

A Bounded Wood

How and why we should manage woodlands in our communities

Sophie Carabine ponders why and how she and local volunteers should manage the beech wood on their Gloucestershire housing estate. How can we avoid subjecting a community woodland to well-meaning but unhelpful devotion?

Take the train to Stroud from London and as you get close, on your right, you will see a quintessential Cotswold village, rising up the hill from the canal, each stone house a fleeting delight. This is Chalford, or more accurately Chalford Vale, and if you were to walk the steep narrow roads up and through it, where donkeys used to take wool to the mills along the canal, you would come to another part of Chalford parish, Bussage.

Or, taking the London Road out of Stroud, past Waitrose and the carpet shop, take the left turn up Toadsmoor valley, the smell of wild garlic wafting into your car in the right season. Pass the lakes and the garage on your left and turn right, into Bussage.

Now on the Bussage development, or 'Manor Farm' as we still just about call it, you are in the midst of houses of fake Cotswold stone, up to 40 years old, built on the chilly hillside that gets more snow than down in Stroud. There are many who remember it still as infertile rocky grazing fields with cross country routes for boys now in their 60s. This development is where I live.

Look to the south on your way to the little row of shops and you will see that the estate is framed by a tall, green wall. Surrounded by our homes, Frith Wood Bussage (Laurie Lee's Frith Wood is nearby in Slad) is a 'pretty average Cotswold beech wood', according to our retained arboriculturist.

From the wood's south side, elderly residents, who've lived decades next to its mixed blessings of greenness and shade, take their daily walk to Tesco Express, for papers, milk and chats. Others walk through the wood to pick up a Chinese takeaway, or a prescription. Near the wood is a dogs' home: sometimes early in the morning or later

at night something sets off the hounds and it is as if the wood is home to a pack of awakened wolves. Primary and secondary schools are on the north side and children have the rarity of a walk to school through hundreds of living antiques. The wood weaves its way into our daily routines, the ordinariness of friendships, the needs of dogs and children.



The northern boundary of the wood showing proximity of houses and local shops.

Woodland ecologists such as Keith Kirby will point out how ‘modern’ a tall beech wood like Frith Wood is, a specific version of woodland, beloved of the Victorians but not a typical historic ‘working wood’, which from mediaeval times would provide smaller timber for firewood and fencing, rather than attempting to reach for the sky (Kirby, 1992). If a wood was named ‘Oak Wood’ it might not be because it was full of oaks, but because, rarely, there was one mature oak left standing near the edge, whilst the rest were humdrum, smaller trees, supplying commodities. In Epping Forest today, you can see the hornbeams that were cut – and cut again – at shoulder height to produce up to 40 branches of firewood each time. They were cropping machines, unlike, for example, becalmed, tall beeches in the Chilterns after the decline of beech Ercol furniture.

Yet our statuesque wood does indeed have history, quietly maintaining its place over hundreds of years. Around 1600 a Chalford cartographer called Matthew Nelson mapped the wood, partly owned by an Oxford college, partly by the Crown. A fragment of the map remains. Skip a few hundred years and on a photograph from the air in 1945 you can see the paths through, suggesting possibly young trees at the time, whose canopies had not closed over. We do not know for sure why the wood may have been mostly felled in the early to mid 20th century. But those trees in 1945 with gaps between them are the tall beeches of Frith Wood today.

Currently Google maps (or try ‘dinosaur.womanly. inserting’ in What3Words) dramatically shows its enclosure

by houses. But it is still here. Foresters say: “The wood that stays (i.e. survives) is the one that pays” (i.e. has a value). So this must have been a wood with a purpose, worth mapping, worth keeping. It was providing goods with a market, perhaps pit props, perhaps furniture, firewood or hazel hedging. Would that the maps told us more, whether local people got any benefit, or just the rich owners. Would that we knew when beech came to dominate, or whether for many years earlier, more versatile products guaranteed the wood would be mapped, defined, preserved.

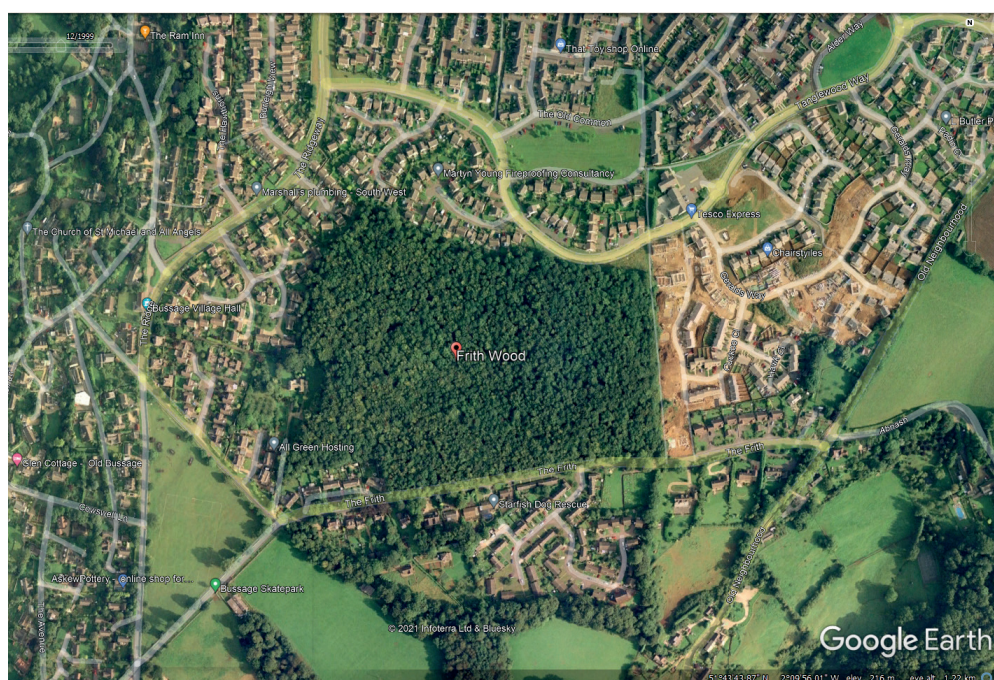
Its value today, the thing that will help it survive, is what it means to the humans wrestling it into a 21st century relationship, consensual or not. Here things get complex.

While lines on a map are visible, the wood, like so many apparently simple places around us, is also bounded by invisible tracks of power and influence. To write about the natural world is to write of politics: land, supremely, is where wealth and control reside, reliably leading to contention. When my house was built, the development was controversial on this quasi-virgin land and planning consent required the wood to be kept as compensatory free space. Its value in offsetting a new development saved it, when some of it, the other side of the road, had already gone. It was part of a socio-political settlement, for better, for worse.

Around six hectares of the wood are still owned by the developers who built my house. They have so far held on to the wood in the hope of planning permission, despite the District Council excluding it from development. Presumably Frith Wood is such a sprat in the developers’

wider commercial ocean that it is barely worth an internal meeting.

They take a robust approach to public relations, at pains to point out, rightly, that it is mostly a private wood and any walking across it, except on public footpaths, is trespass. They blocked off any entries from back gardens onto the wood. They may not however be winning hearts and minds: one motivated member of the public recently defied their calls to respect unarguable property rights by deploying a permanent marker to draw additional paths on their admittedly hostile signs and cross out the ‘private’ in ‘private property’.



Location of Frith Wood showing how it is bounded by housing development.



The tyranny of signs: the price to pay for a popular woodland.

A much smaller area is owned by Chalford Parish Council, about the size of two football pitches, and with its agreement I coordinate a volunteer group to manage this parcel of woodland. With dedication, if imperfectly, a Parish Council expresses the democratic will of its residents, councillors putting in time in thankless committees, variously striving for the common good or promoting their personal passions. There is something very proper about a wood, enjoyed by so many, being under the care of the most local Council in our system. But the latter does not necessarily have woodland management skills and it might be preoccupied by lively issues such as whether to strim the grass verges, about which it is strenuously lobbied in both directions.

So the Friends of Frith Wood group provides expertise and focus where previously the wood had little attention from its owners. We are however one of the multiple lines of responsibilities and interests, intersecting in the background. Of course, to most people, whatever these nuances, Frith Wood seems simple, a public space, a wooded version of the playing fields with the swings to the west. It is, in common parlance, 'our' wood, (and that of our dogs). Telling people that,

legally, this is not the case is not always heard, still less with interest and acceptance.

Moreover in Covid, 'nature' was promoted as our salve and sanity and we took our walks in twos and threes if allowed, broadening at incredible speed every path we trod. There has been widespread attrition of the land on so many sites open to the public: yet another legacy of the pandemic, along with anxious children and all else. And as a gran on our Facebook page said recently, why shouldn't young people do what young people do in a wood? Not everyone can afford to take fancy bikes to 'proper' bike trails elsewhere.

This leads to a deep challenge for any local woodland



The magnificent Frith Wood volunteers are representative of the local community.

management. If the community did acquire the developers' portion there would be great relief, in terms of it not going for housing. But in the context of a post-Covid society, feeling fired up about the great outdoors and our rights to enjoy it, any talk of 'ownership by the community' may risk the future wood, as much as protect it. It is of course for everyone and woods have always been a place for less than perfect behaviour. But we will need to persuade the community that apparent possession of a wood is only to share an interest with the ultimately more critical soil, trees and ecosystems. People are not malicious: they just follow their friends, their kids, the conversation, the dog. Therefore, for example, some areas may need to be fenced off. Can we convince our neighbours that rather than being simply today's woodland users, the deeper, more joyful, role is as stewards for future generations?

The challenge of courageous woodland management in public settings comes into sharp relief around the darling grey squirrels. Day-by-day they gnaw, both at young trees when they reach a certain diameter and, in Frith Wood, high up in the canopy, which becomes misshapen and stunted, reducing growth and strength. Large branches are weakened; damp and rot get in. When the leaves are out, perhaps especially when heavy after rain and in the wind, they come crashing down: bad for the wood and potentially bad for humans. It was squirrel damage in large



Facets of management: a planted viburnum, a fence and a conservation log pile.

measure that made the retained arboriculturist say that Frith was an 'average' Cotswold wood.

You need very few squirrels to affect a wood and we have many. Whilst the vegan population on the estate can safely be called a small minority, that does not mean there would be any widespread support for a selective cull of the cutesy greys. (In the background, I have conversations with those leading national trials of squirrel contraceptives, mostly being done on private estates. "Would you," I ask



Volunteers using grey squirrel damaged branches to create dead hedges.

“be interested in how it could work in a more public setting?”, knowing this is not a route to a quiet life amongst many of my neighbours).

So, the pressures on this surrounded rectangle of ‘nature’ are legion: its boundedness, the mixed ownership and interested parties, climate change and our buckling ecosystems, the tight embrace of so many users who claim to love it, just by using it.

But if we were to zoom in further on our map, or better still, take a slow walk through the wood, we would see its beauties enduring. We could be too quick to despair.

A pile of rotting logs from ash felling is a deliberate addition to the nature sanctuary, quietly doing its thing, letting the fungus take hold. A few evenings ago, in a nondescript part of the wood, I spotted wild hypericum (St John’s Wort, for gardeners and those seeking a pricey herbal remedy), figwort, self-heal and more. Spindle, viburnum, yew, field maple, hornbeam: all these willing Cotswold woodland species have taken to the wood after we planted them a few months ago. We plant without guards: the wood is rabbit and deer-free and guards are a temptation to younger visitors in a swashbuckling mood after school. In 2003 a woodland management plan listed nearly 100 plants seen in mid-May. Twenty years on and they are nearly all recognisable even without a structured search, from gooseberry to woodruff, sanicle to dog rose.

A great-spotted woodpecker, hidden in the high canopy, was enthralling us last spring with its booming hammering, and treecreepers dart about at some height. But the best woods also provide homes for the shrub-lovers and the least tidy Parish Council part of the wood, goldcrests, wrens, tits and blackbirds all seem at home. The iconic shot of the wood is soaring trees and not much else, affirming the ‘cathedral’ description often given to beech woods. But a wood responds to light and where trees have been felled due to ash dieback, the woodland flora grows back, giving cover for birds. A healthy if untidy growth of brambles can be protective of new trees and provide nectar, if there is not too much shade and they get to flower. In the last few months the volunteers have been reducing new growth of brambles where they might overtake the bluebells, but elsewhere, we leave them: there is much joy in basic education in the art of woodland management.



Volunteers Will and Erica enjoying some plant identification.

And, if we love the birds having shelter, we should celebrate rather than denigrate the sociability, the space, the solace, the mind-clearing power of the wood for humans, despite the damage we seem able to do. It is rare to be in the wood and not hear someone say how fortunate we are to have this extraordinary place. Relatives of mine have planted spindle, remembering babies who were never born and in the hope of being a family in another way. Or you say hello to a stranger, perhaps through their dog, and hear of their recovery from a cancer and how, today, now, it is beautiful to be alive, to be in the wood.

Nan Shepherd, in her classic *The Living Mountain*, captures walking the Cairngorms, mostly alone. It’s full of gems, for example how to enjoy walking heather with bare feet: “By setting the foot sideways to the growth of the heather, and pressing the sprays down, one can walk easily enough” (Shepherd, 1977). Nan, we are in the lowlands, we are not alone, rarely barefoot, due to dog mess, but we know your joy in every texture, every movement, every moment.

And so, precariously, in uncertainty and without any wish to tell the wood what to do, we bother on, accepting, without too much hoo-ha, that doing nothing is to do something, to collude with the decline of this ancient monument and living organism. We wrestle with whether and how a community should take on the liabilities of a wood in which humans, climate change and grey squirrels are creating severe management challenges, whatever we



Before (below) and 12 months after (above) the formation of the nature sanctuary in the wood.



do. We try to influence behaviour without being archetypal middle class neo-protectionists. We fulfil the governance of a charity, however dull that is, so that we can get more funds. We spend evenings doing grant applications for nicer than average wooden fencing, so that a nature sanctuary is more acceptable. We sprinkle bluebell seeds in big hope and modest expectation. We simplify entrances so they are easier for people with electric scooters. So, quietly, some things are better.

To respond to the fact of being alive on this tiny planet, implausibly providing us oxygen, hurtling around on the edge of a marginal galaxy, is everyone's quest. If you are landed, planted perhaps, a few miles out of Stroud, at 'dinosaur.womanly.inserting', the need to muster a response seems urgent, if complex. Thankfully the bounded wood is not asking us to define its future, just to be its companion in finding one.

References

Kirby, K. (1992) *Woodland and Wildlife*. Whittet Books Ltd. London.
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