

Making woods work

Innovation and enterprise are at the heart of the venue for this year's AGM. The Greensand Trust's Sue Raven explains why.

Greensand Trust



Think of Bedfordshire and extensive areas of woodland are not the first things that come to mind – more likely fields of Brussel sprouts. It is one of the least wooded counties in the country, however, there are numerous small woodlands, a significant number of which are on ancient woodland sites. The Greensand Ridge, which stretches roughly east-west across the centre of the county, is one of the more wooded areas of the county and is now home to the Working Woodlands Centre (WWC), located adjacent to Maulden Wood, a large woodland SSSI owned and managed by the Forestry Commission.

The WWC is run by the Greensand Trust, a small independent environmental charity that works along the Ridge. The Trust has long been concerned about the lack of management in local woodlands, with the resulting decline in woodland wildlife, and has been involved in a number of projects over the years to try to encourage better and more sustainable management.

Setting the foundations

An investigation carried out by the

Trust in 2005 estimated that only 37% of the county's woodland was then being managed. The issues making woodland work uneconomic in Bedfordshire are the same as those facing many places – the small, isolated nature of many of the woodlands (94% < 50ha in size), poor access, high deer numbers, a poor quality resource due to lack of management and cheaper products coming from abroad. During the period of the study the only people then attempting to make their living full-time from coppice work left to move elsewhere in the country!

The study made a number of recommendations, including the suggestion that a 'working woodland' centre could help by providing a focus for raising awareness of the importance of ancient woodlands, their need for management and the value of buying local wood products and providing support to woodland workers. The Trust and the Forestry Commission had been discussing such an idea for some years, with the additional feature of workshops for woodland workers, and a new office for the Trust, as its then home in the old Commission office in Maulden Wood

was falling down and the wildlife moving in! FC had started an Ancient Woodland Project in its woodlands locally, removing non-native species and restarting coppice regimes, and wanted to support the local woodland industry.

It was a long and eventful journey involving many changes and compromises but eventually, in 2008, funding was obtained from the then East of England Development Agency to build a set of incubator workshops in the wood, on the site of the old Forestry Commission workshops that had existed since at least the 1960s. This proved to be the vital catalyst, and around half the funding required for the main 'Working Woodland Centre' immediately adjacent to the wood, just off the main A6 was secured from the Rural Development Programme England.

Building up

The workshops were built in 2011/12, but there was still a long way to go. The journey through planning was far from straightforward, but consent was granted after a deferral, and a further 10 different funding bids were required to secure

enough funding to deliver the first 'phase' of the Centre. The time that elapsed between initial funding bids and delivery was so great that three funding awards had to be turned down due to time constraints on spending them. However, the clearly-identified need and goodwill of several key individuals ensured that the Working Woodland Centre was constructed during 2012 and opened late that year.

The WWC consists of a classroom/training room, a small meeting room and the headquarters of the Trust. It is heated by a woodfuel boiler with woodchip being sourced from a local estate. Outside there is space for educational and training use and a woodland discovery area for children. The workshops consist of five units – two are used to support the Trust's ranger service, while the remaining three are leased to local woodland or wood-related businesses, providing them with a vital helping hand in the journey from garden shed to sustainable business. All three are currently occupied, with one now hosting a share. As well providing a workspace, the workshops are also encouraging collaboration.

Bringing people in

Training courses are integral to the Working Woodlands Centre concept and have covered a wide range of topics; from tree health to small woodland management, wreath-making and wood sculpting to deer management. Funding was secured from the Heritage Lottery Fund, via the Greensand Country Landscape Partnership, to support a range of courses over a four-year period, recognising the contribution that woodlands make to the landscape of the Greensand Ridge and the need to stimulate positive activity within them. Some courses are targeted at woodland owners and managers, with others more focused on engaging the wider public with woodlands and wood products.

Making connections

The Trust is working closely with workshop tenants and local woodworkers to develop opportunities for working in local woods, and ideas for training courses and products. The links are mutually beneficial – for example, one local woodworker's coppice by-products have been successfully used as bundles to shore up river banks for a Greensand Trust project, and a beautiful giant dormouse nest for educational use has been created from willow. We are all looking forward to the SWA AGM being held at the WWC in September, and the opportunities this will bring to meet other members and swap ideas and experience.

Visits by local schools and youth groups are slowly growing and we have

a particularly good link with our closest Lower School who now visit the wood several times each year. Among other activities they have tried their hand at coppicing, taking the results back to use as pea sticks in their school garden. The Centre has also hosted 'twilight sessions' where teachers from across the area visit after school to learn about what the Centre has to offer.

Next steps

Looking ahead, the Trust, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, is seeking to expand the range of courses and events that engage with the public to keep promoting the need for positive management and supporting local wood workers. In the longer term the Trust has planning permission for the next phase of the Centre, which will provide a café and other much-needed facilities to support visitor access to Maulden Wood, as well as a focus for retail of local woodland products. Substantial funding

will be required, but the Trust has already demonstrated its ability to secure funding and deliver just what is needed.

More information

Find out more about the Greensand Trust's remarkable success story in reviving the fortunes of Bedfordshire's woodland industries by coming to the SWA AGM and Skills Share this September. It's taking place at the Trust's Working Woodlands Centre in Maulden Wood.

For more about the SWA AGM, see page 5.

And to find out more about the Greensand Trust, go to www.greensandtrust.org



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