

## INFORMATION NOTE

BY ANDREW CHURCH, NEIL RAVENSCROFT AND GILL ROGERS<sup>1</sup>

SEPTEMBER 2005

### SUMMARY

In 2002 Forestry Commission England contracted the University of Brighton to undertake research into the attitudes and perceptions of woodland owners to public access. The six study areas in south-east England represented a good range of woodland and owner types. Overall there was a benign attitude towards public access to woodlands with only a few private owners reluctant to allow any access. Woodlands were mainly seen as non-commercial propositions requiring continuous investment to maintain their value, and many owners were attracted to grant aid to help them fulfil wider aims for woodland management. Owners felt that larger woodlands located in the urban fringe should be the strategic focus of access initiatives. In no case outside the public/non-profit sectors was recreational access a leading priority of the owner, and the blanket availability of proportional grants solely related to the provision of access seems unlikely to attract much new provision.

### POLICY CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH

In 2002 Forestry Commission England published *Sustaining England's woodlands* (Forestry Commission England, 2002) which reviewed the Commission's strategy and support for woodlands and outlined a future commitment to expanding the public benefits from woodlands. The review also noted that the incentives for public access under the Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) were insufficiently focused on the needs of woodland owners interested in improving public access to woodlands. The University of Brighton was commissioned by the Forestry Commission to undertake a contextual piece of research into woodland owners' attitudes and perceptions to public access in south-east England. Six case study areas were selected to provide a suitable cross-section of woodland environments and ownership types.

### PUBLIC ACCESS AND LANDOWNER ATTITUDES

A wide range of economic, cultural, political and historical processes are likely to influence woodland owners' attitudes to public access and access incentive mechanisms (Figure 1). These processes have been explored not only in studies of public access to land but also in research into participation by landowners and farmers in forest management and agri-environmental schemes (Wilson, 1997). As long ago as

**Figure 1 a and b**

Discussing improvements to woodland access can bring benefits to owners and users (b: Woodland Trust Picture Library/Trudi Harris).



1979, the Northfield Report (HMSO, 1979) identified how traditional landowners, rather than commercial institutions, were still the driving force behind patterns of land ownership and occupation. This remains the case, with many of these landowners having a shared culture built up over previous centuries of adopting a conservative attitude to incentive policies (Ravenscroft, 1995).

<sup>1</sup> School of Environment, University of Brighton.

More recently, a number of authors (Winter, 1996; Bishop, 2000; Parker, 2002) have argued that the landowner culture in the United Kingdom, along with policies dating back to the Agriculture Act of 1947, lie behind the emergence of a paradox, in which landowner rhetoric is about defending their right to independence, while landowners simultaneously depend upon grants and subsidies to support their landholdings. This was particularly notable with the tax arrangements for forestry up to the 1980s. The claim is that landowners have learnt over the past 50 years that the promotion of public policies, including provision for access, often comes with a guaranteed income (Bishop, 2000). Thus landowners have been very ready to promote public policy as long as this has underwritten their ownership and independence. In the case of access, the voluntary provision of access is often linked to a moral agenda about landowners as custodians – even if there is an incentive payment to act voluntarily.

A number of studies (see Country Landowners Association, 1999 for a summary) have specifically examined the attitudes of landholders (agriculture and forestry) to access initiatives. These built upon the 1986 study, *Access to the countryside for recreation and sport* (Countryside Commission/Sports Council, 1987). In the Country Landowners Association study over 80% of landowners reported very few or no problems associated with permissive access of all types. Motivations for allowing access were mainly linked to personal dispositions rather than business operation. The strongest motivations for allowing access were tradition, responding to public demand and seeking to educate the public.

The position regarding the potential of new incentive schemes to promote access, such as the Woodland Welcome initiative (Forestry Commission, 2002), thus remains unclear. While there is evidence from the Country Landowners Association (1999) that many owners provide access largely as a gesture of goodwill, other authorities suggest that this ‘goodwill’ is largely conditioned by the availability of grant aid. As a result this research project was designed to explore to what degree these broader landowner attitudes to access are demonstrated by private woodland owners in the south-east of England and, consequently, to what extent – and under what conditions – are they likely to engage with the Woodland Welcome initiative. The project also sought to examine the interactions between landowner attitudes to access and broader changes in the economics and culture of woodland ownership and management.

## THE CASE STUDY AREAS

The case study areas were chosen to ensure that the study analysed locations containing a range of woodland types, including urban, rural and woodland park, while also including a good range of owner types and woodland environments. The six areas are shown in Figure 2 and were in the following locations:

**Hampshire:** near-urban area between Southampton and Romsey, with a substantial proportion of woodland owned by public and non-profit bodies.

**West Sussex:** sparsely populated rural area near Midhurst, where most of the woods are small and owned by non-forestry businesses – mainly farms, private householders and absentee owners.

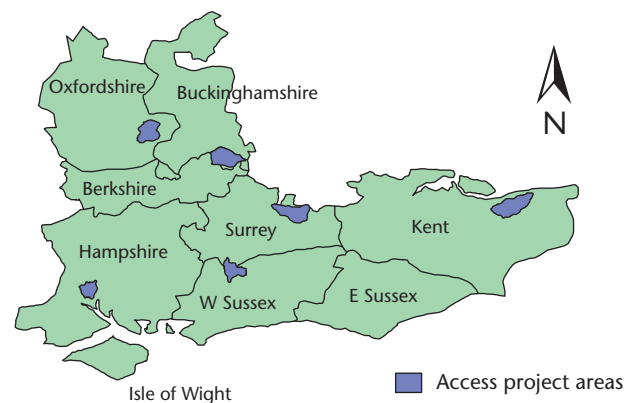
**Kent:** urban fringe near Canterbury with some large woodland owners but few commercial forestry businesses. In this case study area a formal body had been established called the Blean Owners Group.

**Surrey:** outer London suburbs near Epsom and Banstead, characterised by publicly owned commons and woodland, often managed by non-profit organisations.

**Buckinghamshire:** commuter belt in the Chilterns, north and west of Slough, with a substantial number of golf courses and business owners with no commercial forestry interests. There are also some large institutional owners such as the Corporation of London and the National Trust.

**Oxfordshire:** sparsely populated rural area south and east of Oxford near Chalgrove, with comparatively little woodland and mainly in fragmented plots. There are also a number of private owners who use their woods primarily for privacy and security.

**Figure 2**  
Six case study areas in south-east England.



## RESEARCH METHODS

Researching landowners has always been challenging due to the problem of identifying owners, especially in areas where land registration is incomplete. In previous projects, attempts to contact owners have often produced very low response rates. Currently these difficulties are further compounded by the political and economic climate in rural England. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, the crisis facing some rural areas and the recent fox hunting bill mean that some landowners are wary of providing information to researchers, especially on the topic of access. Our experiences in this project and a number of other pieces of research suggest that this creates three main problems for research on owner attitudes. First, owners may be even harder to identify than normal, as intermediaries may be reluctant to pass on contact details. Second, owners once contacted may be very cautious and may prefer to meet researchers face-to-face before passing on information. Third, even in face-to-face situations, owners may still be wary of the aims of a research project and will only be forthcoming about their motivations in relation to access once they feel they can trust the researchers and their methods.

In order to address these problems the methodology for this project was based upon integrating the findings from the following methods:

- a self-completion questionnaire
- face-to-face interviews
- group interviews.

Wherever possible, all owners were contacted initially by telephone and were asked to complete a questionnaire containing a combination of closed and open-ended questions. In some cases it was necessary to write first to establish the legitimacy of the researchers. The initial contact, preferably by telephone, was considered essential in order to explain the aims of the project. In previous projects postal questionnaires to owners have produced very low response rates. A sub-sample of owners was selected for face-to-face interviews and they were asked to complete the questionnaire prior to the interview. This began with the researchers going back over the questionnaire to ensure that the owners were satisfied with their responses and understanding of the questionnaire. This dual approach to researching the same owner was designed to overcome any owner reluctance as well as to provide an in-depth understanding of the

perceptions, attitudes and cultures that lay behind the responses to the questionnaires. The majority of respondents selected for face-to-face interviews were private owners. This group was a focus of the project partly because knowledge is lacking on the attitudes of private woodland owners. In addition, a number of key public/non-profit making owners were also interviewed to ascertain the issues affecting all types of woodlands in the case study areas. The group interviews were also based on the interview schedule; attendees were mainly from public and non-profit making organisations.

A total of 83 questionnaires was completed. The response rates for the questionnaire were generally good and varied in the case study areas from 30% in Hampshire to 75% in Oxfordshire. A total of 38 face-to-face interviews were undertaken and these produced a rich data set as many of the interviews lasted well over an hour and involved researchers being given tours of woodland plots. In a small number of cases, however, owners were willing for their woodland to be examined in the research but did not wish to take part in interviews. In these cases the researchers were directed to intermediaries such as contractors and advisers who were responsible for managing the woodlands. It was decided to conduct interviews and questionnaires with intermediaries since often the woodlands they managed represented significant plots in the case study areas. This presented a further challenge for the research since advisers and contractors may wish to communicate their own views rather than those of the owners. This problem was addressed by adjustments to the interview process, an approach which also generated important findings since it allowed a better understanding of the role discussed below of contractors and advisers in the take-up of incentives for access.

Fourteen owners not involved in face-to-face interviews participated in three group interviews. These proved less satisfactory in terms of the data gained compared to the face-to-face interviews. The respondents to the questionnaires and interviews could be divided into the following four categories reflecting their main ownership and business activity characteristics:

- **Private non-forestry owners/businesses**, which included farmers, golf clubs, and private woodland owners with relatively small land holdings, where the ownership purpose is unrelated to commercial forestry or forest products (26 questionnaire responses, 22 face-to-face interviews).

- **Private land/forestry owners with some forestry business interests**, which included large estate and woodland owners and substantial tree nurseries (19 questionnaire responses, 3 face-to-face interviews).
- **Public/non-profit making organisations**, which included local authorities, nature conservation bodies and other charities (28 questionnaire responses, 11 face-to-face interviews).
- **Contractors and advisors**, which included agents and forestry contractors who completed questionnaires on behalf of owners of particular plots of woodland in the case study areas. These were usually owners of larger areas with some forestry business interests (10 questionnaire responses, 2 face-to-face interviews).

## FINDINGS

### The use of the woodlands

While relatively few of the respondents used their woodlands for commercial timber production (23% of the respondents) or recreation (19%), many of them (73%) claimed that their woods are a wildlife habitat, a landscape feature (68%) and a reserve for nature (48%). To some extent, these last two responses reflect the views of the local authority and conservation body owners among the respondents. However, they also reflect a broader view about the reasons for owning and managing woodlands, even when those woodlands have little or no commercial value or potential. For example, over 80% of the respondents felt that their woods contributed to nature preservation, and 78% felt that they contributed to preservation of the landscape. In contrast, just 31% felt that their woodlands were a source of income.

Only 10% of respondents suggested that their woodland ownership was connected to preventing development nearby, although 32% felt that the woodlands did act as a buffer to neighbouring properties. Also, one-third of the private non-forestry businesses/owners felt their woodlands were important for personal privacy.

Overall the findings from the questionnaire suggest that few private owners own their woods to make money; indeed woodlands can be a drain on finances. Rather, the majority were concerned about enjoying their woods and promoting nature and wildlife conservation. A significant

minority was also concerned about privacy. The quotes below summarise the views of many of the private owners:

The woodlands sit there as a non-productive area without any revenue but they need management, especially fallen down trees. They're an expensive item on the profit and loss account of the business. (Private non-forestry business owner, Oxon)

I want to keep the woods private but I have a duty to maintain them. When one plants trees one gets satisfaction and I don't want to leave a shambles here. Each generation is responsible for the future. (Private non-forestry business owner, Bucks)

### Issues relating to access

In the interviews there was widespread recognition by many of the owners that certain types of woodland are more suitable for public access and thus for support from grant schemes. For example, most owners were sceptical about the value of providing access to remote rural woodlands, particularly in the Oxfordshire and West Sussex case studies. In addition, it was felt that large woodlands are proportionately more valuable for access than small isolated woodlands (unless the latter are in areas of high recreational pressure or would provide key strategic links in an access network). There was a strong belief among owners that the priority for access are woodlands in urban fringe areas where demand is likely to be high, since the majority of visitors to woodland travel short distances. All types of owners recognised that in areas of relatively high demand (e.g. the Surrey case study) access to large woodlands was very beneficial because, relative to open countryside, these areas can absorb large numbers of people while retaining a sense of peace and isolation.

The results from the questionnaire indicated that 80% of the respondents owned woodlands that are accessible from public rights of way. In addition to statutory access, two-thirds of the respondents currently provide permissive access to parts of their woods for specific activities. Nearly 50% of these respondents claimed that they permit access on foot to forest tracks, while approximately 30% allowed walkers to roam throughout their woodlands.

Two-thirds of respondents experienced no problems or no more than minor inconvenience with respect to access. Of the remainder, only a few reported 'very severe

**Table 1**

Woodland owners' experiences of problems with access.

Problems	Experience of problems (% of respondents)				
	No problems	Minor inconvenience	A few major problems	Many major problems	Very severe problems
Interference with livestock	57	26	14	2	2
Damage to equipment	69	22	9	0	0
Gates left open	50	32	12	6	0
Erosion of paths and gateways	36	30	29	1	3
Vandalism	21	38	29	10	2
Disturbance of game birds	68	15	11	5	2
Litter	15	49	19	15	1
Insurance claims	77	16	5	3	0
Policing of visitors	50	33	13	3	0
Visitors in non-access areas	35	37	22	6	2
Claims about the legal status of permitted routes	81	12	6	0	0
Illegal vehicular access	34	22	31	10	3
Fire	61	17	19	3	0

Note: row totals are more than 100% due to rounding.

problems' with access (see Table 1), although some 30% of respondents claimed to have experienced some form of problem that they described as leading 'to many major problems'. The key problems categorised in this way were illegal vehicular access, visitors in non-access areas, litter and vandalism. Erosion of footpaths and vandalism were common problems that 29% of respondents identified as causing 'a few major problems'.

Interestingly, few difficulties were identified with respect to raising game birds and rising insurance premiums as a result of increased access. For example, 83% of the respondents reported that public access has caused no more than minor inconvenience for game birds, while 93% have had no problems at all with insurance claims. Even in contentious areas, like interference with livestock and gates being left open, the majority of the respondents had few problems to report.

### Attitudes towards woodland ownership and public access

When asked about their attitudes to woodland ownership, there were clear differences between the respondent types. For example, all private land/forestry owners, most contractors and nearly 80% of private non-forestry businesses/owners felt that they should be

able to do as they wished with their land. Over three-quarters of these respondents similarly asserted that they lose control over the woodlands if public access is allowed, and 80% felt that access reduced the fees chargeable to field sports and commercial ventures. Very few of these owners and advisers felt that they had any *duty* to provide access. The public bodies and non-profit making organisations had a different view on such matters. Many indicated that their rights over the land created duties to others in respect of access. This duty was often expressed as an obligation, commonly associated with concern about managing the public when they are in the woods.

Nevertheless, nearly 90% of respondents claimed to welcome or to be content with the current state of statutory and permissive access to their woods. For many private owners, this was based on little more than local people walking on the woodland tracks. Only 10% claimed that they merely tolerated access or that it caused significant problems.

A number of statistical techniques, including principal component analysis, were used to identify groups of owners according to their responses to the questions about access. Three distinct types of owner emerged based on attitudes to permitting public access:

**Dutyists:** those who felt that they had a duty to provide access, often as a consequence of having received management and planting grants from the Forestry Commission. The vast majority of this group were public/non-profit making owners. While feeling that they have a duty, these owners asserted that it was acceptable to link this duty to an incentive or compensation scheme.

**Reluctants:** those who did not wish to permit access even with an incentive, but currently tolerated it when and where they felt it expedient to do so. This group included around 10% of the owners surveyed and they were all private non-forestry business owners, mainly with small plots in rural areas such as Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and West Sussex. Often they had purchased and cultivated woodlands to provide privacy for a residential property. At the extreme, some members of this group sought to prevent any public access to their land in order to maintain security.

**Marketeers:** those who were minded to provide access, but would only do so with the right incentive (this was often expressed as a premium over direct costs and income foregone). The majority of private owners fell into this group, especially those with non-forestry business interests. Access was viewed as a market good and many were not interested in permitting public access if it was perceived to interfere with current market and non-market benefits obtained from woodland. For these owners public access was associated with a diminution in capital value and revenue income, as well as a loss of managerial control. As a result, this group preferred short-term flexible agreements, so that they could exploit new opportunities as they emerge. The views of some of this group reflected difficult market conditions and the quote below encapsulates the differing pressures on the marketeers:

People want to use woods free of charge and owners have to pay... My woodland is of little value, it would be difficult to sell and I'm expected to shell out at my own cost and I don't get anything back, so you get kicked in the teeth whatever way you go...if I was to have a reasonable income from a grant I am quite prepared to think again and I could run the woods in a more business like way but I don't think that the Forestry Commission has anything like that in mind. (Private non-forestry business owner, West Sussex)

## Responses to types of incentives

When asked about how significant different types of incentives are in woodland owners' decisions to provide public access, the dominant view was that the only really significant incentive was the availability of financial grants (see Table 2). Over half of respondents rated the availability of financial grants as very important or vital to granting access, but there was considerable disagreement on the need for grants. A third of respondents claimed that the availability of grants was not very important or was irrelevant to their decision about public access, and this proportion rose to 60% among private owners. Thus, although the availability of financial support was more significant than any other incentive, it is important not to overstate its role. Table 2 presents as a weighted average owners' ratings on a scale of 1-5 for different types of incentives. The weighted average importance of grants was just 3.1, or little more than 'quite important'. Slightly lower scores were registered for grants for meeting insurance premiums (2.6) and for the costs of way-marking 2.8. Interestingly, there was very little positive response to some of the

**Table 2**

Weighted average importance rating by owners of different incentives.

Incentives	Score	Number of responses
Availability of grants	3.1	71
Help in applying for grants	2.3	71
Help in developing access plans	2.0	68
Provision of staff training in visitor management	1.8	68
Provision of a warden service	2.0	68
Grants for producing visitor information	2.5	70
Provision of route markings and visitor management materials	2.8	70
Provision of visitor facilities (parking and toilets)	1.9	69
Financial contribution to additional insurance premiums	2.6	69
Compensation for additional costs of access	3.2	69

Note: average score is calculated as the sum of the percentages in each category x their weights, where: 5 = vital; 4 = very important; 3 = quite important; 2 = not very important; 1 = irrelevant.

incentives perceived as more expensive or harder to organise such as grants for access plans or visitor information, perhaps because these were directed at those who already had a positive attitude towards access and wanted to manage it.

The responses to the questionnaire suggest that nearly two-thirds of private owners were not motivated predominantly by grants, and the levels of interest in grants for access among private owners were similar in rural and urban fringe locations. The truth, however, may be different as agents and contractors encouraged owners to apply for grants. This situation was explored further in interviews and the findings suggested that forestry contractors, concerned to maintain the quality of woodland environments, acted as a stimulus encouraging owners to apply for grants to improve access. There may therefore be a case for making information about grants and best practice readily available to this group. A majority of interviewees claimed that for access-related grants to appeal to owners they needed to be linked to the owners' wider objectives for owning woodland, especially silvicultural management. As one large landowner with forestry business interests noted:

I'd be surprised if access grants that promoted owners' woodland aims were not appealing – even match funding 75/25 might be appealing...if you buy woodland you want to look after it and improve it and you're willing to consider match funding. To persuade owners about public access you must show what grants and improvements do for woodland, not in monetary terms but for conservation and wildlife, and then appeal to their better nature.

The interviews and questionnaire responses suggest that about a sixth of private owners were willing to consider extending access, given appropriate inducements. In the main, this was connected with boosting the commercial potential of the woods, although some owners felt that the current management costs need to be defrayed through other income streams. In addition, some of these private owners were concerned about the deteriorating condition of their woods, the decline in commercial possibilities, and felt that access grants might be a way of bringing in new resources. This was very much the position underlying the approach of the contractors. In addition, many public and non-profit owners wanted to improve their access provision but lacked the resources to achieve this.

## DISCUSSION

Overall the study suggests there is generally a benign attitude towards public access to woodlands – with only a few private owners actively seeking to prevent it, often for privacy and security reasons. There was, equally, little active support for extending public access among the small private owners found in all the case study areas. Yet, concurrently, there was a widespread view that woodlands are non-commercial propositions that require continuous investment to maintain their value. As a result, many of the owners were attracted to the potential of grant aid to help them fulfil their wider ambitions for woodland management. This interest among owners was certainly fuelled by a few large contractors who increasingly rely on these grants to fund their work, and thus encourage and support owners in making suitable applications.

Public, private and non-profit owners were also supportive of grant aid that responds to the differing characteristics of woodland plots. In general, owners felt that larger plots located in urban fringe areas should be the strategic focus of access initiatives along with woodlands in other locations that could provide key links in strategic or circular walking routes.

In no case, however, outside the public/non-profit sectors was recreational access to woodlands a leading priority or, in most cases, part of private owners' broader agendas, while all associated the provision of access with a range of costs and lost opportunities. Thus, the blanket availability of proportional grants solely related to the provision of access seems unlikely to attract much new provision. Owners held more positive attitudes to grant aid that related to their broader motivations for improving woodland management.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work was funded by Forestry Commission England and managed by the Social Research Group of Forest Research.

## REFERENCES

- BISHOP, K. (2000).  
Seven steps to market.  
*Journal of Rural Studies* 16, 312–325.
- COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION/SPORTS COUNCIL  
(1987).  
*Access to the countryside for recreation and sport*. CCP  
217. Countryside Commission, Cheltenham.
- COUNTRY LANDOWNERS ASSOCIATION (1999).  
*Survey of permitted access*. Country Landowners  
Association, London.
- FORESTRY COMMISSION (2002).  
*Woodland Welcome guidance notes*.  
Forestry Commission, SE England Conservancy, Farnham,  
Surrey.
- FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND (2002).  
*Sustaining England's woodlands*.  
Forestry Commission, Edinburgh.
- HMSO (1979).  
*Report of committee of inquiry into the acquisition and  
occupation of agricultural land*.  
Cmnd Paper 7599. HMSO, London.
- PARKER, G. (2002).  
*Citizenships, contingency and the countryside*.  
Routledge, London.
- RAVENSROFT, N. (1995).  
Recreational access to the countryside of England and  
Wales: popular leisure as the legitimization of private  
property. *Journal of Property Research* 12, 63–74.
- WILSON, G. (1997).  
Factors influencing farmer participation in the  
Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme.  
*Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*  
50, 67–93.
- WINTER, M. (1996).  
*Rural politics*.  
Routledge, London.

## USEFUL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Websites concerned with landowners and public access in  
England:

[www.cla.org.uk](http://www.cla.org.uk)

[www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk)

[www.countryside recreation.com](http://www.countryside recreation.com)

[www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk)

Enquiries relating to this publication should be addressed to:

Paul Tabbush  
Social Research Group  
Forest Research  
Alice Holt Lodge  
Farnham  
Surrey GU10 4LH

Tel: 01420 526223

Email: [paul.tabbush@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:paul.tabbush@forestry.gsi.gov.uk)