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Owning and managing your own tract of

WOODLAND

With a smallholding now costing the equivalent of a sizable lottery win, a new and more affordable alternative is the purchase of a tract of woodland. The 'dos and don'ts' are often much the same, as are the opportunities to engage in woodland management, crafts or leisure. Patricia Ockenden explains how connecting with ancient woodland has helped many people in their quest for the 'good life'



THE NUMBER OF individuals deciding to purchase their very own patch of woodland has increased sharply in recent years, but unlike the passive, tax-driven investors of the 60s, 70s and 80s, these people are from a different mould. According to recent research by Woodlands.co.uk, they buy for love of the countryside and to preserve it for the enjoyment of future generations. And many are finding their lives transformed as a result of their purchase.

These new owners do not necessarily have big plans for their woodland to start with – in fact, some are merely motivated by a vague dream and the possibilities of reconnecting with nature. They also make their purchases fully aware of what they can and can't do with their land. For example, they may have to maintain public rights of way and footpaths, they are not allowed to erect permanent buildings, and if they want to cut down more than a couple of mature trees, they must get a felling licence from the Forestry Commission. They are also asked to sign a legal document committing to maintaining peace, and activities such as paintballing, quad-biking and other noisy or potentially harmful forms of entertainment are not allowed. Furthermore, they must also agree in writing that they will not subsequently divide the ownership into smaller pieces. So, if the usual incentives for buying land do not generally apply to small woods, what is their attraction?

Mike Houghton, who recently bought seven and a half acres of Welsh hillside with his wife Jill, remembers: "My first visits to the wood were in the depths of a very wet Welsh winter. There



Photograph by Mike Houghton.



were streams formal and informal everywhere; what trees there were, were bare and unrecognisable; the ground uneven and treacherous with moss and gullies. Thinking of buying this wood, I kept wondering: what are we doing?"

According to Woodlands.co.uk, what sets this new breed of woodland owners apart from profit-driven plot buyers is that, for a start, their woodlands are much smaller – usually somewhere between two and ten acres at the most. This smaller size makes the prospect of embarking on a long-term project much more appealing to would-be buyers, and with prices starting at around £6,000 per acre, depending on where you are in the country, they are also more affordable than say, a boat or a small cottage. It is clear that the rewards will also be different.

The research reveals the emotional depth of the relationship that owners develop with their woods. The report found that four out of five buyers are initially motivated by pure recreation and wildlife interests. Many of them



Photograph by Mike Houghton.



will walk into a woodland and simply fall in love with the idea of being able to observe the magic of seasonal changes in the forest, become a regular walker, and watch birds and butterflies. And then, as they become familiar with the wood's diversity and abundance of life, and experience how much they can enjoy and share it, a transformation takes place. The vast majority begin to perceive themselves as guardians of the wood rather than owners.

Thinking back, small-woodland owner Mike Houghton says: "Now, six months later, our woods have become our church, our playground, our school, the best nature documentary ever, and fascinating in different ways each time we visit. I have become both more 'possessive' – wanting to protect it from the harm of uncaring visitors – and at the same time realising that it owns me far more than I can ever own it.

"I have so many plans and schemes, and each visit adds to the list, and every job takes time. A few steps added to a footpath have taken me and my brother a day, and will take another day at least to finish. Carving a tent-peg takes half an hour, and I need at least twenty. I have worked all my life 'selling' my time, and was ruled by time sheets and 'chargeable hours', and now, finally, it is all irrelevant. The purpose of carving a tent-peg is to be part of the process – the spray of wet sap from the newly exposed wood, the feel of the draw-knife going through the wood adjusting for grain and the flow, and the slow revealing of the tent-peg – not perfect, but 'fit for purpose'. This is all reducing my ignorance and adding to my experience; my world is focused on the task in hand with a vague ▶

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Photograph by Mike Houghton.

► awareness of the woods around, and anything beyond might as well be a different world. This work is satisfying beyond measure.”

SO, WHAT CAN YOU ACTUALLY DO IN YOUR SMALL WOODLAND AREA?

Walking, camping, climbing, making campfires, studying wildlife, or working with wood are only a handful of the more obvious things you can do. According to the research report, owners see woods as a place for productive tasks, not just for leisure or relaxation. Interestingly, these productive endeavours are usually not motivated by financial gain – owners on average generate around £350 a year from their woods, which is less than the average annual spend of £400 – but by a sheer interest in studying their surroundings.

Three-quarters see collecting wood for fuel as important, and one in two will take part in various woodcrafts. More than one in two owners want their woodlands for other activities such as keeping fit, birdwatching, sharing the woods with friends and family as well as pets, camping and lighting bonfires. A number also keep livestock, but there are restrictions, with permissible stock usually limited to either pigs or poultry (with a limit of three pigs or fifty birds per acre), and they must be kept securely within the designated area by good, strong stock fencing. This is, however, only a rule of thumb rather than written in stone, and anyone wishing to acquire woodland would do well to check out local bye-laws and restrictions.



Photograph by Mike Houghton.



Angus Hanton of Woodlands.co.uk says: “Owners often tell us about how their woodland is an escape from modern life, but it is particularly the escape from being a slave to clock-time which comes across most strongly. Things happen in a woodland when the time is right, rather than as a result of man-made regulation, and this very ‘natural’ sense of time is what many people like about being in woodlands”

Only a small proportion of owners believe in a ‘hands-off’ approach to management of their wood. They are usually more inclined to reversing neglect, and they often do so with the involvement of family and friends. A very common management activity is creating dead wood log piles as habitats for insects. Clearing space for existing trees is another important activity, because unless light is allowed in, the woodland gets darker, and conditions for diversity of wildlife deteriorate. This involves removing overgrown bracken and, where necessary, minimal tree felling. Establishing new trees for the next generation is another job to consider



for new owners, and according to Woodlands.co.uk's report, more than half of owners have planted new species.

Other management activities frequently include coppicing trees, and cutting bushes with brambles (three-quarters of owners have done this, or plan to do so), improving tracks,



Photograph by Mike Houghton.

building fences, and clearing unwanted plants. In addition, many owners have done much work to replace conifers and softwoods with native and broadleaf tree species with the help of information from the Forestry Commission. To help with this management, secure storage for tools and equipment in their woods and shelters for overnight stays have been created. But leaving the woods to themselves is another option, and many owners go to their woods to be still and to sit and rest under the canopy of the branches or in a small clearing.

Margaret Johnson was a nurse lecturer before she retired on health grounds due to Chronic Fatigue Syndrome five years ago. She bought her ten acres of woodland after she inherited some money from her father. She says: "Being in the open air and the peace and tranquillity certainly helps the soul! The exercise

walking around my wood each time I go and the little bit of work I do helps to keep my exercise management going, though I do too much a bit too regularly! The thing with a wood rather than an allotment is that it makes little difference if I decide to leave my day's task for another time."

LEARNING NEW SKILLS ON THE JOB

Owners spend a lot of time visiting their woodlands, often as much as once a week. They prefer to do most of the wood management tasks themselves. Some will bring significant background knowledge of the natural world and of practical tasks, but in general there is a lot of 'learning on the job'. Angus Hanton says: "New buyers are putting in more management resources than previous owners. We lay down opportunities for them to learn how to manage their woodland if they are so inclined, and offer every new owner free books and a free course for basic skills. Most importantly, we also connect them with other woodland owners so they can learn from each other and form a community. Developing new skills and creating meaningful social connections is, in our experience, one of the key returns of becoming a small-woodland owner."

WHAT FOR THE FUTURE?

This new breed of owners does not see their investment as a short-term financial scoop. Asked about their plans for the future, none of the respondents ticked the box stating 'I plan to sell when the price is right'. Most envisage passing it on down the line to future generations. The minority who have no children (less than a quarter) plan only to sell when they can no longer actively maintain the woodland themselves.

The evidence put forward by owners, and from the information gleaned by Woodlands.co.uk, all points to woodland owners wanting to exist in harmony with their woods and wanting to safeguard their future. They all take their responsibility very seriously, but enjoy their woods enormously. *



Photograph by Mike Houghton.



Further Info

For more information, visit www.woodlands.co.uk, which includes fascinating clips of woodland skills, the results of the survey referred to and details of woodlands for sale around the UK.