



Witherslack head forester Steve Thompson

Tapping an asset for the rural economy *and* biodiversity

According to Witherslack Woodlands owner, Nick Stanley, whose ancestors were granted the Manor of Witherslack after the Battle of Boworth Field in the 15th century, firewood has been grown and processed on the 800 hectare south Cumbrian estate since the Iron Age.

Now the clock has turned full circle for the idyllic beauty spot near Grange Over Sands which has been put back to work, producing valuable timber for woodfuel and a more vibrant haven for wildlife.

The Estate has a range of diversified businesses, ranging from tenanted farms, rented workshops and a plant nursery, all underpinned by a rural sustainability ethos. But managing the historic woods – much of which are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and Special Area of Conservation and which is renowned for its plants and wildlife - had been regarded as a necessary cost. But all that changed in 2005.

Nick Stanley explained:

“That was when a marketing adviser from Cumbria Woodlands paid a visit. She convinced us that we could make much more out of our woodlands, get more of them back into sustainable management and exploit the expanding market for woodfuel. Without that initial assessment we would have been much slower to recognise the opportunity. It proved to be a crucial and timely contact.”

Grants

Cumbria Woodlands helped Nick secure a LEADER grant of £8,000 to purchase a POSCH firewood processor, which uses sensitively coppiced Estate hardwood such as oak, ash and hazel. They also increased the price of their finished product to a more economic and profitable level. Then fate took a hand, remarks Nick.

“Almost the following day the price of oil went through the roof and woodfuel became not just a more eco-friendly and sustainable way of heating buildings, but also cheap-

cheaper. Demand ratcheted up and with the new wood processing machine we were in a position to take advantage. There is no way we could have done that without making the investment suggested by Cumbria Woodlands.”

Nick has utilised other marketing and business support and safety training through Cumbria Woodlands to develop the woodfuel business.

“Help in getting grants to buy machines has been massively helpful, but just as important has been the emotional and intellectual support from Cumbria Woodlands. They understand the business and provided a constant source of advice and support. When I was uncertain about some thing, they could help and importantly also reassured me when we were on the right track and doing things well.”

Profitable

Woodland management is carried out by the Estate's forestry team who run the firewood business from the Halecat woodyard. Nick reflects that over the past five years the cost of timber bought in to process into woodfuel has risen from £20 to £70 per tonne. The price of the finished product has increased from £40 to £110,



vindicating Cumbria Woodland's confidence in the venture as a way of supporting sustainable woodland management. In 2012 about 40% more firewood was sold than the corresponding period the previous year and with more people installing wood fuelled boilers, the outlook continues to look rosy.

Witherslack produced 1,200 tonnes of firewood in 2012 to supply 400 customers and has created three new forestry jobs on the Estate. That output includes 200 tonnes for a district heating system at Halecat to heat six buildings using a Farm 2000 161kw boiler, funded by the savings in oil and gas as well as the Renewable Heat Incentive.

The Estate is now busy converting more farm buildings into a high quality business workshops heated by firewood



1610kw biomass boiler on the Witherslack Estate



grown in the surrounding countryside. Given the challenges of cutting down our reliance on fossil fuels, reducing emissions and combating climate change, it's a neat example of thinking global and acting local. Nor has the expanding woodfuel business been bad for wildlife. Quite the opposite.

"Firewood has been used since the dawn of time so we are not doing anything new in that sense," said Nick. "Our harvesting programme is almost entirely met through coppicing and we work with organisations such as Butterfly Conservation and the Lake District National Park to ensure we enhance habitats. Environmental awareness and the firewood business are two sides of the same coin for us."

RDPE—Making the Difference

Cumbria Woodlands' Advisory Service, the Forestry Commission's English Woodland Grant Scheme and Local Action Groups are all supported through the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE). The RDPE is managed by DEFRA and aims to improve competitiveness in the agriculture and forestry sector, safeguard and enhance the rural environment, foster competitive and sustainable rural businesses and support thriving rural communities. It is funded by the UK Government and the EU's European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.



Cumbria Woodlands Advisory Service

The service offers a key source of advice for owners of undermanaged woodland in Cumbria aimed at bringing more woods into active management. The need to tap this vital sustainable resource and invest in woodfuel was identified in the Cumbrian Local Development Strategy (2008). Both Cumbrian Fells and Dales and Solway Border and Eden LEADER RDPE projects earmarked funding for the initiative. The scheme highlights the potential of woods to reduce heating bills by using local firewood, setting up rural forest-based enterprises, offsetting the effects of climate change and improving wildlife habitats. Three levels of service are offered: an initial free assessment and report (Silver Birch Day), followed by more specialist support under the Oak level service, which can include grant applications and timber mensuration, and a woodfuel and renewable energy assessment, both charged at just 10% of cost. Funding is also provided by client contributions and United Utilities.

Key achievements

- 475 woodland owners have contacted the service to enquire about help with managing their woods.
- 394 woodland owners have signed up for a free advisory visit and report.
- 4208 hectares of woodland visited by advisers.
- 58% of clients accessed further specialist advice (Oak Days for grant applications, timber mensuration, woodfuel assessment).
- 116 applications made to the Forestry Commission's English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) resulting in projects with a total value of £397,735 declared to date.
- 51 woodfuel reports commissioned.

Skills

Cumbria Woodlands also runs an RDPE funded training scheme 'Skills for the Forest'. Set up to deliver training to the forestry and farming sector in Cumbria, this £400,000 initiative provides subsidised training to raise the skills of the forestry workforce and to improve the employment prospects of woodland workers in Cumbria. The scheme has also upgraded the skills of woodland owners, enhancing their abilities to manage their woods. Key achievements:

- 700 enquiries logged since the scheme began in 2011.
- Six major demonstration events organised, including timber extraction using small scale equipment.
- 337 training places taken up, 73 training courses offered and 841 training days provided (Sept 2011— Dec 2012).



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