

Category: Small Woodlands

Name of Wood: Bron Haul, Abergele, Conwy

Owned by: David Brown and Ruth Pybus

Summary

The main objectives are quality hardwood timber and coppice production whilst exploring opportunities for improving biodiversity and aiding water management, carbon capture and storage, solar energy capture, and soil building.

The broad strip of woodland, which was established by the current owners around 20 years ago on open grazing land, also shelters the farmyard and remaining fields whilst improving the appearance of the valley.

Silvicultural management

The woodland received a first thinning and pruning using a grant from the Welsh Assembly Government's (WAG), *Better Woodlands for Wales* programme. Exotic alder, planted as a nurse crop, was removed and the best stems of oak, cherry, ash and sweet chestnut were pruned.

Under the continuing WAG, *Glastir Woodland Management* scheme, thinning operations remove poor stems and favour oak, which are high pruned.



Integrating new woodland with existing woodland (Picture: Les Starling)



Hazel coppice under thinned broadleaves

Tracks and new fencing have been installed to improve access for management operations and extraction of timber and to keep the woodland free of livestock .

The stand is vulnerable to damage by grey squirrels and a cull takes place every summer. Some areas are high fenced to exclude fallow deer which otherwise do great damage to coppice regrowth of hazel and sweet chestnut.

Product development and outlet

The woodland is so far mainly yielding firewood which is the sole source of heating for the owners' home. Surplus is sold to family and friends. The owners make charcoal which is sold locally through small shops and larger outlets, such as the Welsh Food Centre at Bodnant.

Coppicing sweet chestnut has provided quality fence posts for the farm, which aims to become self-sufficient in fence posts in the near future, with potential for supplying posts in small quantities to neighbours in the medium term.

The owners make and sell the local style hazel basket, as well as sweet chestnut hurdles, and they demonstrate coppice skills at local shows, and teach basketry at the farm and at the Woodland Skills Centre in Bodfari.

Other greenwood crafts people are encouraged to use the woodland as a source of materials, including a besom broom maker and a pole lathe worker at the present time. The first material likely to be available of milling size, in about 5 years time, is larch.

Wildlife conservation

The woodland was planned with irregular edges and rides planted with flowering and fruiting trees and shrubs to provide sheltered, food-rich habitat for insects, birds and bats.

It has established good connectivity with neighbouring semi-natural ancient woodland and the PAWS woodland, Coed Fron Ddu, historically a wooded common. Woodcock, green woodpecker, nuthatch, redstart and bullfinch are regularly seen and red kites are increasingly common visitors.

The plantation and neighbouring woodlands have several large badger sets while fox cubs can be seen playing around their den in April.

The site is monitored for dormice following the identification of hazel nuts opened by dormice in 2008, and nest boxes for their use were organised by the North Wales Wildlife Trust and Conwy Biodiversity officer; there is a dormouse management plan in place to minimise negative impacts of woodland operations on this population.

Landscape and recreation

Woodland creation at Bron Haul has provided high landscape value, breaking up the grassed hillside and improving habitat diversity.

The woodland sympathetically follows the contour of the land, has a staggered edge, and creates a sheltered setting for the rest of the farm.

Flowering and fruiting trees and shrubs on the long woodland margin and along rides and footpaths within the wood increase its visual appeal. The latest track building has opened up a wide ride that will allow ground flora to flourish.

Two footpaths provide public access to the woodland. These appear in a publication describing interesting walks in the area and are well used by visitors and local dog walkers. The owners make a point of encouraging public access and engaging with recreational users about their work.



Owners Ruth Pybus and David Brown among thinned broadleaves

Education

In 2014 the owners hosted a field trip by the distance learning Forestry MSc from Bangor University. Attendees toured the woodland and a recent planting site to develop their understanding of establishment and management of young broadleaved woodland.

A group of home-schooled children (primary to sixth form age groups) and their parents came to experience tree planting in 2014. They then walked in the established woodland to see how their trees would look by the time they were grown up.

With the help of financial support from the Basketmakers' Association the owners have researched the local tradition of basketry, which used hazel split into weaving strips. The Association is now going to film their basketmaking to make an instructional DVD. Meanwhile, the owners have started to run courses teaching the various skills needed to make this style of basket. Visiting the woodland to understand how hazel is managed to grow good quality raw materials forms part of this course.

Lessons learnt

The development of the woodland from scratch at Bron Haul by a devoted young couple intent on producing quality timber and coppice material and then using it in innovative ways to develop and maintain a successful business, while making a major contribution to landscape and wildlife conservation, with educational spin-offs, is a shining example of what can be achieved given relevant knowledge, attention to detail, and hard work.

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Judges: Dr John Good and Philippe Morgan