive
- Increasing our own UK timber supply means we can reduce our reliance on imports from damaging practices overseas, which cause numerous human rights and environmental abuses
- Soil structure and water are retained by tree roots and good forest management, which reduces the risk of flooding downstream and limits soil loss
- Agricultural production is helped by judicious tree planting, providing shelter, food and landscape amenity.

The range of benefits that ecological forestry enterprises provide are exactly the kind of public goods that governments claim they want to support. Yet these businesses are often operating outside the scope of government support packages, subsidies and schemes. Despite this, they are able to run viable businesses, make a decent income, and enrich their local landscapes and communities while doing so. Imagine what they could become with some extra support!



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Case studies



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A note on the case studies

These twelve sample enterprises range from mobile, itinerant individuals managing differing woods on contracts across a region, to partnerships managing their own woodlands, to medium-scale timber production operations, and larger-scale educational enterprises which employ dozens of people. In terms of the forest areas they manage, they range from just 4 or 5 acres to several hundred acres.

But they all support at least one full time job, they sell products from UK trees, and their woodland

management supports a great abundance of wildlife and environmental benefits. As with many land based businesses there is often a mix of income streams. These include, but are not limited to: sawn timber, coppice poles, building timber, landscape products like gates or fencing, firewood and educational or consultancy work. This diverse mixture of income streams allows businesses to be sensitive to the environment, to carry out a range of activities over the year to follow the seasons, and to respond to fluctuations in local demand.

Abbey Timber



Abbey Timber is a family-run sawmilling and forestry enterprise based in Abbey St Bathans in the Scottish Borders. It manages 270ha of woodland, made up of 24 small blocks surrounded by farmland. The species mix is a mosaic of conifers and some significant remnants of ancient oak woodland, some of which is a protected Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

A sawmill has been present on the site for over a hundred years, running originally on water power with a circular saw. Electricity arrived in the mid 1900's and since then a modern sawmill business has been gradually built up, offering a variety of sawn and finished timber. The majority of orders are from within a 50 mile radius, but some can be as far as London or abroad.

Storm Arwen, which devastated forests in the area in November 2021, brought down 70 hectares of trees in

Region	Berwickshire, Scotland
Business type	Family run estate forest and sawmill
Size	270 ha, in 24 separate blocks
Species type	20% each of sitka, larch and Scots pine, 40% is mixed
Products	Sawn and finished timber, plus biomass chip to supply district heating system
Year established	Over 50 years ago
Annual average turnover	£250,000
Main costs	Variable
Employees	4.5 FTE
Legal form	Company

the area (around 25,000m³ of timber), and demonstrated the fluctuations in timber supply that changes in climate and more extreme weather can cause. This sudden abundance of wood has proved beyond the capacity of Abbey Timber to process on their own – some will be harvested and milled in-house, but the pine and spruce are being sold to bigger sawmills and some of the pine is even being shipped to Holland from the local port.

They mill around 700m³ of wood a year, but also supply 300m³ of woodchip to a district heating system which supplies heating to the majority of the local village of around 50 people.

The conifer trees were originally planted following WWII. The plan is to slowly shift the management over to a CCF system, by continued thinnings and both underplanting and natural regeneration. The starting point is already relatively diverse, but they aim to increase the number of different species and ages by restructuring with many different intimate and group mixtures, such Douglas fir and cherry, Scots pine, aspen and birch and western red cedar, sitka spruce and red alder. Storm Arwen obviously had a very significant impact on plans to restructure the woods, but areas will be re-planted as the fallen timber is cleared up.

Despite spruce getting some bad press, both sitka and Norway spruce are a valued part of some of the replanting mixes, well adapted to a range of sites and quickly producing versatile timber used for construction, fencing, pallets, and even internal joinery. In a mixed wood, where diversity is resilience, most viable species can have a role to play.

Leeds Coppice Workers



Leeds Coppice Workers are a peri-urban workers co-operative, restoring woods in and around Leeds and selling and promoting local woodland products. Unusually for a forestry business their work covers urban as well as rural areas (the Leeds district is a very large one), so they manage all kinds of woodland, but most of it has been uncared for, for a long time.

A lot of their work involves bringing unmanaged woods and coppice back into rotation, so the first cut produces very little in the way of high quality product, but plenty of wildlife and biodiversity benefit. Productive coppice requires consistent planting density and regular rotations to get consistent sized poles.

They provide a variety of products, including bean poles and other garden products, hedging stakes and binders, fascines (bundles of wood) for natural flood management solutions and environmental improvement, hurdles, firewood, charcoal, craftwood, materials for schools and so on.

In 2022 they were working over 11 different sites, cutting mostly in small 0.4 to 0.6 acre coupes, often in publicly owned woods. Their recent success as a business means that they



Region	Yorkshire
Business type	Coppice management co-operative
Size	Managing a range of woodlands
Species type	Mixed, usually including hazel coppice
Products	Firewood, charcoal, craft products
Year established	2012
Annual average turnover	£65,000
Main costs	Wages, truck, machinery and wood processor, fencing
Employees	8 members, all working part time
Legal form	Workers Co-operative

are now able to choose the woods they take on, and are paid to do the management at some sites, rather than only taking the end product and getting no management fee, as was largely the case when they first started.

One advantage of working in an urban area is the available markets, and their scale of operation means they can take on significant orders. The flip side is that a major barrier for them has been a safe and secure processing yard – their current base is the third site they've had in ten years. Whilst it is the best of the three spaces, their presence is based on a relatively insecure service level agreement with some limitations. Transporting wood around their multiple sites is also a major problem; for example their charcoal kilns are in one place but the coppices are widely spread out. In order to grow as a business they would benefit from better facilities for processing and storage.

Sawmills Devon

Sawmills Devon is a successful example of a sawmill business, providing sawn timber from adjacent forests. Overseeing a number of management plans and felling licences across about 100ha of woods near to his base, Mike can take all sorts of orders and respond with individual tree selection and sensitive extraction of trees. This allows the woods to avoid the clearfell/replant regime, with all the damage that usually entails to wildlife, soil and watercourses. This means the woods can gradually move to a CCF system, which means the woods overall are growing in value rather than being periodically removed entirely. 90% of his trade is in sawn timber.

The business is based on Mike knowing the woods and trees extremely well, because he lives very close to the woods and can spot problems and opportunities at an early stage and extract the right trees for the job. The scale at which he operates means he can meet most orders and people like the business because of its role in supporting local, resilient woodland management.

Being able to build his timber framed house at the site of his woodyard and sawmill was a key game-changer in allowing him to expand and invest. Planning permission for the home was crucial to the business but it took a number of years of persistent and hard work to achieve.

Region	Devon
Business type	Suppliers of sawn timber and roundwood forest products
Size	Owens 2ha, but and manages and extracts from about 100ha
Species type	Wide range of age, class and species, covering native hardwood and conifers
Products	90% sawn timber
Year established	1990
Annual average turnover	£600,000
Main costs	Wages, buying in extra roundwood timber, machinery maintenance
Employees	5 FTE
Legal form	Limited Company

Having become a successful local business, employing around 5 FTE staff, the main challenge is now finding access to a larger processing space. The business has strong demand and would like to expand and to secure a long term location which would allow for maintaining the trained staff. However, the sawmill and yard is currently tied to Mike's personal land and there is a serious lack of affordable opportunities for such business expansion. This echoes a similar emerging situation with successful local food and farming businesses. Even once established, expansion is very difficult because of the lack of suitable processing, packing and storing space; in this case, timber yards.



Rowan Working Horses

Kate Mobbs Morgan runs an itinerant low impact woodland management business. Some of the work is carried out with her with three Ardennes horses, Kip, Quinn, and Sol – but horse logging is only a part of the work she does.

Kate works across woodlands in South Wales and Monmouthshire, carrying out woodland restoration, selective thinning and extraction, often for public bodies. Using horses is ideal when the ground conditions are tricky or there are high conservation requirements, and they are particularly good where the soil is thin or sensitive, where the ground is wet or steep, and where very selective felling is necessary. Their light weight and high manoeuvrability make them perfect for working around delicate flora and fauna, and they run on grass and oats – not diesel!

Kate first got interested by seeing a horse logging demonstration at a show after which they then offered her some training days (Kate had no previous horse experience). A business like this takes a while to get established, due to the kit and experience one needs to have, but Kate was lent the equipment and harnesses to begin with which enabled her to get started. Forestry management on foot like this, with or without horses, is

Region	Monmouthshire
Business type	Low impact woodland management, sometimes with horses
Size	Variable
Species type	Mixed
Products	Varied – good management is the goal, not products
Year established	2010
Annual average turnover	£55,000
Main costs	Sub-contractors, horses, transport, insurance
Employees	1 FTE
Legal form	Sole trader

hard work, and Kate has a sideline in gardening work which is lighter and fills in the gaps.

It's hard to be a woman in forestry, the work has to be very high quality all the time, as you are double judged for the work and for being a woman in the role. Despite that, demand for her work is high and there is expanding interest in horse management because of all the associated benefits.

There are, however, barriers to growth: like finding well trained tree cutters, and getting the funding to support training. The contracts are often so tight that it is increasingly hard to train people on the job, and then of course there is also a rural housing issue. Kate is currently renting, and she applied for a One Planet Development (OPD) development but it was rejected. Hard graft and stubbornness are prerequisites for this work.



Elwy Working Woods



Elwy Co-op manage and work around 70ha of mixed forest in the locality of their sawmill and yard, in Denbighshire (North Wales). The business is based in woods that were planted 35 years ago on a bare field site. The forest management, extraction, sawmill and frame building workshop work together, and a local biomass heating supplier takes the wastewood and thinnings.

The trees going into the mill are almost all very local, while the income from milling pays for the work in the woods.

Region	Denbighshire
Business type	Woodland management, timber, buildings
Size	40 hectares of woodland owned by members and a further 30 hectares in the locality
Species type	Conifers (larch, western red cedar, Scots pine, Douglas fir) broadleaf (oak, sycamore, ash, birch)
Products	Firewood, cladding, timber, building frames
Year established	Co-operative established in 2010, but 10ha woods planted as the centre of the business in late 1980's
Annual average turnover	£70,000 for the co-op, but members also have separate businesses
Main costs	Parts, wages
Employees	12 members in the co-op
Legal form	Workers Co-operative, and associated companies

Elwy is a good example of the interconnections and synergies between woodlands that need management, a business that needs trees, and a rural area that needs buildings – especially housing for the people employed in the forest and mill.

Detailed local knowledge of the woods and the trees is invaluable, as this allows selective felling and sensitive management. Being in the woods means that felling and extraction can take place according to local conditions, and it works because the staff live in the woods or nearby. That local knowledge means better care, higher quality trees and a higher, quicker income. It couldn't have happened without a long term vision and investment plan from Adrian who originally planted the trees, and although it didn't make money for years, now there is a sustainable cycle of processing and management.

There are of course still issues: the cost of putting in good access to the forest is prohibitive, yet would be necessary for an even better level of management. Planning policy is still a big barrier with very little affordable housing available locally, but in this instance – the workers could even build themselves the housing – if only they were allowed to do so!

Broadleaf Wales

Just a mile downstream of Elwy Woods is Bron Haul Farm, another site where grazing land has been afforested. Following nearly 30 years of meticulous management it is starting to show its productive potential as the woodland completes its conversion from plantation to Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF). Broadleaf Wales' aim is to market the timber resource as it grows and develops.

The 20ha woodland was planted in two phases 25-30 years ago, and then again ten years ago. The woodland creation was supported by public funding through the Woodland Grant Scheme and Glastir Woodland Creation. Gratefully received as this support has been, the farm would ironically have received more money in government subsidy over the years had it continued to graze sheep!

Without a doubt, the most important work done here is grey squirrel control. This invasive squirrel has a habit of bark stripping many of our broadleaf tree species, causing stunted growth, disease and destroying their timber (and nut growing) potential, with oak, birch, beech, sweet chestnut and sycamore all being very vulnerable. By trapping 80-100 squirrels each year between April and July, almost all damage is prevented.

The mature woodland is currently undergoing a third (and possibly final) round of thinning in its conversion to CCF. Whilst the first thinning yielded timber only fit for firewood and charcoal, the second thinning also provided fencing materials in the form of cleft sweet chestnut and struts and



Region	Denbighshire
Business type	Timber from own plantation
Size	20ha, plus 8ha grazing on the holding
Species type	Young mixed plantation, 25-30 years old
Products	Timber and firewood, also consulting and delivering schemes and courses
Year established	1993
Annual average turnover	£20,000, £12,000 of which on wood products
Main costs	Machinery and tools
Employees	1 FTE
Legal form	Two sole traders, in partnership

strainers from the small larch component. The first customer for these products has been Bron Haul Farm itself, helping to keep the remaining small beef suckler herd out of the woodland, but there is an increasingly strong local demand for fencing.

The biggest of the thinned out stems are now being planked, naturally, at their neighbouring sawmill at Elwy Wood. Mostly ash, cherry and larch, the owners are using these currently small volumes of sawn wood to learn how to stack, season, price and market timber. But volume will increase as the market interest is already there.

There have been clear environmental benefits from planting trees on grazing land, and now it's possible to see a far more resilient ecology in the soil, water and carbon stabilised on the sloping ground. Meanwhile, the remaining herd of cows grazes the wonderfully sheltered woodland-enclosed fields of species-rich grassland, supplemented with summer prunings from the woodland. In July the cows extend their extraordinarily long tongues for the cherries weighing down the branches overhanging the fields – agroforestry in action!



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The Woodland Skills Centre

The Woodland Skills Centre is in North-east Wales in the heart of the Clwydian Range Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The land extends to 50 acres and is owned by a family trust who acquired it over 40 years ago.

At that time the land included self-sown woodland, rough grazing, an old sandpit and various pieces of unmanaged plantations, mainly Norway spruce and beech. The vision was to move to mixed native hardwoods managed as coppice with standards. There have always been 3 management objectives (all equal): social, environmental and economic. It is a working woodland that pays its way producing coppice timber, firewood and income from related activities such as providing courses in the woods. The woods have been subject to regular species monitoring and recording with a continuous programme of habitat creation and management. This has proved successful with the woodlands being home to many species of plants and wildlife.

Region	Denbighshire
Business type	Woodland skills centre focussing on crafts, education and health
Size	20ha
Species type	Mixed, hazel with standards
Products	Hazel hurdles, charcoal, sawn timber
Year established	Early 1980s
Annual average turnover	£21,000 from forest product, but the Woodland Centre has a much higher overall turnover
Main costs	Machinery
Employees	12 at the Centre but 1 FTE on forest management
Legal form	A limited company and trust owns the land





The land hosts the Woodland Skills Centre, a community-owned, not-for-profit social enterprise, as well as Bodfari Environmental Ltd, a commercial company specialising in woodland management, environmental work, grounds maintenance, firewood and charcoal. Between the two organisations they employ around 12 people.

The Woodland Skills Centre runs a programme of around 80 courses a year in traditional crafts, attracting students from all over the UK and from overseas. The Centre also runs family holidays, hosts visits from schools and runs a wide-ranging Social Prescribing Programme with between 8 and 12 sessions each week working with both adults and young people. Most of the Social Prescribing referrals are from Social Services and other departments of the Local Authority and Health Board.

As part of the Centre's commitment to sustainability the buildings are all carbon negative and energy performance band A, with traditional timber-frame construction, timber cladding, internal lime plaster and sheeps wool insulation. Despite some initial opposition from the Planning Department, eventually planning permission was granted and the range of timber-frame buildings on site, all made by local labour from locally sourced timber, are now seen as a model of sustainability and attract many visitors. The Centre believes that it should be economically sustainable and therefore does not look for or receive external grant funding; Instead, its income is entirely derived from the courses it runs and the programmes it delivers.

Hill Holt Wood



Hill Holt is a woodland-based business that has expanded into social care and educational work. Two woodlands are the basis for their work, which now includes a suite of related activities. Hill Holt Wood itself is a 22 acre native broadleaf woodland, owned by the charity, where much of the educational activities take place. Norton Big Wood is a 43 acre mixed forest of Scots pine, larch, oak and hazel, where they carry out a lot of their social care work. Alongside this they manage 1000 acres of woods in the locality as a landscape and forestry business for firewood and timber.

At Hill Holt, where things began, the previous owners had taken out a lot of the mature oak, leaving only low quality timber, but this was the basis for building up what is now a significant local employer with around 40 staff. Trees from the woods they manage have provided the cladding and timber for the numerous buildings on site.



Region	Lincolnshire
Business type	Education social welfare, landscape management
Size	9ha
Species type	Broadleaf (oak, ash, birch, hazel)
Products	Timber and firewood, but main business is supporting people
Year established	Woods purchased in 1995 to begin social enterprise, and in 2002 new directors took over
Annual average turnover	£ 1.14million
Main costs	Staff wages (70%), vehicles, diesel
Employees	40 staff, 32 FTE
Legal form	Charity

They are now a locally and nationally funded college, based within the woods, whose main work is helping young people and those with mental health issues. Some people need 1:1 supervision, or are vulnerable with various health conditions. The charity brings this human care together with ecological restoration and habitat management, providing an invaluable service for the community. Alongside this they have a trading arm which carries out off-site contracting, produces timber and firewood, runs funded events and manages sites for local authorities.

There is significant surplus need for their work, yet physically the woods are at full capacity in terms of parking and the numbers of people they can host. At the same time, their costs and wages are rising while funding has remained static, posing a real threat to the future of the business.

Underwood Crafts



Alistair Hayhurst is a woodland craftsman based in the Derbyshire Dales. He makes a living from restoring and managing coppice and turning the poles into products, together with traditional rural work like hedgelaying and hurdle making. Craftsmen like Alistair are keeping traditional skills alive. He makes garden furniture, screens, hurdles and gates; mainly for the Derbyshire area, though his hurdles go all over the country. He supplements this with work in schools and training courses.

Alistair doesn't own his own woods, but manages and extracts from various sites. In Derbyshire, good coppice poles are hard to come by and he obtains the best quality

We have about 23,000 to 50,000 ha of coppice in the UK.¹ On 30,000 hectares of good coppice we could have 15,000 jobs like Alistair's. Meanwhile, according to Forest Research² there are currently only about 16,000 forestry workers in the UK in total.

¹ National Forestry Inventory, 2020, https://ncfed.org.uk/news/national_forest_inventory/ *National Forest Inventory says coppice area is 23,000ha but there is plenty more not properly managed or accounted for

² Forestry Facts and Figures 2020, Forest Research, <https://www.forestryresearch.gov.uk/publications/forestry-facts-and-figures-2020/>

Region	Derbyshire
Business type	Coppice and coppice crafts
Size	Various woods, but 4-5 acres is supporting his business
Species type	Woods in different management conditions, includes hazel and sweet chestnut
Products	Hurdles, chairs, garden ornament, hedge-laying, willow structures, school workshops
Year established	2000
Annual average turnover	£30,000 – 35,000
Main costs	50% is fuel, costs after that are low
Employees	1 FTE
Legal form	Sole trader

poles by travelling to Hampshire and using coppice that has been kept in rotation for generations, and which therefore supplies consistently good products.

The pieces of woodland he manages locally are very mixed, and extraction can be hard, especially from steep ground with no recent management history. A rotation is 7-8 years and you need security of tenure to make the considerable investment of work worthwhile. In a sparsely wooded area it is an issue that landowners often lack an understanding of woodland rotations and the long term agreements and commitment that they require.

Alistair makes a living from a small area of woodland, which illustrates the employment levels we could have if we invested in our coppice. He extracts poles from about 2 hectares of woods annually, although other income comes from workshops, courses and willow hurdles. One hazel panel can sell for £150 and be made from 3 good hazel stools – and this takes up about 15 square metres of land.



Working Woodlands Cornwall



Region	Cornwall
Business type	Coppicing and reinstating woodland management
Size	Various
Species type	Varied, includes oak and Ancient Semi Natural Woodland
Products	Firewood, charcoal, landscaping products, consultancy
Year established	2010
Annual average turnover	£65,000 turnover, £25,000 from firewood and £10,000 from charcoal
Main costs	£55,000 is wages, then fuel and overheads
Employees	2.5 FTE
Legal form	Community Interest Company (CIC)

Working Woodlands Cornwall is a Community Interest Company working to restore, manage and create woodlands in Cornwall. It is currently composed of three full time staff but they are set to expand. They work across several woodlands, owned by conservation bodies and private estates, that have both biodiversity and productivity aims. Coppice restoration and CCF make up their primary silvicultural techniques.

Their main products are firewood, charcoal and coppiced poles, alongside a contracting and consultancy service. Their biggest selling product is oak firewood which they dry in polytunnels to ensure the low moisture content required. The business grew out of a one person coppice-based enterprise which started in 2010, and in 2016 this became Working Woodlands Cornwall CIC when a valuable volunteer became a business partner.

As well as forestry and forest products, they deliver training, public engagement events, work placements and entry level jobs to create better understanding of woodland ecosystems and meet the sector's skills shortage. Consultation work includes woodland creation design with the aim to bring Cornwall's tree cover up to the national average, agroforestry, and woodland management plans.

Much of their work is based on woodland restoration for Cornwall Wildlife Trust with whom they have a good working relationship. However, the woodlands have often been out of management for so long that they have both a low ecological value and a low economic product value. Reintroduction of woodland management is increasing biodiversity and climate resilience as well as improving the economic viability of the woods, and the Trust are excited by the improvements to their reserve.



Working Woodland Cornwall's work in boosting public access to the woods enables people to encounter the foresters and their work. Local people can then develop an understanding of woodland management and be less alarmed by the sight of a felled tree in its context, and firewood and charcoal customers are able to see the management involved in heating their homes and cooking their food whilst enjoying a walk in the woods.

In the long term, Working Woodlands Cornwall aim to bring more areas of woodland into management and create infrastructure to produce non-combustible forest products. There is almost no woodland industry or culture locally so the team are having to create the methods of production and markets from scratch. Financial assistance for equipment is another challenge to work around, as grants are often aimed at larger operators working large

areas of forest. Cornwall's woods are small with poor access and have requirements that are currently not taken into consideration by current support schemes.

Cornwall's housing crisis is a further issue facing the business. Second home and holiday cottage ownership has pushed house prices way above average local incomes and a fully subscribed rental market means land workers in the region have to find 'alternative', often less than ideal, housing solutions.

Middle Ruckham Farm and Forestry



Middle Ruckham Farm and Forest is a mixed holding in Devon. Forestry work provides the living, and it currently comes from predominantly one product: wooden compost toilet buildings. The forest is 24 acres of mainly conifer: having started by taking out a lot of the spruce, there is now Douglas fir, larch, western red cedar and some poplar

The woods were purchased in 2002 and cost £1200/acre; it would be far more difficult to make this business now, based on current land and forest prices. The woods were derelict when purchased and Dave needed to find an economic driver to fund the sustainable management plan. He fixed on the niche product of compost toilets as a way to add value from lower grade trees, so in effect the marketing drove the management plan, showing that developing marketing skills can be an important part of forestry work.

They take out about 30m³ a year within a CCF system, but the forest is probably growing at 100m³, so the woods are providing an income and increasing in volume and value every day.

The compost toilet buildings are a good example of adding commercial value to low grade timber. One good tree gives the timber for one toilet

Region	Devon
Business type	Sawn timber and small buildings
Size	Just under 10 ha
Species type	Planted Ancient Woodland Sites of conifer (Douglas fir, larch, western red cedar)
Products	Sawn timber for buildings, compost toilets, firewood
Year established	Woods date from 1964, purchased in 2002
Annual average turnover	£70,000
Main costs	Wages (50%), materials (35%), machinery and yard
Employees	3 FTE
Legal form	Limited Company

building – which can sell for £2,000-£3,000, rather than £100-200 as bare poles – and a living can therefore be made from felling just 30 trees a year.

They are also part of a wider group of people who share a Wood-Mizer sawmill on a principle of ‘rent for use’. Sharing costs and time like this makes an expensive machine affordable, and this is a key part to making the whole system work.

Local housing cost and availability is again critical. They live on the adjacent farm which was bought previously so they currently have no significant housing costs, but if they had to pay rental costs, alongside higher land prices, this economic business model would be very challenging.



Say it with Wood

Toby Allen began fencing work 27 years ago. Four years later he started cutting the trees and wood that he needed, and from there the business has grown and they are now a relatively large local employer which employs around a dozen people.

The company manages a range of forests on a contract basis in the Herefordshire area, but also goes to Kent to fell and collect high quality sweet chestnut coppice as Kent has the best sweet chestnut coppice due to its history of pole production for hops growing. Last year about 3,000 tonnes of wood went through the yard, the majority felled themselves, from around 12-15 acres of coppice plus contract thinning and harvesting. They are now based in a large ex-arable grain drying shed, with the yard run by one partner, Aly, and the woodland work run by Toby.

They make a wide range of products, including bespoke gates, garden furniture and fencing products (particularly if

Region	Herefordshire
Business type	Sawn timber and small buildings
Size	Working in around 80ha across different sites
Species type	Sweet chestnut mainly, with some mixed woods
Products	Fencing, management, firewood, craft and landscape products
Year established	Pre-2000
Annual average turnover	£500,000-£600,000
Main costs	Wages (£24,0000 per year), loan repayments, fuel
Employees	10 FTE
Legal form	Limited Company

something more creative is wanted) timber and roundwood, firewood and so on. High demand means their fencing products go all around the country. Woodchip and sawdust go to local markets for bedding, paths and gardens, and this contributes to an efficient, low waste economy. Sending goods around the country is not ideal for energy costs of course, but is much better than importing from overseas. The solution would be to invest in and fund every region to manage its forests and re-create good quality coppice.

Increasingly they have trained up their own staff, but the limiting factor now is a supply of good quality local timber – especially sweet chestnut, which is useful because it is so durable.

It is no surprise to find that rural housing is yet again an issue. They train up employees who often then have nowhere to live on the wages that rural, manual work provides. It is also a struggle competing with the price of imported timber. Despite the valuable work they do in providing rural employment and good habitat management, there is no protection from international price volatility. Businesses like this are always seeking to put environmental considerations first, and that can often cost them thousands of pounds, for example if they delayed their cut because of ground conditions. But there is no real support to help or encourage this sort of care to be taken.

The small profit margins make the model tight, as other forest managers can undercut good practice with cheaper alternatives sourced from bad management both in the UK and abroad. The drive for low costs within international trade punishes the environment, and shows why there is a need for more systemic solutions.



What Common themes emerge?

The benefits of an integrated approach

For a long time there has been a division in forest management, where 'production' happened in one forest – mainly in fast growing monocultures of conifer species – and 'conservation' happened in another – mainly in native species woodlands. But nature thrives in holistic and diverse systems, not in monocultures of isolated species, and human interaction and management can play a key role in maintaining and building this diversity.

Humans must recognise that we are part of these living systems and if we use the right stewardship techniques, then timber production and conservation can succeed together.

The majority of our timber imports are softwood, a material that we need domestically, and we can grow these trees in a way that is good for nature. If planned carefully, we can avoid blanketing our landscapes with monoculture plantations. An integrated approach means that we can plant conifers and broadleaves in blocks or intimate plantings to get the best out of both. Economic use can go alongside social activity, using the same physical space but at different times. To the same degree, we don't need to keep people out of woodland habitats to look after them; we can actually improve them by responsible management in a way that also considers wildlife. The interplay of people and nature over thousands of years has given us the woodland flora and fauna we have today. **Human interaction is not the problem; the question is what sort of interaction we have.**

The importance of firewood

Almost all the forestry and woodland enterprises in this report make a portion of their income from firewood, indeed some of them are heavily dependent on it. At a time when the burning of biomass – wood – in some situations is contentious because of its industrial scale, its reliance on imports, or the smoke and pollution it causes,

it is important to note that burning wood for energy has been practised by humans for thousands of years. Making a fire to cook your food over, or heating your home is not inherently a 'bad' thing to do, and while many of our woodlands are lacking in sustainable management cycles, any preparatory work carried out in these woods is almost always going to produce firewood as a by-product, sales of which can go towards supporting future management cycles. But not all burning of biomass is equal. Importing wood pellets made in toxic factories overseas, to feed power stations here, so that shareholders can keep subsidies rolling in, may not be quite so positive. **Burning wood is not the problem: the question is how and what we burn.**

Global trade and UK Supply

We've created a vicious cycle for ourselves here in the UK, where we don't produce enough timber but instead import what we 'need' from overseas. Currently, global demand for timber continues to increase, driving deforestation in forests across the globe at an alarming rate.

Our unsustainable reliance on overseas timber imports cannot go on. It is a catastrophic market failure where 'free markets' are destroying the homes and livelihoods of forest peoples around the world, while being a major cause of the climate crisis which affects everyone.

To really encourage our own UK industry, we must at some point control our imports. That could be through tariffs, or quotas, or better regulations, or properly funded and monitored certification schemes around the sources of supply. The UK has a relatively low total forested land area compared to Europe, (13% in UK and 40% average in the EU) and so we have a long way to go. We need to fast track creating new woodlands, alongside getting our existing woods under much better management. Then we can have a locally responsive timber supply all around the country, and less products shipped around the world. **Trade is not the problem; the question is what kind of trade we have.**

What are the main barriers to the expansion of the ecological forestry sector?

Affordable housing

Without affordable rural housing, people simply cannot afford to live near their places of work. Living nearby is crucial to reducing environmental costs. It means being able to act in harmony with the changing seasons, to work with unexpected fluctuations in weather, or to respond to local demand. That change will require amending the current planning legislation to allow rural forestry worker dwellings far more easily. As within farming, the lack of 'access to land' is often the result of an 'access to housing' issue.

Grants and funding

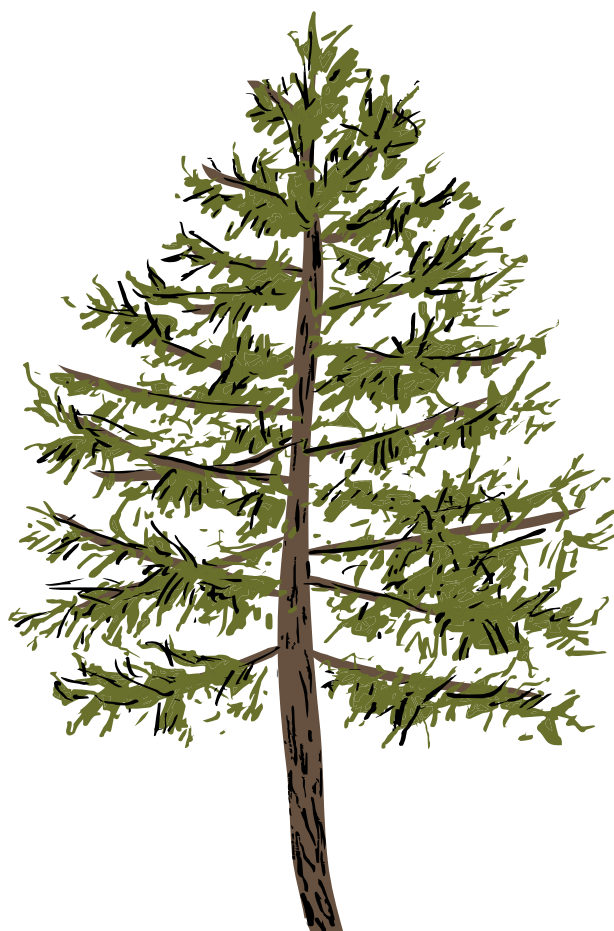
Grants and funds are currently focused towards large volume operators. This is seen for instance, in the administrative burden they require of applicants, or the types of subsidies offered for machinery and equipment. They do not account for smaller businesses, with lower turnover, or which respond to local conditions and orders. We need a far more flexible approach which understands local constraints and issues, seeks to build economic renewal, and can adequately reward high social and environmental benefits. That will require a fully funded and trained advisory service.

Cost of land

Many of these businesses would struggle to get started today because of the huge rises in land and housing prices seen over the last 10-15 years. Housing cost relates to planning regulations and political policy of course, but recently there has also been pressure from land speculators and carbon credit companies. These people are interested primarily in land as an asset class that can make money, and as 'greenwash' for allowing their continued greenhouse gas emissions. Regulation, taxation and a clear land use strategy is needed to ensure land serves the community, local markets and nature, and does not serve people trying to make easy money.

There are a number of other related barriers...

- Low public understanding of forest management and timber supply issues must be addressed.
- There is a lack of relevant training and expertise about the possibilities of regenerative forestry compounded by a lack of funded opportunities for practical skill building.
- There is a historical divide between farmers and foresters (which is beginning to be bridged) but which needs a significant boost to further mutual understanding – yet no organisation is being resourced to do it properly.
- Price competition with unregulated suppliers from abroad.



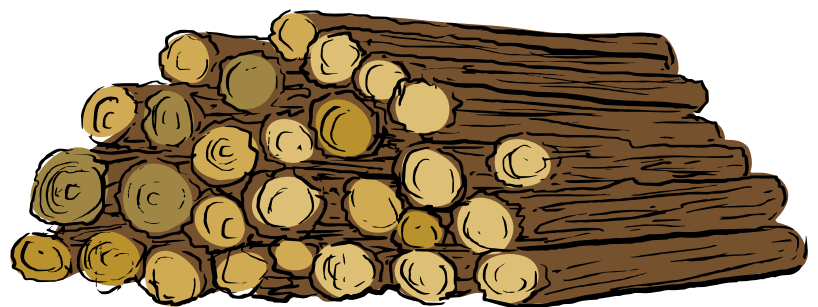
Politics and Policy

There is a story we can tell about UK forests. Rich, varied woodlands, with bluebells, dappled shade and birds singing up in the branches of mighty trees. Intermittently, people extract trees, coppice the old stools, or carefully manage blockfellings. Some of these people are linked to the local building industry which creates and retrofits beautiful, well insulated homes, made from a local supply of carbon-sequestering timber. When the foresters aren't felling, the woods are alive with people enjoying nature, forest schools and social welfare programmes. In every town there are 'tree stations' and timber hubs, sourcing wood locally and selling sawn wood, building timber, firewood, charcoal, sawdust for mushroom growing, and connected to tree care services for their local communities.

But is this merely fiction? Far from it.

This report shows that forests across the country are already being managed in an ecological and socially just way. We have the knowledge and the experience to make this story real everywhere – but the country lacks the political will and direction to make it happen. The desperate plight of nature and the ongoing climate crisis make the need for transition both clear and urgent. Many people have started this work, but it needs institutional backing and funding to make it widespread. It starts with a recognition of the interconnected nature of many of the problems and solutions and the commitment to forging a new pathway that is not solely based on lowering costs. Lowering costs usually means increasing automation and reducing ecological care, both of which are disastrous for society in the long run.

We have been undervaluing woods in this country for decades. Large conifer monocultures are un-loved and inhospitable for many species, while native woods often only survive in scraps and pockets, clinging on. Because these woods are often small, extraction and management doesn't 'pay'. We need a concerted plan of investment to improve this situation.



Policy Recommendations

1. An integrated vision

It starts with a land use strategy that gives equal weight to social, environmental and economic issues. This will properly integrate the complex set of fibre, energy, food and environmental needs that must be considered. It will require an action plan that shifts forestry practice away from monocultures and towards Continuous Cover Forestry and mixed use. It will aim to significantly grow the UK forestry industry and make its products affordable and available throughout the country.

2. A clear framework

Devolved governments must offer a clear ecological and social framework for their forestry organisations. This will support local forestry businesses and empower communities to care for their woodlands.

3. Grants and loans

Issue grants and loans that can bring more existing woodlands under ecological management across the UK. This means investing in things like infrastructure, access tracks, machinery and marketing systems.

4. Research and development

Invest in research and development for CCF and agroforestry and develop ways for forests to produce food and for farms to integrate trees into their systems..

5. Planning regulations

Amend planning regulations to allow for more on-site forest worker housing. This will allow people to afford to live near to the woods they manage, increasing ecological understanding and reducing costs.

6. Building timber supply chain

Increase development, connection and investment in the retail trade between forestry and the UK building industry. Make timber the standard, 'go-to' building material because of its ability to naturally store carbon.

7. International trade

Support the UK forestry and timber industry by reducing imports through quotas or tariffs or properly monitoring certification schemes so that only the most well managed timber and pulp products are allowed to enter the UK market.

8. Infrastructure

Invest in processing centres and retail outlets that allow people to access UK tree and timber products. This could be through business rate relief, or other tax support, or funding, low interest loans and changing planning laws.

9. Education

Educate consumers and the wider public about woodland industries, their history and future potential.

10. Ambitious targets

Set and meet high targets on woodland creation as current targets look unlikely to be met, and are already far too weak. Ensure those woods have planting and management plans that provide for multiple uses into the future, including short term softwood production to meet economic demand.

Conclusion

These twelve businesses are already showing what is possible. We can have a forestry industry that provides timber, forestry services and fulfilling jobs, while also sequestering carbon and benefiting wildlife, alongside creating spaces for recreation and healing.

There are already hundreds or thousands of practical foresters out in the woods working towards this vision

Our members are already doing the work that needs to be done, and everything we are doing can be scaled up – but it needs political will and investment. Of course this model needs refinement as a vision, and then it needs an action plan to make it happen. That will need political, financial, social, planning, and public support, but together we are making that vision a reality.





Written by: Oli Rodker



The Landworkers' Alliance is a grassroots union of farmers, foresters and land-based workers in the UK. We campaign for the rights of producers and lobby the UK government and devolved nations for policies that support the infrastructure and economic climate central to our livelihoods. We have a growing membership who we work to support by developing agroecology training and solidarity support networks.



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