

Community Trees Handbook

Case Study 1: Examples from Gateshead – *in which a council supports community rangers to care for its special places; and a public wood acquires some influential friends*

The story so far...

Gateshead seems to be erupting with new features – the sensual curves of the Sage; the re-conditioned Baltic; the extravagant embrace of the Angel; the ever-open malls of the Metrocentre; the cheeky winking bridge...

And the ordinary fabric of the city seems constantly to be rising up, fading and decaying, building anew on its colossal industrial heritage – new houses, old sheds, new railings, old stone walls, old quarries, new landfill...

There are places within this crazy mosaic where trees, flowers and grass are also quietly thrusting themselves up. Some of these plant communities have been growing naturally for centuries, whilst others suddenly find an opportunity to flourish when the humans have released their grip.

Amongst the town there is farmland with narrow lanes, stone walls, hedges and woods. The Derwent Valley, home to red kites, stretches right to the Metrocentre; the river Team slinks past muddy reeds and staites into the Tyne.

Over half of the borough of Gateshead is farmland with a few woods. Chopwell Wood has been worked hard over the centuries, yielding both its living wood and its fossilized coal to the demands of the day.

What's happening at Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council

The **Natural Environment Team** at Gateshead Council are working to protect natural communities in the borough, help their inhabitants to thrive, and find new places where nature can break through the paved surfaces and find a home amongst people.

They manage over 20 special places for the benefit of wild life and people, including woods, meadows, heathland and ponds; the 'Grow It' project encourages community food growing and allotments; they run Forest School training to encourage children to learn out in nature. They also run the Gateshead Countryside Volunteer Rangers to share in their work and act as ambassadors in their communities. These Rangers are 'a force to be reckoned with' according to Jayne Calvert from the Natural Environment Team. They contribute to management planning at quarterly meetings and are ready to offer their views on all topics...

For years the Team have worked with community groups, schools, volunteers, allotment associations, wildlife groups and others to support their various rapprochements with nature. So when the **Big Tree Plant** funding opportunity appeared, they were well placed to channel money and energy into numerous well-run projects. The council publicised the fund, collated the groups' various projects and made the application on behalf of the Rangers. They particularly favoured fruit trees to link with the council's healthy eating



agenda; and they have worked with communities to identify planting opportunities in those areas most deprived of nature. The Big Tree Plant funded the trees and shelters and the Rangers did the planting work, helped by the local group in some cases.

Station Wood

Next to the Metrocentre is the thunderous A1; right next to this arterial road are several wildflower meadows, sown on old arable land, already home to skylarks and kestrels; and just by the meadows is a wood planted in 1998 with oak, hazel and slender birch now up to 20 feet high. The old hedges, ditches and banks can still be seen round the edges, with laid ash and old hawthorn, remnants of farmland right in the town. The Rangers have added a new orchard to the corner of this wood, on the site of the old Swallowwell Fire Station, with a grant from the **Big Tree Plant** and support from the council. They planted a hedge and some fruit trees in winter 2011/12, including apple, pear, cherry and plum. There is a new entrance here too, welcoming people from the nearby houses.



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Addison Village

"Addison Village" is no longer a village – it is a wood, planted where the mining village was demolished in 1958. Sycamore was thought to be the only tree hardy enough to withstand the polluted ground, so it still dominates the wood today. Now ash is seeding itself in occasional gaps where it finds richer soil and a patch of sunlight; and schoolchildren have planted woodland wildflowers too. Just 50 years ago this was home to a close-knit mining community with its own Male Voice Choir, Drum & Fife Band and Welfare Association. Nature has now reclaimed Addison Village and today it hosts

a community of woodland animals, walkers and children. The wood is being cared for by the Rangers, who have installed paths, mended fences, and keep the place tidy.

Clara Vale Community Orchard

This mining village did survive the pit closure in 1966 and retains a strong community ethic. When the mine site became derelict, nature crept back in and the villagers have protected it as a nature reserve, fending off plans for development.

At the other end of the village they have carved out another special place – the Community Orchard. A 25 year lease from the



council at a peppercorn rent has enabled the community to apply their creative talents to the project without getting bogged down in fund-raising and ownership issues. This tangle of bramble down by the railway was cleared by two sturdy Tamworth pigs, then fenced around. The orchard was planted in 2000 with apple trees, both eaters and cookers. Tony Tynan, one of the organisers, commented that “the idea had cut across all the various interest and age groups in the village. Virtual strangers suddenly became friends.” With funding from the **Big Tree Plant**, the Rangers and the Clara Vale Conservation Society have now added some new apple trees to the orchard in winter 2011/12.

One delightful feature of this orchard is how each tree has a numbered post linking it to a house in the village. So for example, tree no. 3 is a Golden Spire apple allocated to 11 Tyne View. Each tree is rented for £3 a year by a villager, or 'tree tenant', as a way of raising funds, with over half the households in the village having adopted a tree, and some asking for several. Villagers get first choice of their fruit and anything not collected goes into the common pot.



Windy Nook

High up on the south side of town is Windy Nook Nature Park, from where you can see down to the coast and to Sunderland. The Natural Environment Team have worked with the Friends of Windy Nook over the years, adding wildflower meadows to its existing acid grassland and thinning the woodland. Occasional horses are tethered to posts and graze the meadows unofficially. The Team also lead Forest School activities in the adjacent primary school, so they were keen to plant some **Big Tree Plant** fruit trees in their grounds when the opportunity arose in winter 2011/12.

What's happening at Chopwell Wood

Meanwhile further up the Derwent Valley, Chopwell Wood has been making Friends from the surrounding villages. When this Forestry Commission wood of 360 hectares was threatened with privatization in 1991, local people stood together to prevent the sell-off and the possible threat of clear-felling and mineral extraction. The new **Friends of Chopwell Wood** also took the opportunity to set out their vision of a Woodland Park for learning, for play of all kinds and to care for the plants and animals living there.

The Friends have worked hard to realise their vision: they run educational days for local schools, using a beautifully converted store shed as a classroom; they enable others to run woodcraft days and cycle training; they have found an accommodation between the walkers, cyclists and horse-riders; they took over the sale of Christmas trees from the Forestry Commission, bringing people and funds into the wood; they organise



the hugely popular summer Forest Festivals.

They have been supported in their work over the years by an increasingly sympathetic Forestry Commission. They managed to secure a FC Ranger who lived and worked in the wood full time from 1997 to 2007 and this greatly assisted their many ventures.

Over the last 20 years they have enabled £300,000 of investment into Chopwell Wood on projects including conservation work, the popular sculpture trail, footpaths and trails, tables and benches, carpark improvements and information boards. One pioneering project was the LiDAR – Light Detection and Ranging - survey of the wood in which laser beams from a helicopter scanned vegetation and topography to reveal hidden archaeology. They also collaborated on an innovative Health Project where local patients were prescribed a visit to the wood to improve their physical and mental well-being. As Liz Searle of the Friends says, “The very presence of the woodland bring about a feeling of peace and tranquillity, which is especially valued on the edge of a huge urban area. It is a green escape from the



pressures of everyday life, and it is right on the doorstep for many people”. Their most recent project is tracking down and celebrating the 'Timber Jills' who worked in Chopwell Wood during World War II as part of the Women's Timber Corp. So far they have found 6 ladies in their late 80s and 90s.

The Friends have already published one booklet on the natural and social history the wood and this forms part of the ongoing archive.

This high level of initiative and activity does not just happen by itself. It is only possible with dedicated people organising the work, support from the Forestry Commission and a supply of funds. None of these can be taken for granted. Whilst many people attend events and sign petitions, the work has been done by a small core of dedicated enthusiasts. The 2010 Christmas tree sales had to be abandoned because the early snowfalls made access hazardous. Support from FC has waned and the full-time Ranger was replaced with a part-time Ranger, who has since been replaced by a monthly visit from a Ranger based some 25 miles away. Litter, fly-tipping and vandalism have increased since losing that custodial presence on site.

In early 2011 the community was stirred into action again: “Residents tied yellow ribbons to doors, gates and hedges to create a ring of protection around the wood. Ribbons lined the route into the Wood and were worn by protesters, horses and even dogs.” About 1500 people rallied to protest against the latest



attempt to sell off the wood and the Friends sent a representative to meet the Independent Forestry Panel in Hexham to put the case for continued public ownership and enjoyment.

So what next for Chopwell Wood? Liz Searle speaks of the joy of caring for the wood: “It’s *our* woodland, we just love it!” As long as that sense of ownership and care can be found in the surrounding villages, nurtured and supported by the Forestry Commission, then this special Friendship with Chopwell Wood will continue.

Acknowledgement: Windy Nook photo courtesy of Gateshead Countryside Volunteer Rangers

Websites

The Big Tree Plant

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/bigtreeplant/>

Gateshead Countryside Volunteer Rangers

<http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/countryside/getinvolved/volunteers.aspx>

Station Wood

<http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/countryside/sites/crosslane.aspx>

Addison Village

<http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/DocumentLibrary/Leisure/CountrysideWildlife/countryside/adisonhedgefield.pdf>

Clara Vale

<http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/DocumentLibrary/Leisure/CountrysideWildlife/countryside/Clara-Vale-Leaflet-Nature-Reserve.pdf>

Windy Nook Nature Park

<http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/countryside/sites/windynook.aspx>

Friends of Chopwell Wood

<http://www.friendsofchopwellwood.org.uk/>

Forestry Commission – People, Trees & Woods

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestresearch.nsf/ByUnique/INFD-5STBZ2>