

Angus Hanton

The man behind woodlands.co.uk tells us about the joys and responsibilities of becoming a new woodland owner

In the early 1970s Angus Hanton's parents decided to buy a woodland. It took ages because the woods were either too large or they'd get outbid. Eventually, when Angus was 12, they bought a woodland in East Sussex, as a family thing, which children and grandchildren have enjoyed. Then, about 20 years ago, the Hantons realised there was a market need for woodlands small enough to manage and sold at a fixed price to cut out the terrible auction business. They called themselves Woodlands For Sale, and put up boards with their name and a phone number.

LW How did you start?

AH Our first woodland was 108 acres near Ashford, and our first sale was to a neighbour and then 40 acres to Kent County Council for a country park. We were able to give them exactly what they wanted, because we'd bought the woods and they needed to wait for their next budget to come through.

LW How did you market the woods?

AH There was no Internet then, and the business relied on press releases to local papers and the phone numbers on the boards. Creating woodlands.co.uk has



can use on coppicing or management; anything to get them going.

LW What do you say to people who say woodlands are over-priced?

AH I'd say they were previously undervalued. The problem is that the public and estate agents see woodland as rubbish land unless it can be changed into housing. If woodland prices have gone up at least it might have changed that. And if people don't pay much for the woods and they lose interest they'll

consolidation as owners decide they want a bigger area and buy their neighbour's plot.

LW Do neighbouring owners cooperate?

AH They're a mixed bunch of people. Some want to escape other people completely. Others want to escape the office. But we try to introduce them to other owners and help them set up unofficial groups. It depends whether there's a shared interest. When a wood is long and thin it may not be suitable, but when it's square there are likely more common tracks and reasons to meet.

LW Do neighbours ever fall out?

AH Rarely. We have a covenant which prevents owners from doing commercial activities like wargames and full-on clay pigeon shooting, nor can they split up the woods any further. Our marketing is skewed at a conservation angle, and most people who buy tend to have similar ideas to us. Occasionally we've had to rattle a sabre, but normally it's enough for neighbours to mention the covenant to stop people doing anything anti-social. It also stops people from buying a woodland who just want a garden.

LW How's the market feeling now?

AH We're not feeling the squeeze yet. People may have a nest egg that was earning them 4-5%, but they're now getting very little return. Other people fear inflation and think their money is safer in land. And a recession makes people rethink their values after a spell of high consumption.

LW Is the stock of woodland drying up?

AH Not yet. Certainly the supply of land is less elastic than demand, but acting as a resale agent is helping us.

LW Do you think, as some people say, that you've 'democratised' forestry?

AH I think there is a danger in cosy organisations. I went to a Royal Forestry Society meeting recently, and someone stood up and said: "Welcome to everyone, and I'm especially pleased to see old friends." Surely you'd be even more pleased to see newcomers? We've brought a lot of new people into forestry, probably 1000 in the last 10 years, and we're only one operation. And what they have bought is usually mixed woodland that foresters used to consider as useless. They are often uneconomic unless you factor in the fun and enjoyment of managing your own woodland.

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"A recession makes people rethink their values after a spell of high consumption"

transformed the business, with potential buyers able to view woodlands at their leisure rather than having to call for details, and we don't have to send out paper particulars. It's enabled us to communicate the principles of woodland management and the responsibilities of ownership much better.

LW Where do the woods come from?

AH Sometimes from estates, but mostly from big woodland investments from the 1970s.

LW People have said that woodlotting is converting the woods into gardens. How do you encourage people to manage their woodlands properly?

AH Nature does it. Gardening 5 acres part time is too great a task. Sometimes new owners want to put a fence around their wood, but they soon realise it's going to take too much time and money, and they get used to the idea of it being unfenced. We've recently introduced a scheme to give new owners £300-worth of training which they

abandon the woodland rather than resell to someone who will look after them. I have an instinct that the more people pay for a wood the more they are likely to spend on managing it, and that they judge the running costs by the initial value. I can't prove that, but I think it leads to better management.

LW Do you resell woodlands?

AH Yes. Very few people resell, but most that do sell will do so through us because we know the woods and have a list of people likely to buy. Recently one owner in Yorkshire was moving to Lincolnshire, and wanted to sell their woodland, so we swapped it for one we already had near their new home. Their old woods have sold now too, so both woodlands are more actively managed than would possibly have happened if we hadn't been able to make the swap.

LW Do owners expand?

AH Yes. We split the woods up in the first place, and then there's subsequent