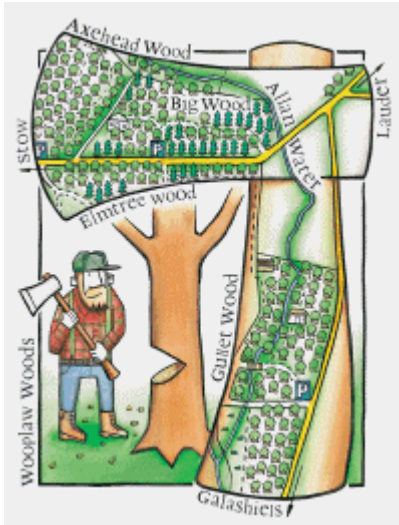


WOOPLAW



Summary

- Wooplaw is in the Scottish Borders, 6 miles north of Galashiels.
- The woodland is 23 hectares, of varied ages and species, conifers and broadleaves, native and exotic.
- The woodland is owned by a community group.
- Borders Community Woodlands owns and manages the woodland.
- BCW is a charitable trust.
- The key aims are the promotion of community involvement, training and education.
- The project began in 1986, with the carving of wooden axeheads.

Why ? The project originated in 1985 with Tim Stead, a sculptor of wood and furniture maker, who lived and worked in the Scottish Borders. He had decided (initially for aesthetic reasons) to use only native British timber and this led on to the idea of wanting to find a way to help to restore this resource as well as use it. He came up with the idea of 'Axes for Trees' and produced 365 handmade hardwood axe heads- one for each day of 1986. These would be sold to raise money to buy a piece of land on which trees could be planted.

The publicity for this scheme drew the attention of two people involved in the native and community woods movement in Scotland, Donald McPhillimy and Alan Drever. They met with Tim in 1987 and together discussed the possibility of creating a community woodland. This led to the formation of Borders Community Woodlands (BCW) to take the project forward and a large public meeting in Melrose, in which David Bellamy participated.

Miraculously, Wooplaw, a local 23ha woodland came on the market and within 3 months BCW had succeeded in securing sufficient donations and grants to top up the axe head money and purchase the first community woodland of its type in the UK.

Who ? Due to Wooplaw's rural location between several communities, BCW is a community of local interest rather than belonging to any one community. Most members come from the surrounding towns and villages of Melrose, Galashiels, Tweedbank, Stow, Lauder, Blainslie and Earlston but the membership extends much more widely.

The beneficiaries are all the people who use the woodland for a wide range of activities and for training/ educational purposes. Members also have access to products from the woodland (e.g. firewood and willows). A large number of local groups and schools use it on a regular basis. It serves as the base for the local WATCH group (the junior arm of the Scottish Wildlife Trust), the Princes Trust run two week team building exercises in the woodland and Earlston High School use it annually as a base for their third year studies. A great deal of training in woodland management skills has taken place at Wooplaw which has led to several of the trainees finding full time employment. Timber has been sold and contractors employed, all contributing to the local economy and rural development.

For the first few years the project was run by the original core group of 6-7 people. There are now approximately 120 members who each pay £5 for 2 years membership. Members' meetings, which are open to all, are held monthly in the log cabin in the woodland. Those who attend regularly (about 10 people) constitute the management committee and are given the title of Warden. They make the major decisions about management projects, events and work days. Walks through the woodland are then arranged for members who wish to have these decisions explained to them. Two newsletters per year provide details of all events and decisions. Events are well publicised in local newspapers.

Seven years after BCW was started, mainly because of the potential availability of Lottery funding through the Millennium Forest for Scotland, another related organisation was launched called the Borders Forest Trust (BFT). Its aim is to develop the community woodland movement in the Borders region and in particular to promote the use and therefore value of native timber. This has taken off with great success and now oversees an impressive range of woodland, timber and educational projects, including a further 15 community woodlands. Of particular relevance is the ambitious Woodschool, a training centre and base for craftsmen in native timber.

Although BCW is autonomous, there is a link with BFT and its community woodland projects. This has helped in terms of being able to raise the profile of Wooplaw and place it in a wider context as a practical demonstration of managing a community woodland. BFT fundraising has also provided access to additional funding for BCW. Wooplaw in turn has been important to BFT as a well developed community woodland and has been used to demonstrate what is possible to each of the new community woodland projects. It has also been a source of experienced trainees, some of whom are now in full time employment delivering other BFT projects. However, there is some concern that that the unique BCW identity has, to a certain extent, been lost in the wider project.

What ? Wooplaw (originally Uplaw, or Hill of the Curlew) is the collective name for a group of 8 linked woodlands totalling 22.77 hectares (56 acres) situated in the

Scottish Borders 6 miles north east of Galashiels. The woodlands are in two clusters and were part of a designed landscape around Wooplaw House. Wooplaw is classified as a mixed 'long established' woodland of plantation origin and is growing on mainly brown earths and surface water gleys. It lies at an elevation of between 230 and 280 m above sea level, on a ridge which forms part of the foothills of the Moorfoot hills. It is relatively susceptible to windthrow (Hazard class 5). A stream, the Allen Water, flows through parts of the woodlands.

While an initial survey revealed that there were no special habitats or species, and few ancient woodland indicators, the woodland supports a surprisingly wide diversity of flora and fauna. This is due to the fact that there are many small stands with a considerable mixture of sizes and ages. General proportions of species are: exotic conifer 55%, native broadleaves 23%, native conifer 18%, exotic broadleaves 4%. One of the distinctive characteristics of the woodland is an area of big (140 year old) Sitka spruce and Douglas fir. Apart from the new planting, the age of the trees in the other compartments varies between 30-80 years. Species include birch, ash, oak, lime, willow, sycamore, Sitka spruce, Scots pine, larch, western red cedar and Douglas fir.

Little work had been done in the woodland for about 15 years before it was bought by BCW. The 23 ha included three unplanted fields which have now added an additional 9.3ha of largely native broadleaved woodland (Axehead Wood, Gullet Wood and South Gullet Wood).

Vision ? The original objectives of Borders Community Woodlands were:

- An educational resource for children and adults
- A place for peaceful enjoyment and relaxation
- A practical local response to concern about international exploitation of forests
- An opportunity to learn about forest products
- Scope for trying out different management practices especially those that encourage native trees and a habitat favourable for wildlife.

These objectives largely remain. Added to them are the promotion of the concept of community woodlands, the provision of disabled access, the enhancement of wildlife habitats and the promotion of training and education.

The 3rd 5 year management plan has now been prepared. The general aims are now defined as long term restructuring towards native woodland and continuing to promote community involvement, training and education.

How ? The 'Axes for Trees' proved very successful in demonstrating serious commitment to potential funders, attracted members and undoubtedly helped the project get off to a good start.

- ◆ An MSc student from the University of Edinburgh, John Sargeant, was inspired by the project and decided to base his dissertation on it. In 1989 BCW gained access to a comprehensive survey with management recommendations which still form the basis for planning future management.

- ◆ The first Forestry Commission planting grant was applied for shortly after this and after some discussion, a Community Woodland Supplement was also made available.
- ◆ However, the busy people who were involved initially got on with being busy elsewhere and the initial enthusiasm began to wane. For the next three years a small core of the original instigators laboured doggedly with very little help. They managed to plant the two smaller fields (the Gullet Woods) and carry out some essential management, drainage and access works.
- ◆ Over this period, markets for wood products (small coppice material and firewood) were developed. Income was used to fund the development of the group and buy necessary equipment.
- ◆ In 1993 one of the core members, Hugh Chalmers, who was working with the Scottish Wildlife Trust began to bring teams of volunteers to the site for their practical training. Axehead Wood was fenced and planted. As labour costs were very low, it was possible to spread the grant money over a wide range of operations. During this period the log cabin was built and a tree nursery and holding area constructed.
- ◆ 1993 also saw the start, with woodland craft days, of the many diverse community events which are now held regularly in the woodland and which bring in volunteers to help with the work.
- ◆ In 1994 horse logging demonstrations were held and schools became more closely involved through a local head teacher who had come onto the committee. This year saw the start of the annual Hallowe'en party, winter tree dressing, tree planting events, charcoal making demonstrations and a woodland dance performance.
- ◆ In 1996 £10,000 was awarded by the Charities Lottery Foundation for access and a pond with dipping platform, otter holt, otter hide, bridge and a thatched shelter were built in Gullet Wood. SNH also supported this work.
- ◆ In 1997 Wooplaw was the setting for several ambitious arts projects including a night-time film performance "Beasts of the Forest" and a sculpture project. A schools education pack was produced. This was supplied to all schools in the Borders and is still used regularly by them and by the Borders Council Ranger Service .
- ◆ 1998 saw the launch of the Woodland Access Initiative. 800 metres of all ability access trails were constructed with interpretative maps, as well as an outdoor classroom, educational resource box, composting toilet and green woodworking area. There has been close liaison with local disabled groups and for two years they were coming out on a regular basis to help in the construction of the new facilities. Mazda and Future Forests funded the planting of a further 600 trees in shelters as part of a carbon fixation deal.

- ◆ In 1999 1000 willows were planted in Gullet Wood as a source of native and basket willows to provide adequate material for local willow crafts courses. The SWT group is visiting less often using the woodland mainly for training in habitat mapping and bird identification.

BCW believes that there have been no significant **obstacles** in developing Wooplaw. The principal problem was the initial falling off of enthusiasm in the early years. This was due partly to the woodland being at a distance from any one community and partly due to naivety. For example, all the teachers in the region were invited to an open event one Saturday shortly after the project's launch, but none turned up. The project was right but the triggers for action and timing were not. There were a number of key factors which acted as **solutions** and rekindled the enthusiasm which has been maintained ever since. One of these was the regular involvement of the SWT habitat management team, members of which developed enthusiasm and commitment that was carried beyond working hours. Another was the involvement of a new 'generation' of people mainly from Stow and Lauder including local head teacher, Jeanette Fox, now Secretary of BCW, who was instrumental in forging the right kind of links with local schools.

It was recognised that it is crucial to maintain a core of committed members. This is achieved by deliberately seeking out people likely to be interested, by maintaining their interest through varying ideas and activities and by ensuring that everyone has a real sense of reward for services rendered. There have been no major disagreements between core members and no major crises.

Vandalism has been a minor problem. The wood stove has twice been stolen from the hut and at one point a group of young people from the other side of the Firth of Forth decided it would be a lovely setting for their weekend raves.

Greatest Achievements ? Probably due to the fact the BCW is a pioneering project it has generated, and tolerated, a great deal more publicity than might otherwise have been the case. This has been deliberately fostered (e.g. via display boards circulated round Scotland) to promote the concept of community woodlands.

The project has received a huge stream of visitors from all over the world and from a wide range of professional and academic organisations. BCW also deals with constant enquiries from other groups which see it as a project worthy of emulation. BCW is proud to be "a bunch of amateurs" whose advice is being sought.

Regular small but significant successes have been the events and televised news items such as the opening of the access trail in September 1999. Possibly the only challenge currently facing the group is maintaining its identity alongside Borders Forest Trust and this is being discussed amicably.

Sources of help and advice ? Skills within the group at the outset were habitat management and practical forestry. Tim Stead was very good at marketing and promotion and was able to access administrative support. More recently the group has had access through its members to a wide range of knowledge and contacts in education, the arts, timber crafts and habitat management. Chainsaw training for wardens has been provided and funded by Scottish Borders Enterprise.

Early inspiration and help came from the alternative forestry movement in Scotland, the Laggan project and Reforesting Scotland. The first organisations to provide funding and support were the Worldwide Fund for Nature, the Countryside Commission for Scotland and the Marks Trust. This was followed by the Forestry Commission's grants and help from SNH for tools and habitat creation. The regular input of labour from SWT training teams has been very significant. There has been a steady income from a wide range of small grants such as Shell Better Britain, BT Access for All and Borders Regional Council.

A proportion of funding is now accessed through BFT and some discrete projects are also implemented by BFT. Regular sources of income are Woodland Management Grant, timber sales and donations made at events. Timber was originally felled and converted by members but this was considered to be too time consuming and is now undertaken by contractors, thereby supporting the local economy.

Future Activities ? In general terms the aim is to manage according to the management plan and to continue to provide and promote all the community benefits. There are no immediate plans to expand the woodland beyond its existing size. Two specific aims for the future are to widen the diversity of land use and the number of useful products from the woodland.

The new willow nursery/coppice area at Gullet Wood is to be expanded by the planting of a further 4000 sets, bringing the total area up to 1 acre. Other ideas which have been discussed include the production of birch sap wine, fungi harvesting, planting fruit trees & bushes and the development of charcoal production.

Discussions are also being held on a possible name change, from Borders Community Woodlands to Wooplaw Community Woodland in order to avoid the current confusion with BFT.

Lessons for others ? The main lessons are:

- Have a long term vision
- Have patience in achieving it
- Realise there is a lot to learn and don't hesitate to ask advice
- Get involved in the movement generally and develop a common purpose

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