

Community Woodland Network Conference July 28TH & 29TH 2007

An excellent weekend held at Stoke Rochford Hall in Lincolnshire at the end of July, with over 130 delegates in attendance it made for a lively conference. Proceedings were started with a number of woodland exhibitors outside the conference venue, they were Alan, Chris and Robert from Hill Holt Wood - www.hillholtwood.com who demonstrated green woodworking with the traditional Pole Laythe. We also had **Alistair Hayhurst**, making hurdles - www.underwoodcrafts.co.uk and finally **Richard Johnson** in attendance carrying out some sculpture work. Richard can be contacted via e-mail at: richwjster@gmail.com

Woodland Trust Chief Executive Sue Holden opened the conference and gave an update on recent projects at the Trust including the recent decision with Luton airport, our acquisition of 200 plus acres at Wragby in Lincolnshire as part of the Limewoods project and our various campaigns to engage children including Tree For All and the Scouts partnership this year to create 100 new woods marking the scouting centenary.

Sue also spoke of other opportunities for people to get involved with our work including Nature Detectives and our recently launched Ancient Tree Hunt. Sue pointed out how important it was for us to have a variety of ways in which people can get involved and how people's voices can help with campaigns such as the threats to woodland including the current case of the proposed Weymouth relief road which will effect Two Mile Coppice and other wildlife habitats in the area.

Our next speaker was **Jill Butler** for the Woodland Trust who used the opportunity to speak about the Ancient Tree Hunt that Sue touched on in her speech. Jill first joined the Woodland Trust in 1995 as a Woodland Officer but became ever more interested in woods that are the nearest to those that have a long history of old trees – our old growth woodlands. Her 'hero' is William the Conqueror who through his Forest Law in the 11th century has given us an inheritance of some of the most important ancient tree sites in the world – places such as Windsor Great Park, Sherwood Forest and the New Forest.

Jill now campaigns for ancient trees on behalf of the partnership between The Woodland Trust and the [Ancient Tree Forum](http://www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk), a group of volunteers and supporters from different parts of the world of trees. 'Arborists, landscape historians and artists have opened my eyes and it is so exciting to be with them as they come up with new insights into these fantastic and very special trees' The conference is an ideal opportunity to raise awareness of the scheme and encourage people to go out into the countryside and start recording our ancient and veteran trees. For more information and how you can get involved in this fascinating project visit our website www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk

Following on from Jill, we added an international flavour to the afternoon with an interesting presentation about woodland and ancient trees in Sweden from **Vikki Forbes**. Vikki has worked with ancient trees and woodland for 15 years; 11 years in England including 6 years as the property manager for Hatfield Forest for the National Trust and the last four years in Sweden as a nature conservation consultant. Vikki has been involved in the Ancient Tree Forum since its early days and helped to start up a Swedish branch! She is passionate about ancient trees, but is particularly interested in pollards and sharing the combined knowledge from Sweden and the UK. For more information see - <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/ancient-tree-forum/atfinternational/sweden/sweden1.htm>

We broke for tea and an opportunity to speak with groups in the adjacent room where it was pleasing to see many had brought posters of their woodland activity. It is really interesting to see the range of work that people are undertaking up and down the country. We also had exhibits from Allan Portas from the National Hedge Laying Society - www.hedgelaying.org.uk and Fiona Gordon from Ecolots - www.ecolots.co.uk who had travelled all the way down from Scotland.

The afternoon programme continued with our second international speaker, Dominique Mansion from France. He gave an animated presentation about French woodland and his project The Masion Botanique in the Loire Valley. Dominique was aided by a translator for the session. The champion of the 'Pollards and defender of the 'Bocage' (small fields separated by hedges and trees in France), Dominique Mansion is a naturalist, illustrator, teacher and countryside activist working for the protection of natural works of art: tree pollards.

Dominique makes the link between art and the tree and is known as the white wolf in the Perche Vendome, his native region. Some of the older locals are not too sure about his passion for collecting 'Trognes', the French name for pollards. His almost compulsive interest in these trees, which he lists, sketches, photographs and preserves, dates from his infancy. "When I was three, I used to climb in two pollards which grew behind my parent's small farm. Later, I built tree houses in them and I played at travelling from one end of a hedge to the other without touching the ground!"

Realising the menaces which threatened this area and the emblematic trees in his countryside of Loir-et-Cher, Dominique created the Association Perche Nature in 1980 and illustrated 26 panels for an exhibition about the 'Bocage' which travelled around France for twenty years.

In 2002 Dominique designed the 'Chemin des Trognes' at Boursay, in the grounds of the Botanical Museum, which in turn led to the development of the European Trogne centre, which is permanently based at the Botanical Museum.

Currently Dominique is president of this organisation working to raise public awareness of pollards and the bocage, amongst the young, the general public and within local authorities. The first conference gathered 24 delegates on the subject in the autumn 2006, and a Fete des Troignes is on the cards for November this year. For further details have a look at the website - www.maisonbotanique.com

Our final speaker for the afternoon was Tim Scoones, Executive Producer for the BBC Natural History Unit in Bristol. A biologist by training, a naturalist for as long as he can remember, and a committed conservationist, Tim Scoones has been making wildlife documentaries for nearly 20 years. Tim started out with world-renowned natural history specialists Oxford Scientific Films, making films for National Geographic Television, the Discovery Channel and the BBC, before moving to Bristol to join the prestigious BBC Natural History Unit, where he is now an Executive Producer. For the BBC, Tim has worked on award-winning series such as Andes to Amazon, Nile, Natural World and Horizon, among others.

For the last three years, Tim has been part of the core team of the BBC's hugely popular Springwatch (and now Autumnwatch) series - a team which he now leads as Executive Producer. He is a key player in the BBC's ambitious Breathing Places campaign which aims to inspire people to make their local areas better for wildlife and for people. He has managed to galvanise other areas of the BBC, from children's programming, local TV and radio, the web team and now BBC News to join in on the annual event that Springwatch has become, thus making it an ever more important focus for conservation awareness, working in partnership with a large consortium of leading UK wildlife organisations. Tim is a passionate conservationist and sees his role with television shows like Springwatch as an important tool in winning the hearts and minds of everyday people and making them care more about UK wildlife.

During his presentation Tim stressed the point that programmes such as Springwatch and the new Breathing Places project are excellent resources for communities to use and for the Community Woodland Network to use to attract more people. Tim challenged the delegates to make the most of Breathing Places to attract more members to volunteer for their woodland project as its a powerful media tool created for individuals to exploit.

After a question and answer session the afternoon programme concluded. For those who were interested in starting a general debate on woodland conservation and management and impromptu session was held in the bar led by Andy Beer, Gary Haley and Jill Butler.

After the evening meal we adjourned to the bar and ran a woodland quiz. We also presented a prize for the best woodland poster competition and held a raffle. Thanks to various sponsors for the prizes including Downtown in Grantham. The raffle raised £129 for Tree Aid in Africa, see www.treeaid.org.uk for more details.

Sunday started bright and early with workshop sessions from 09.00 to 10.15 and then 10.45 until 12.00, the sessions were on -

- Tree For All - what the Woodland Trust's tree planting project can offer you. www.treeforall.org.uk
- Treesponsibility - Climate change and its repercussions for woodland and woodland planting. www.treesponsibility.com
- Media Workshop - make the most of promoting your groups events and activities
- Woodland Archaeology with Gary Haley, investigating the historic environment of your woodland
- Ancient Tree Hunt with Jill Butler, practical session in grounds. www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk
- Woods Under Threat with Alice and Bredhurst Woodland Action Group. www.woodsunderthreat.info and <http://www.bwag.org.uk>
- Bearsted Woodland Trust – The success story of this community woodland in Kent. www.bearstedwoodlandtrust.org
- Planted Ancient Woodland Restoration with Alistair Crosby – the situation and the opportunity. <http://www.woodland-trust.org.uk/publications/index.htm>, and then go to conservation publications

After the workshops and an early lunch we boarded two coaches and set off to visit Hill Holt Wood at Norton Disney. Half an hour later we were greeted by Nigel Lowthrop, the staff and volunteers on site. We split into various groups each focusing on a particular theme.

What is different about Hill Holt Wood is that it is small woodland in which a lot of people are being employed. They are generally young excluded or unemployed people. The wood is managed as a native woodland habitat but also as a backdrop and resource for other goals such as education and training of the young people .

Hill Holt Wood is controlled by a board of voluntary directors representing local communities, local and national businesses and local councils.

It is certainly a very different experience from many of the woodlands managed by the individuals and groups visiting but none the less is good to highlight the other possibilities that are currently being successfully delivered by Hill Holt. For more details go to - www.hillholtwood.com

After the two hour visit we returned to Stoke Rochford via Grantham Station to drop some of the delegates off for their train connections. After a final refreshment interlude at the hall it was time to close on another conference.

Thanks to everyone who attended, to all our speakers and the staff and support team at Stoke Rochford who made us so welcome, and for the great food!

Many of the questionnaires have come in and in general the feedback has been very positive which is encouraging, we will make a note of the comments for the next one in 2009. If you do have any additional comments or feedback on the event please do let me know.