

DISCOVERING LONGWOOD



Introduction

Long wood was in effect a consolation prize. Having prevaricated for nearly a year and finally decided that we really would like to own a small wood for recreational purposes, we couldn't believe our luck when thirty-three acres came up for sale almost on our doorstep. Unfortunately we were to be bitterly disappointed. We failed to write the magic number in the box in a sealed bid transaction.

A fortnight later we made arrangements to view a nine-acre plot about eight miles from our village. Access was via a muddy pot-

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holed track, which dissected a large area of woodland that had been further divided up into smaller individual holdings. There would be no privacy. It was dank, it was dark, it was dismal and we could hear traffic thundering along a major road nearby. We left feeling rather depressed.

There didn't appear to be anything else suitable on the market. A local land agent was advertising thirteen and a half acres of semi-natural ancient woodland on their web site, but we dismissed it for being too far from home without even reading the particulars. Christmas was approaching and I saw an item on the regional news program about reindeer in Tenterden for the festive season. Irresistible, and an opportunity to purchase some presents in an environment far less stressful than a shopping centre. On the journey there we decided to make a slight detour to locate the web site woodland. Down a narrow, winding lane with the stretching bony fingers of trees interlocking overhead, a 'For Sale' sign came into view on a right-angled bend next to a bridge over a stream.

We were confused. Two arrows on the board pointed in different directions, with no obvious access to the trees standing on the other side of the stream. We walked further along the lane and discovered a gate, but this led into a narrow stretch of woodland on a fairly steep westerly facing slope. Having suffered with mobility problems for most of my adult life, the legacy of a childhood spinal injury, it didn't look very inviting. Intrigued, we abandoned the notion of communing with reindeer and retraced our tracks to the land agent's office only to find it closed for the weekend. Muttering and mumbling about a wasted journey, we glanced at sheets of particulars displayed in the window, all with an accompanying plan.

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We had been looking at the wrong piece of land! Back in the car, back down the winding lane, but this time we went through a gate



into a field of broad beans, across a track following the eastern boundary to the far corner, to stand in front of another gate and a notice nailed to a tree. PRIVATE WOODLAND KEEP OUT We squeezed around the edge of some rickety fencing and ventured into the unknown.

Rodney glanced back to check that I was still following.

'Are you alright?'

'No', I replied, 'There are wolves in there.'

The entrance track led into the dark, dark gloom between towering conifer trees. I hadn't seen any glittering, menacing eyes, but I knew they were there, or had been, lurking to determine whether we were friend or foe.

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The ground was uneven, the outcome of centuries of mammals burrowing, and littered with fallen branches. Rodney forged ahead whilst I stayed put, intermittently nervously looking over my shoulder.

Then the sun came out! Shafts of brilliant light slicing through the darkness like laser beams, illuminating convoluted organic shapes, intricate bark patterns, fern fronds and yellow-green mats of moss. Peering through the gigantic wooden bars, I could see the bean field bathed in sunlight confirming that Long Wood lay on a gentle south-facing slope.



Rodney returned from his reconnaissance mission to report on a tangle of fallen trees and evidence of extensive animal activity. He suggested we explore further in the opposite direction.

The pathway travelling east was much easier to negotiate, and a complete contrast to the 'wolf end' was immediately noticeable. Much smaller deciduous trees, with blue sky clearly visible above their tops, now surrounded us.

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I have no idea exactly how or why it happened, but I suddenly experienced the most incredible feeling of familiarity and belonging, although I knew without a doubt, I had never stood on this patch of ground before. Rodney pronounced he was happy with what he had seen and although he wasn't convinced that Long Wood was as desirable as the one we had lost in the sealed bid fiasco, he would like to put in an offer.



By Monday morning we had come to the realisation that for very different reasons we both desperately needed to own this particular thirteen acres of woodland; Rodney in order to preserve his sanity after spending every alternate week incarcerated in the nether regions of a P&O ferry, and me, at the risk of appearing to be losing all sense of reason, because my brain was convinced it contained a homing device which needed to make a connection.

Recent experience had taught us that desirable small woods only came up for sale sporadically and when they did, the purchasing process could be far from

straightforward. We determined to make the vendor an offer he couldn't refuse.

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Six weeks later we were the new custodians of Long Wood. The next item on our shopping list was a book explaining how to identify the different species of trees!

In the Beginning

Our home is in a very pleasant village, but our garden is tiny and we live in close proximity to our neighbours on all four sides. Now we possessed thirteen and a half acres in which to roam about at will. No public access, no road adhering to any section of the boundary, no buildings within sight, we were like a pair of excited children with a new toy.

The most interesting, avidly watched program on television became a two-minute slot entitled 'The Weather'. We were fortunate in that it was an unusually dry winter and although not always sunny or particularly warm, the ground underfoot was firm, making it possible to drive with ease across the edge of the bean field, up our sloping entrance track, to park our car under the 'wolf end' conifers. Any forecast not featuring gale force winds or monsoon rains, resulted in us pulling on our thermal underwear topped off with garments not even fit for donation to charity shops, and heading for the great outdoors.

It was a strange feeling, elation combined with the expectation that at any moment an authoritative figure clad in green wellies, moleskin trousers and a wax jacket would make an appearance, intimate towards the sign by the gate with the barrel of his shotgun and ask us to leave.

The measure of time became distorted - entering Long Wood was synonymous with existing in another dimension in which we could

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easily spend three hours simply traversing our territory. This operation though was by no means as straightforward as it sounds. The main ride from the entrance gate to the eastern boundary was over a metre and a half wide, fairly flat and only covered with moss and small twigs, but there were no other obviously constructed pathways around the plot. Narrow tracks frequented by animals leaving slight, trampled indentations on the surface disappeared off in various directions through the undergrowth. Unfortunately these had evidently not been made by giraffes and unless we wanted to crawl around on all fours, action needed to be taken to remove both living and dead overhanging tree growth. Rodney selected a vicious looking bill - hook from his collection of tools.



I made a rather pathetic Jane, following at a safe distance as new walkways were forged around the perimeter with links to the main ride.

We were fascinated by everything around us, stopping frequently to inspect, poke at, exclaim over and question our discoveries, from

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tiny nibbled nutshells to a three metre long oval hollow. There were large rotting stumps standing like grotesque statues in a sculpture park, animal holes with freshly displaced earth at the entrances, a pond reclining at the bottom of a steep slope filled with murky, black liquid, skeletal wooden remains poking above the surface and who knew what lying in its sinister depths.

We took it for granted that our enthusiasm would be infectious. Some friends and relations did manage to appear excited as news of our latest acquisition was relayed to them. Others merely looked confused.

'Why?' they queried.

'What are you going to do with it?'

'Are you going to build a house and move there?'

We were under the misapprehension that it would be a treat for them to be given a guided tour. Their reactions though came as a shock and we soon realised the truth contained in the old saying, 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' In essence, our nearest and dearest were expecting a stroll in a public park, whilst we were revelling in fighting our way through a wilderness.

'There's an awful lot of work to do here.' became a common comment.

They rapidly succumbed to the cold and failed to hide their bored expressions, anxious to return to a warmer, brighter more civilised environment. When a falling branch only narrowly missed giving my mother a bout of concussion whilst she bravely tackled the 'wolf end' footpath, we were forced to consider the possibility that this dream of ours was not for sharing.

What next?

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The realisation began to dawn that we couldn't continue to keep acting like visitors ourselves; we had voluntarily become the owners of a living, growing plot of land complete with all its wildlife in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and as such were now responsible for performing tasks to ensure the continuation and longevity of this precious piece of English countryside. We started to read various publications and books on woodland management but very quickly became overwhelmed by a plethora of advice based on a multitude of scenarios.

What type of woodland did we possess? What were our ambitions for it? How were we going to achieve this?

We couldn't even answer the first question with any degree of competence or confidence. Having failed to determine the majority of tree species in their dormant state, despite trudging around clutching sheets depicting winter twigs (rendered useless by the actual examples being 20 to 30 metres above our heads), meant we were unable to assign Long Wood to any one of the eighteen main woodland types listed in the National Vegetation Classification (NVC) index, especially as categorisation also depended upon



recognising the accompanying ground flora species. It would soon be spring we consoled ourselves, then we would easily be able to achieve our first objective.

Great swathes of wild garlic emerged along the stream banks, pom-poms of brilliant white stars camouflaging

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the tangle of fallen and rotting wood, which to our inexperienced eyes was probably something that required 'dealing with'. Carpets of delicate wood anemones burst into flower throughout the eastern section, serving to banish our gloomy frame of mind if not our confusion.

A glimmer of hope came in the form of a short article published in the Small Woods Association quarterly magazine describing a booklet entitled 'Fundamental Woodland Management' by Rodney Halliwell. It was the sub-title that intrigued me - 'Management of woodland to ensure safety and continuity'. We immediately posted off a cheque.

The illustration on the front cover showed people strolling through a sunlit glade - a good start, and the text continued to provide solace explaining how not all woodland management needed to be focused on timber production, but could instead be based on a system of 'continuous cover' involving the periodic removal of small groups of trees, self regeneration and the retention of standing deadwood or fallen branches to provide habitats for wildlife and fungi. This made sense and on our small, somewhat neglected site, appeared to offer an alternative to labour intensive coppice rotation and the clear-fell of conifers, followed by replanting together with procedures to prevent immediate annihilation by wild animals.

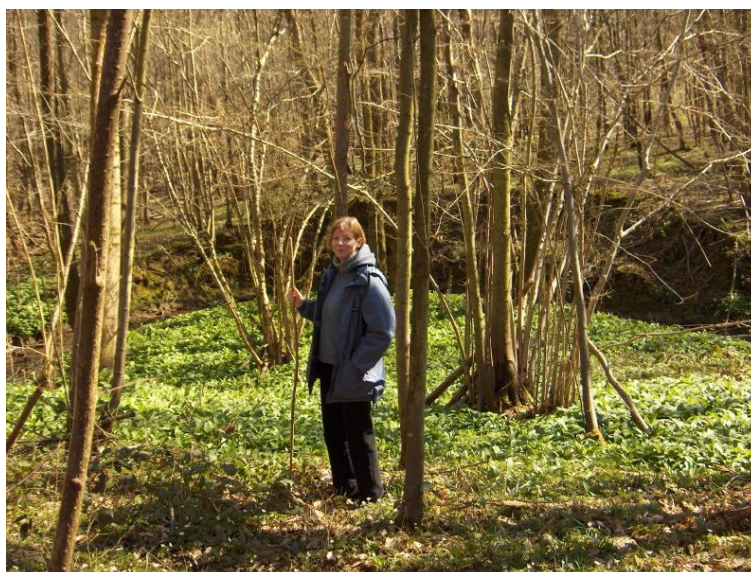
Perhaps Rodney's metamorphosis into a 300-pound chainsaw-wielding lumberjack with rippling biceps and six-pack would not be necessary after all.

Spirits buoyed by manageable possibilities, further enhanced by bluebells blooming and vibrant new leaf growth magically unfurling,

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we set out with a spring in our step to search for the perfect place to site our camp fire and picnic table. In the depth of winter we had christened a small scallop-shaped clearing south of the main ride 'the dining room', because it appeared to be an ideal location for entertaining. However we were totally unprepared for seasonal fluctuations in light levels. Full leaf cover transformed the chosen spot into an uninviting, cool, damp, dark cave, which even the thinning of weak perimeter trees would not improve. A completely different area needed to be found so I embarked on a mission to pace the length of Long Wood, acutely aware that once removed, trees could not just be reinstated.

This proved to be a very valuable exercise as there were many factors to be taken into consideration, for example the lie of the land, drainage, the height of surrounding trees capable of casting shadow, ease of access, and the avoidance of unnecessarily destroying ground flora or healthy immature trees. We had started to comprehend what we were dealing with.



The real turning point though resulted quite unexpectedly from a day spent at the Kent County Show where my sister was exhibiting her pedigree Jacob sheep. Strolling around the trade stands on a sunny July afternoon we came across one with eye-catching boards at the entrance displaying pictures of wildlife, plants, scenery and woodland. As we ventured into the marquee for closer inspection,

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we spied some very useful leaflets spread out on a table with titles such as 'Managing woodland rides, glades and edges'. A cheerful young woman approached, clutching a clipboard.

'Are you looking for advice or information about anything in particular?' she enquired.

'Yes,' we replied, 'but not anything - *everything!*'

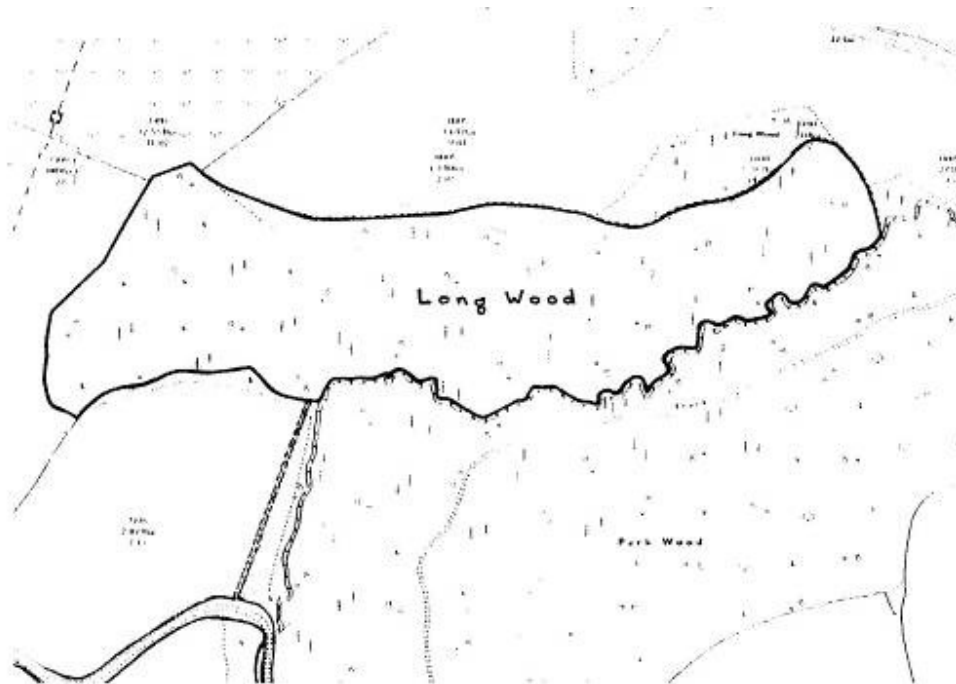
The first step towards solving any problem is, by all accounts, to admit you have one in the first place.

'Our names are Heather and Rodney. We own a wood and we don't know what to do with it.

After questioning us and considering the facts, Rebecca explained that she represented the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) and we would be eligible for a free site visit by one of their advisors to assess the woodland and give appropriate management and conservation advice. There was a waiting list but we should be contacted within a couple of months.

We couldn't believe our luck.

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Later when the euphoria had subsided, I began to mull over our predicament. Quite by chance we had stumbled across a lifeline, potentially providing tailor made recommendations to start us off on the right track. We were reasonably intelligent, practical people who were capable of holding down responsible jobs but did we intend to stand in our wood on the day of FWAG's visit and give the impression we were complete idiots?

I was galvanised into serious action. Whilst Rodney laboured to create the 'Picnic site', I systematically worked my way around Long Wood taking photographs and notes, collecting leaf samples and poring over reference books. The more I discovered, the more fascinated I became. By early September when Becci Harvey arrived to survey our site, I had formed a mental map of the plot and was able to describe roughly what grew where.

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On the right track

It was a pleasure to give someone with such enthusiasm for her occupation a guided tour around our wood. The Land Manager Report, when it arrived a week later, contained both technical information and management advice together with many useful contact details for more specific guidance on a range of topics, including the name of Mike Chapman the designated



Plantation on Ancient Woodland site officer for the High Wield AONB. One thing leads to another as the saying goes and in this case an informative course run by Mike in October in a wood close to ours, led to an assessment of the conifers planted across the western section of Long Wood, followed by a successful application for a felling licence which arrived amongst the Christmas post

With expert help we had been pointed in the right direction, ready to make a start in the New Year of 2007 on tasks we hoped would secure the future of Long Wood, increasing and maintaining the bio-diversity of habitats, enabling us to pass it on in the future in a much improved condition.

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"Discovering Longwood" is made up of a combination of Rodney's diary extracts detailing work carried out in 2007, weather reports and my illustrated journal for the year. Every month I chose a different subject to concentrate on, either describing major projects or events, or hunting out facts and figures to augment notes and photographs in an attempt to increase my understanding of how everything lives and functions within our boundaries.

