



The Award-winning Woodland

Doug and Claire King-Smith took on the challenge of restoring a neglected woodland in Dartmoor National Park, Devon.

Here they share the challenges, but also the many positives of creating a community-loved woodland enterprise.

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Initially, back in 2006, a group of friends and I tried to raise the funds to buy Hillyfield as a community woodland enterprise, after discussing all the dreams we had and the future we hoped for. There were a number of reasons this didn't work out: the wide scope of our expectations; the imbalance in what each person could contribute in terms of finance, skills and expertise; and the fact that half of the group would have needed to move from other parts of the country and required somewhere to live, hoping that maybe they could tuck themselves away in the woods for a quiet woodland life. Ultimately, there was just one person left and the then owners decided not to sell.

I continued my relationship with the woodland by volunteering for a couple of days each week to help clear

wood, cut laurel and generally help out. I managed to find an organic grazer who brought his sheep to the land, and I ran a workshop to make a simple field shelter to act as field kitchen.

Two years later I handed a letter to the owner, Charles, asking for first refusal should he ever decide to sell – it turned out he had put the land up for sale that very day.

It was not easy to raise over £100,000 to invest in neglected woodland on Dartmoor National Park. Hillyfield required massive infrastructure development in order to do the simplest of tasks, and after three months I gave up. We had a restricted access through a disgruntled neighbour's driveway, and a planning authority famous for its restrictive attitude toward any sort of development.

Somehow fortune smiled and a friend came up trumps, offering to invest 50:50 in the project.

Thirty years my senior, Sky had a lot of wisdom to share. First was a warning: "If you can't do it on your own, maybe it's not meant to be." Sky had seen this before and cautioned that to borrow money to make one's dreams come true could come at a greater cost, especially if later on one partner needed to step out.

The second cautionary note he offered was to suggest that my girlfriend's and my plan to get married on the land was a possible folly. "It's going to be so much work," said Sky, "Why not make it easy on yourselves?"

The truth is, my vision to create a sustainable woodland enterprise from a neglected woodland on marginal land was never going to be easy.

Marrying the Land

In 2011, Claire and I did get married in the woods, and we now have three gorgeous children who enjoy the woods as much as we do. Our wedding was a great celebration, not only of our love for each other, but a celebration of love itself, and of the land. At the ceremony, our rings, which were engraved with the silhouette of the Hillyfield horizon, were blessed by everyone in attendance. This ceremony, and the extraordinary amount of work it took to make happen, has helped tie us into a sense of place which I could only have dreamt of. In effect, we not only married each other, we married the land.

Growing up with a fairly sheltered middle class background I have often been uncomfortable with the huge inequalities in our world. Here in the UK, access to capital and to land seems to be a hurdle which is

near impossible for most to cross. As a student studying Anthropology, it became clear how many of us dream of building community, caring for Nature, supporting sustainable growing and localised economies. Many of us want to return to our roots and get down to life on the land.

When I bought Hillyfield I displayed an offer on our website. I invited others to put forward proposals of land-use, saying that I had 18.6 hectares (46 acres) available (half-pasture and half-woodland) and that I wanted to share it. My hopes were that we could help people connect with themselves and each other through hands-on working of the land; also that we could offer opportunities for people to take on a share in the management and engender a sense of place.

For the first two years we worked towards restoring the woodlands, neglected for 40 years, with a plan to gradually halo-thin areas, opening up the canopy to bring light to the remnants of the deciduous woodland which had been mostly felled and replanted with Japanese larch (*Larix kaempferi*) as a Plantation on Ancient Woodland Site (PAWS).

Frustratingly, immediately after our wedding came the news that this larch plantation was infected with a deadly disease called 'Sudden Oak Death' (*Phytophthora ramorum*). We were ordered by the Government to fell all of the trees within just five months. This was heart-breaking and forced our hand: a 30-year plan needed to be carried out in a handful of months.

At this time Sky, my business partner, decided to sell his share in the land and with support from my family I was able to buy him out. I did this knowing that the road towards our dreams had got that bit steeper – I was now fully invested.



Learning by Doing

One of the blessings of our wedding was that my wife's cousin, Lloyd, a professional golfer and former bodybuilder, decided to stay in Devon. Not just that, but he pledged a kind of Woody-allegiance and together we undertook the herculean task of clearing five acres of twisted cherry laurel, an entangled mass of thickly wound stems, followed by the colossal task of felling the larch.

We started with zero experience in felling trees, and ended up fairly competent, clearing about 50 trees each day. Within two months we had both slimmed up and put on considerable muscle. Throwing trees about on a steep hill gets you fit fast!

Meanwhile, every month I hosted a music night in town, a deliciously intimate gathering of folk music, cakes and sheepskins. Here I would be able to share snippets of our adventures in the woods. Gradually word spread, and each month we would host a volunteer weekend. Soon people would be asking "How's it going in the woods?". We also found out about WWOOF and Workaway, both networks providing opportunities for volunteers to engage in meaningful work.

It soon became very obvious that we had to resolve some serious infrastructure issues. How were we to extract the timber? How could we keep growing our vision whilst sharing an access which took us straight past the living room window of our testy neighbour?



A family photo in December 2019



Planning Issues Become Monstrous

We managed to negotiate a very generous grant from the Forestry Commission to improve the tracks within the woodland, and also to buy a narrow strip from a neighbouring farmer which would take us straight to the road. This new access would allow us to get much needed forestry access, as well as avoid our previous gatekeeper entirely. He wasn't the most sympathetic fellow and had installed CCTV cameras to record all of the comings and goings from our land. Each year we would find a planning enforcement officer wandering around the woods, having had a fictitious tip-off that we were living on the land, or erecting buildings without planning consent. For seven years this continued, and for six of them we were in the process of asking for the formal permission for forestry barns. We needed somewhere to stack timber and firewood, somewhere to store our machinery and equipment, and a place where we could add value to the wood we grew on site.

Eventually I decided to lodge an appeal against the third refusal to our barn build. At this point the proverbial compost really hit the fan.

Within weeks of starting the appeal process, we were served seven enforcement notices which effectively turned a simple planning appeal into an extremely complex case. The National Park Planning Authority had decided to throw everything at us in the hope that one element would stick. Despite having been aware of all of our developments over the years, and having offered support at a preliminary enquiry before I bought the land, they decided to enforce against the touring caravans which we used to house forestry workers (an established use for forestry under permitted development), as well as two compost toilets, a field kitchen and another tented structure that we used as a workshop, and our two small wood drying stores. The planning enquiry took on monstrous proportions.

We tried to diffuse the situation by asking to drop elements of the case given that a certificate of lawful use should be issued, but we ended up having to engage a barrister and prepare for a four-day public inquiry.

The cost of all this was astronomical, approximately £45,000, and we were only able to attend because of the enormous goodwill of our community: 806 people contributed directly to a crowdfunder which helped pay for the legal costs and expert advice. Several of our key witnesses and experts acted entirely pro-bono and were willing to give up our cost claim in order to achieve the most positive outcome.

Most of the forestry community was aghast at the obstructions being put in our way. Our story even made it into the mainstream press and radio. Eventually we took to the stand at the National Park headquarters, and later, whilst showing the planning inspector around the woods we received a phone call saying that the National Park wished to drop all of their legal case on the condition that we dropped our cost claim.

We ended up with a very positive shared press statement, where the National Park spelt out their support for woodland enterprise on Dartmoor, and agreed that Hillyfield was an excellent example where community-led forestry was supported and encouraged. They also recognised the need for infrastructure such as a timber drying barn, machinery

store, and workshop to add value to timber grown on the land as permitted development and essential to forestry. On top of this they granted planning permission for two residential units to provide accommodation for people staying and working on the land. We have made all the planning documents available through our website, although all official records have been locked away as 'legally sensitive' and we won't be able to see them for another 48 years!





Mabel with chicken (free ranging woodland organic hens)

Barn Raising

The barn building process has demanded most of our attention for the past two and a half years. Using almost entirely our own timber milled here in the woods, we have hand built three spectacular timber-framed barns, each made in a different style which can hopefully offer the possibility for a learning journey for others interested in timber framing. We have also developed a partnership with a local forestry college and Moor Trees, a tree planting charity, helping to train their young students. We have also been rewarded with two awards: The Dartmoor Society celebrated our work with their annual prize, and the Royal Forestry Society awarded us silver medal in the 2019 Excellence in Forestry Awards.

In May this year we host the national gathering for forestry workers, and we have been shortlisted by the Plunkett Foundation as a candidate to become one of three centres of excellence for forestry enterprise in the UK as part of the Treescapes programme.

Hopefully this year we will see our enterprise picking up pace; where as well as selling planks from our sawmill, and firewood to our local community, we will be able to diversify our income to include more elements of education and public engagement through events and activities.

Bringing people into the woods and onto the land is one of the missing ingredients in the way we can effectively restore neglected landscapes. There is a hunger for hands-on learning and practical engagement in tree-planting and community supported agriculture.

If you are interested in supporting our progress please do get in touch. If you are looking to start up a woodland enterprise of your own where you might be restoring neglected woodland, then we would love to help in whatever way we can.



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A father of three and wood sculptor, **Doug King-Smith** has been immersed in woodland work, community and the arts since 1998. Since moving to Devon he's been active in the local wood scene, organising various woodland events and acting as a consultant to DEFRA for small woodland needs. www.thehillyfield.co.uk
In the next issue, Doug will be writing about the volunteers and woodland culture created at Hillyfield