

# Project report: Woodlands for All

September 2017 to January 2018



## Objectives

The AONB Partnership works to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, landscape and wildlife of the Shropshire Hills AONB. In addition to this, it aims to raise the awareness of people to appreciating the environment they live in, and in particular young people who will inherit the area. The project fits with the AONB's principal purposes and sustainable development principles in that it helps to provide firewood from woodlands, particularly those that are privately owned and may be under-resourced or managed. It also fits in with PAWS in helping to maintain ancient woodland. Another objective is to raise awareness and conservation activity, particularly amongst young people in the area. There is a need to conserve the character and quality of the Shropshire Hills landscape as they are under increasing pressure, and the condition of a number of the special qualities of the AONB is declining, partly through changes in land management but also through neglect.

## Achievements

Our aim was to bring people into woodlands to demonstrate the richness and diversity of the environment, whilst training them to conserve the landscape and to manage and utilise the woodland sustainably. This was aimed towards teenagers and young adults, but also to working and retired people living in and near the Shropshire Hills AONB area; particularly within a 15-mile radius of Clun and Bishop's Castle.

We provided a series of training and awareness raising events that introduced participants to the theory and practice of woodland management, giving them a greater appreciation of how we can utilise woodlands for the sustainable growth of products, such as wood fuel, whilst protecting and enhancing biodiversity.

The project was delivered by Gary Cowell, with help from Lightfoot volunteers. Gary works for Knighton Tree Allotments Trust, thus incorporating specific woodland management expertise into the project.

There were 2 activities:

1. Seven "enrichment" afternoons in the autumn term with 11 students and one teacher from Bishop's Castle Community College
2. Three woodland management day sessions with 11 adults in January in the Clun area.

## Bishop's Castle Community College Enrichment Sessions

A full day session was planned for 4<sup>th</sup> July, but the college cancelled it, due to not generating sufficient interest. They also changed all the dates of the enrichment sessions, causing Gary much extra work. Seven sessions were planned:

1. Friday 8<sup>th</sup> September 2017. *Introduction to Woodlands and Woodland Management*. Location: Bury Ditches, Lower Down, Lydbury North, SY7 8BD

This was an introduction to woodlands in a landscape context and how we manage them both historically and today. We learnt how to identify and measure some of the trees at this historic site. This session was led by Mandy Jones, Learning Ranger for the Forestry Commission.

2. Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2017. *Woodland Wildlife*. Location: Bury Ditches, Lower Down, Lydbury North, SY7 8BD Alan Reid, Learning Ranger for the Forestry Commission showed us the kind of evidence to look for in woodlands to see what wildlife is present. He showed us various dropping, bones/skulls, fur and owl pellets before leading us through the woodland to look for signs of the animals that live there. We found deer tracks and droppings as well as lots of evidence of squirrels. We even found some out-of-season tadpoles.

3. Friday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2017. *Processing wood for fuel – lower input model*. Location: The Hurst, Clunton, Craven Arms, Shropshire, SY7 0JA

During this visit we looked at cutting and drying firewood using hand tools and traditional seasoning (i.e. drying) methods. This session was compared and contrasted with the higher input model seen on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November and we discussed the pros and cons of each. We learnt how to cut up a tree and how to use tools safely and efficiently. This session was led by Gary Cowell, a woodland worker and Co-ordinator of the Knighton Tree Allotments Trust, assisted by Helen Fairweather of Lightfoot.

4. Friday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2017. *Processing wood for fuel – higher input model*. Location: The Clun Log Company, Rhos Cottage, Black Hill, Clun, Shropshire, SY7 0JD

This session looked at how trees can be processed into logs for winter fuel using a semi-automated cutting and drying process. The Clun Log Company provide quality kiln-dried hardwood logs from sustainably managed local woodlands. The logs are cut, dried and bagged within the same building. All the waste wood and sawdust is used to help fuel the boiler which heats the kiln – the aim is to make the process as sustainable as possible. This session was led by Helen Oliver, one of the owners of the company, who also introduced the students to her pony – a very popular move.

5. Friday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2017. *Charles Ransford & Son Ltd*. Location: Station Street, Bishops Castle, Shropshire, SY9 5AQ

We visited the office of this local timber mill to find about what the company do and how they do it. Charles Ransford & Son Ltd supply fencing and other timber products by bringing together years of skilled experience with advanced sawmill technology. Ransfords use naturally durable home grown timber, sourced from sustainably managed UK Forests. The mill provides good local employment and this was discussed on the day. (Please note that this was a presentation and not a site tour as safety requirements do not allow public access to the working mill.) This was led by Alistair Evans and Norman Maitland of Ransford & Son.

6. Friday 24<sup>th</sup> November 2017. *Managing a Small Woodland for Wildlife*. Location: Church Bank, Clun.

This visit was to look at how a small private woodland has been managed for wildlife and to provide some wood fuel to the owners. The woodland had been unmanaged for many years before the current owners decided upon a management approach and carried out works to improve its biodiversity. The children got to see the results of camera “traps” set up in the woods, capturing images of the animals there. This session was led by the owners of the wood, Mary Eminson and Chrissie Verduyn, assisted by Dave Thomlinson of Lightfoot and Gary Cowell.

7. Friday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2017. *Den building*. Location: The Hurst

This last session was cancelled due to the school being closed that afternoon because of bad weather. Our bad weather standby – showing the film *The Man Who Planted Trees* – was not used as the school was closed.

Each session was for 1.25 to 1.5 hours on site. Teacher, Helen Plastow drove the college minibus to each site. The students enjoyed the visits, being out in woodlands. They looked, listened and learned about trees, woodlands, flora and fauna and the timber industry. They gained practical experience of using various hand tools to cut timber.

Gary issued feedback forms (supplied). These showed that the students enjoyed the practical activities and generally rated the sessions good to very good. Because the final session was cancelled, Gary Cowell subsequently visited the school to have a final meeting with the students so that everyone could be thanked and to allow some extra feedback about the activities.

Norman Maitland of Ransfords wrote: “*We greatly enjoyed having the students here. Could you please make sure that their teachers get the picture and also pass on our thanks to everyone for their keen interest and for their model behaviour more*”.

<https://www.ransfords.co.uk/old-school-visitors/>

### **Adult sessions**

The three sessions lasted from 9.30am to 2.30pm to ensure that the participants were not exhausted by the manual labour and to allow them to meet childcare commitments. The first day was indoors, giving an introduction to woodland management. Gary put this in the context of the carbon cycle and climate change. At the two subsequent

days at the Hurst, participants learned about woodland management and developed skills using hand tools to fell, process and season selected timber.

During and after the sessions Gary distributed numerous resources – very useful for those who have woodlands to manage.

### **Participants**

Two expected participants were unable to attend due to work commitments and one dropped out a bit before the course. One other joined in for the first session only.

Participants comprised four women and seven men, ages ranging from school leaver to late 60s, previous knowledge and experience levels ranging from very little to one who has been a professional forester for many decades (who skipped the last session). Three participants are National Trust volunteers at Walcot Woods. Five have their own woodlands to manage.

Cath Landles of the AONB attended the students' session at Church Bank and the final session at The Hurst.

### **Feedback**

Feedback forms were distributed and completed on each day (supplied). The feedback was very positive - the main criticism being the cold, both in the Memorial Hall and outdoors at The Hurst.

At the end of the last session all wanted to share contact details – indicating our shared enthusiasm.

Subsequent feedback: *“What an excellent few days of learning and meeting likeminded people. I feel so grateful for the experience (despite the severe cold of last Tuesday!)”*

### **Special conditions**

We provided information about the AONB to all participants in the form of a leaflet supplied by the AONB office. The support of AONB was acknowledged on all publicity (supplied) and course materials.

Health and Safety Risk Assessments were written for all activities and are on the Lightfoot website.

### **What we learnt**

1. The activity with Bishops Castle Community College was well received by students and staff, to the extent that the college have asked us to repeat the sessions in 2018, which we are endeavouring to do.
2. There was a real enthusiasm for this kind of volunteering, our numbers were full at an early stage. This demonstrated the potential for volunteers working in woodlands in exchange for free wood fuel. We now feel confident in offering the woodland management course that Gary Cowell developed in this project for a small fee to encourage sustainable woodland management to woodland owners, people who enjoy this kind of work as well as people in fuel poverty who have time to work in woodlands.