

# Community Trees Handbook

Common Ground is seeking funds to produce a sister volume to the *Community Orchards Handbook*. In the meantime, the Forestry Commission has supported Robin Walter in the spring of 2012 to research and write the pilot case studies for us which follow.

## Case Studies Introduction

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Few things have the ability to transform places as trees. We have a long cultural and utilitarian relationship with them, using them for building, energy and warmth, paper, pharmaceuticals, food and much more, but also to beautify our cities and to enhance landscapes and make places. For most cultures particular trees are laden with symbolism and may carry something of the sacred.

Who plants trees and why they are planted changed radically with the creation of the Forestry Commission in 1919 and with a gradual shift of involvement in planting amenity and forest trees from private landholders towards statutory undertakers, voluntary bodies and community groups.

Now anyone can take part in changing their local landscape for the better - with trees.

This radical and exciting shift is enabling groups up and down the country to achieve amazing things. Sidmouth in Devon is turning the town into a Civic Arboretum, Stroud has pronounced itself the first Apple Town. Snuff Mills Action Group in Bristol is trying to get Grove Wood registered as a Town Green to maintain access to it, Community Orchards are springing up all over the country, Brighton & Hove Wood Recycling Project are helping to reuse some of the 10 million tonnes of waste wood we produce each year and have been helping similar enterprises round the country. In 1990 the Countryside Commission initiated 12 Community Forests edging cities from the Mersey Forest to Thames Chase. The National Forest has been transforming 200 sq miles of land in central England with 7.8 million trees planted since 1995. In addition to supporting Community Woods, the Woodland Trust is making Heartwood Forest the largest new wood in England by planting and assimilating existing woodland - 347ha in Hertfordshire. More recently the Localism Act 2011 offers local communities the opportunity to buy 'assets of community value' and so increase the amount of woodland looked after by local people. Many planting programmes have drawn people into local involvement, the latest - the Big Tree Plant - a government initiative, will fund 1 million trees for planting by communities in urban areas by 2015.

The many ideas in progress can prove inspiring and informative in improving our places, showing how we can learn from each other to live better with the world through trees. Examples of what people are doing all over the country can build confidence for you, your group, workplace, hospital, school, faith group, local council to achieve similar things. There is no one way of doing things.

Radical action is needed and quickly because we find ourselves in a perilous state: with less trees than any land in Europe bar Ireland, we have lost almost half of all woods over 400 years old in the UK in the past 80 years. Currently more than 600 ancient woods are threatened by new roads and development. Many of our existing woods are not being managed or used, making them impoverished habitats for a variety of birds and butterflies. Loss of tree cover has made us more vulnerable to wind and flood. Neglecting woods here also means that we waste material that could be used for firewood, yet our habits of consumption threaten tropical rain forests and temperate cloud forests on other continents. Our global reach and industrial history should bring responsible action in the face of climate change. Amongst other things we need to lock up carbon by planting millions of trees, caring for trees in the landscape and making more long-term use of wood. As patterns of rainfall and summer heat change, we may need to help trees stay in their climatic comfort zones by planting trees from a wider and more southerly genetic provenance.

More, we need to rebuild our relations with nature, rebuilding ecosystems and reinforcing particularity locally so that myriad creatures can thrive with us.

We can fight the homogenisation of our places with trees using the characteristics and personalities of different species to help create places with meaning and identity. We can bring beauty to places where developers and civic lack of effort have failed us, or where farmers have created vast mono-cultural crops inhospitable for wild life.

Who was it who had the foresight to plant a Plane tree in Abbey Green in Bath two hundred or so years ago and who spared the Major Oak in Robin Hood's Sherwood? These have become landmarks we can now all enjoy, we need to pass on to future generations this culture of caring for old trees as well as championing existing trees in our neighbourhoods and planting trees on grand and small scales to make places and to reinforce local distinctiveness.

There are other ways to help - we can achieve much by not doing things. For example, using our purchasing power at home and work: not using palm oil from plantations that have displaced tropical rainforests; not using virgin paper when recycled will do, not using wood from unsustainably managed forests, as well as buying locally sourced wood or better reusing wood.

Trees are good for us. Over millennia we have worked out a rich rapport in all kinds of situations where nature and culture intertwine. But in parallel we have forgotten too much. We are due for a new surge of humility and shared understanding driven by new needs and new circumstances. What is novel is that communities, not just powerful individuals or agencies, are coming together to create new landscapes and futures. We can learn much and enjoy the sharing through celebrations and by marking the seasons from Bean Pole Week in April, summer wood fairs, Apple Day on 21st October and Tree Dressing Day at the beginning of December.

The following case studies have been compiled by Robin Walter with funding from the Forestry Commission and demonstrate a range of initiatives that we hope will inspire, inform and excite others into action in their own neighbourhoods.

The **Community Trees Handbook** will show the importance of caring practically for our trees and woods, from the youngest to the oldest, and demonstrate how to live with them in changing times. We will look at choosing and planting trees and different management activities.

The Handbook will show what we can do together, in our gardens, streets and neighbourhoods, in our schools, workplaces and hospitals, in urban as well as the broader farmed landscape. We shall examine how and why we might form community groups, the changing role of collective engagement and how to take effective action in the public domain. We shall be seeking examples that will inspire action – please send us your stories.

Our use and abuse of wood products such as paper, timber and firewood significantly affects our trees, woods and forests both at home and abroad. We consider more appropriate handling of this bountiful resource, including how best to source our needs, the careful use and re-use of wood products and the return of this precious fibre to the natural cycle.

Our relationship with trees will be amply illustrated with living examples, showing how people and trees can thrive together.