

Britain's lost wood culture

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Trees and woodlands surround us, and wood is important in all our lives. In Britain today, people that access or connect with woodlands do so through a society that cherishes the beauty of the treescape and the wildlife it supports. Mountain bike trails in our forested hills provide adrenalin-filled excitement, carefully placed picnic areas encourage people to stop and stare, and interpretation boards describe the wildlife that you may be lucky to spot on a sign-posted forest walk. Websites, newsletters and membership packs boast of wildlife value and celebrate our heritage. There is little mention of wood.

Ask any forester or woodland owner about the public's response to woodland management or tree felling, and stories will be recounted from the outraged and incensed. Why is this? Wood is as popular as ever in our lives. Sales boom for 'real wood' flooring and kitchen cabinets. Supply of wood burning stoves fails to meet demand every winter as more and more people aim to cut energy bills. People want wood but do not wish to see trees being cut down. Perhaps it is no surprise, after all this is the same society that prefers to buy a plastic-wrapped joint of meat from the supermarket, whilst the slaughter of the animal is unspoken and remote.

Wood was once the principle material for society. With the reduction of Britain's forest cover to an all time low (5%) at the end of the 19th Century, which coincided with the relentless substitution of wood by manmade materials, we lost our connection with growing trees for wood.

Foresters have not always been the best advocates either. The bold afforestation of our uplands, with dark satanic rows of alien conifers in the early and mid 20th Century, scarred some of Britain's most valued landscapes, buried precious archaeological heritage, and acidified our watercourses. Forestry had become an industry, while wood use seemed irrelevant to everyday life.

Fast forward to the start of the 21st Century and a new purpose for forestry emerges, centred on a role for trees in soaking up carbon dioxide, and in protecting society from environmental damage such as flooding. Increasing concerns about the importation of timbers from endangered forests, especially in the tropics, leads to certification schemes with the promise that the wood is sustainably sourced. Evidence shows that lack of management has actually adversely affected woodland biodiversity. We start to think about 'wood miles' and whether producing home-grown wood may be a good thing after all.

Yet Britain is second only to Ireland in being the least wooded country in Europe: our woodlands are precious. Woodland owners however find that their management is sometimes prohibitively expensive. An increase in hobby or leisure ownership means that woodlands are less often considered to be a wood resource. Practical training courses for foresters and land managers have withered with declining interest and tightening budgets. Overlying these constraints is a public antagonism towards growing trees for wood.

To fulfil any ambition of truly sustainable forestry, we need to gain public support by bringing people closer to growing trees for wood and, ultimately, revive a wood culture in Britain.