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# Woodland Skills Project Report (pdf)

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## BACKGROUND

### The Woodland Resource

Broad-leaved woodlands in Britain are one of the most important ecological systems of rural areas and support a wide range of native flora and fauna. They have been managed by man to various degrees for millennia to produce a wide range of products from building materials and products for industrial processes such as charcoal and oak bark for tanning, to tools and furniture.

As modern technology and transport increased over the last century, cheaper products came onto the market and traditional industries declined, leading to many hundreds of thousands of hectares of woodlands becoming neglected with no management. This decline in management can often mean a decline in ecological diversity, as certain species have become dominant at the expense of others. This is especially true in coppice woodlands. Many woodland plants and animals are largely confined to ancient woodlands which have had a fairly stable history of coppice management over hundreds of years.

Many woodlands have become much poorer in their ground vegetation and in insect species since the decline of coppicing. There is therefore a need in these woodlands to begin managing them again, to preserve or increase the ecological diversity that exists. Woodlands are also very important landscape features throughout Britain, and sensitive management is needed to ensure that they remain so. Wood from local sustainably-managed woodland is environmentally benign, storing carbon from greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and cutting down on environmental and monetary transport costs. Jobs created from increased woodland management would occur where there is need for more work in scattered rural communities, especially where this work is skilled, with low capital and machinery costs and relative high labour costs.

### The Market

Gardening is one of the people of Britain's most popular pastimes and hence, gardeners represent a very large market. Many of the high added value products that can come from our woodlands are very popular with gardeners, whilst many are used in the home. The majority of the products at present in people's gardens come either from unsustainable forests abroad or from softwood impregnated with toxic chemicals. Ever-increasing numbers of consumers are keen to buy products that they do not see as being a health risk to themselves and their families as well as products that are known not to cause environmental problems in their manufacture. There is a very large and virtually untapped market for sustainably-produced woodland products. Charcoal is a good example, with Britain producing in the region of 3000 tonnes per annum and importing 48,000 tonnes of a predominantly inferior product from unsustainable sources.

### The Workforce

There are many people from all walks of life keen to work in an industry seen to be environmentally benign or beneficial. Traditionally, many woodlands were worked by a migrant labour force, as is often the case today in large-scale commercial forestry with

contractor crew moving around to where the mature trees are. Many of the woodlands remaining in the British landscape are scattered and isolated, with few large tracts of broad-leaved forest left. In many areas there are not enough woodlands within sensible commuting distances for a woodsman to work. Hence, nobody works them. This is the same in other associated rural trades such as dry stone walling and hedge-laying, where workers are continually turning work away because it is too far to travel and they only wish to work within a certain distance. Travellers are happy to move to where the work is to get the job done and then move on to the next job elsewhere when the work is completed.

A lot of woodland work and hedging needs to be carried out in the winter time when the sap is down, which is traditionally when Travellers have no work. During the summer and autumn they are often working as seasonal labour on fruit farms.

### **The Target Group**

Gypsies and other traditional Travellers have been the object of prejudice and discrimination for hundreds of years throughout the UK, but the influx of new Travellers onto the road, particularly from the mid 80's onwards, provoked the Government into passing the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. Part five of the Act greatly increased the powers of police and local authorities to evict Travellers camping illegally and removed the duty on local authorities, under the 1968 Caravan Sites Act, to provide sites for Gypsies.

Although nomadism and unauthorised camping are not, in themselves, illegal, the effect of the legislation has been to criminalise a way of life. In addition to this, the systematic closure of traditional stopping places through ditching, gating and boulders has resulted in the Traveller community having nowhere legal to stop. This has devastating consequences, especially for families with young children as a result of high levels of stress and through the difficulties it presents in relation to accessing healthcare, education, training and employment.

### **FFT**

Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) was established during the passage through Parliament of the 1994 Criminal Justice & Public Order Act in response to the increasingly difficulties faced by Gypsies and Travellers throughout the UK and has since grown into a nationally recognised voluntary organisation. The central aim of the organisation is to promote the equitable treatment of all Travellers and to assist the Traveller community to help themselves. The work of FFT is carried out through a national Advice & Information Unit currently based in Brighton, East Sussex.

The FFT Advice & Information Unit serves the whole spectrum of the Traveller community, both traditional and new, whether on the road or settled. The Unit does not restrict its' services to one particular group nor represents one group against another, but respond to the needs of the community as a whole, be they individual or group requests for representation, advice or mediation. The objective of the Unit is to develop expertise in Traveller related issues in order to deliver an informed and constructive service with the aim of achieving sustainable solutions to conflict. FFT also provide its services to a wide range of voluntary organisations and professionals working with Travellers.

Travellers, due to their nomadic lifestyle and differing accommodation needs, can present a unique set of situations and difficulties which are often not appreciated by those in authority and professionals dealing with them. We aim to provide a 'bridge' between the settled and Traveller communities.

Many members of the sedentary population look upon Travellers as outsiders, as scroungers, as not contributing to society, having chosen an alternative lifestyle and therefore as having no rights. However, there are multiple reasons why people live on the road, whether as a consequence of birth, choice or circumstance. From our experience, the majority of

Travellers, whether housed, on official sites or camping in an unauthorised manner, still suffer from unacceptably high levels of prejudice and difficulties which show few signs of abating.

Those who have nowhere legal to stay suffer most and are unable to access many of the facilities and services that the sedentary population takes for granted. The key to their difficulties lies in a lack of adequate and authorised site provision, including council & private sites as well as temporary stopping places.

Despite negative stereotyping of Gypsies and Travellers and the consequent discrimination and disadvantages they face, Gypsies and Travellers have been a part of English culture for over four hundred years and continue to play an integral part in rural economies. Although rarely reported, there are many positive examples - both historical and current - of Travellers, local authorities and the settled community working and living together. FFT has attempted to facilitate and encourage this positive relationship by the development and delivery of the Woodland Skills Training for Travellers project.

### **Woodland Skills Training for Travellers**

The need for The Woodland Skills Training project was identified by Travellers and was developed and delivered in consultation with Travellers. This is, without question, the reason for its success. FFT believes that this is a vital element in finding sustainable solutions to all the issues surrounding the travelling way of life. Travellers must be consulted and included if we expect to successfully manage these complex issues to the benefit of all sectors of the community.

The project initially started in the autumn of 1997 and the first year of training ended in the spring of 1998 (a report from the first year of the project can be obtained from the FFT Advice & Info. Unit). Increased funding was secured and an expanded project was developed for the 1998/99 winter season. Both seasons of training have been seen as a tremendous success. This has not only been as a consequence of providing Travellers with skills that compliment and enhance their chosen way of life, but by improving relations between Travellers and the settled community.

## **THE PROJECT**

### **The Objective**

The central objective of the project was to deliver specially tailored training in basic woodland management (including coppicing, hedge-laying and other related skills) to members of the Traveller community.

### **Delivery**

In order to deliver the training effectively, an innovative approach had to be developed in order to address the central issues restricting Travellers from accessing mainstream training courses. Two main obstacles were identified, these being:

1. A severe lack of authorised or 'tolerated' stopping places. As a result of having nowhere legal to stop, Travellers will undoubtedly face repeated eviction from any land they camp on during the course of training. This is highly disruptive and results in most Travellers dropping out of courses as a consequence of being forcibly moved from the area, if not the county.
2. A lack of training courses that compliment a nomadic way of life or promote/sustain Traveller culture.

In order to address these issues, the training had to be delivered at a semi-permanent residential site (catering for vehicular and non-vehicular accommodation such as benders or horse-drawn wagons) to ensure a secure and safe park-up during the course of training. The training also had to provide skills that complimented a nomadic way of life and had to be delivered by trainers with either direct experience of living on the road or with an understanding and appreciation for Traveller culture.

## Year One

The first year of the Woodland Skills Training for Travellers project was successfully completed in the spring of 1998. Funding for the first year came from The National Lottery Charities Board, The Country Works Programme (administered by Action with Communities in Rural England and funded by BT, the Post Office and The Rural Development Commission), The Tudor Trust and The Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust. The first year provided for the running of six courses training a total of 72 Travellers (12 students per course for one month in woodlands around southern Britain). The 28-day training courses were residential and provided training in basic woodland ecology and management and working in an area of woodland. The majority of the course training involved the manufacture of a wide range of high-value-added products from the woodland.

The courses were run on privately and publicly owned land with the cooperation of the landowners (which included The National Trust and Somerset County Council).

From the analysis of student questionnaires\*, 46% intended to go on to further education and/or training, 42% into self-employment and 12% into employment by another.  
*\*this was based on completed samples of 47 questionnaires – 72 places were offered, 65 accepted and/or were able to attend and 60 completed, though not all students wished to fill in the questionnaire.*

The first year's courses, along with the information gathered from the student questionnaires, provided useful experience and recommendations on how best to develop the courses into the future.

These were:

- The need for one central training camp where the majority of the training could take place as the monthly movement of training camps posed an unnecessary strain on the logistical capability of the programme.
- The need for longer courses so that participants could learn further skills and crafts.
- The need for longer courses so that participants could develop certain skills further.
- The need for a follow-up support mechanism for the course graduates to provide:
  1. Apprenticeships to established woodland workers
  2. Assistance in setting up in self-employment and developing business skills
  3. Assistance in seeking and finding employment
  4. Assistance in accessing woodlands and contracts to work, provision of a support and liaison mechanism between woodland owners and woodland workers as well as providing forestry advice to both parties as necessary.
  5. Marketing support to enable producers to market their produce.

## Year Two

After the success of the 1997/98 Woodland Skills Training Programme, funding was secured for an expanded and upgraded programme over the 1998/99 winter season. Funding for the 1998/99 programme came from the European Social Fund (at 45% of the total project cost),

with match funding from the National Lottery Charities Board, The Tudor Trust, The Camelot Foundation and the Coates Family Trust.

As part of the up-graded programme, it was decided that a permanent site for the whole season was much more preferable option than moving every 4 weeks to a new location, as had happened the previous year. Although the total number of students receiving training was reduced (down to 42), the courses were designed with a larger budget and an extended training period of 9 to 10 weeks with a greater range of skills being taught. Training started at the end of September 1998 and ran through to the conclusion of the winter season in the spring of 1999. The beneficiaries were taught in groups of six with each groups starting on a two week rotational basis. The objective of this system being to create an overlap of courses so that beneficiaries could meet and learn from a greater number of their peers and see various skills practised before deciding on specialised areas of training.

Finding a permanent site for the winter season proved quite difficult, not in the least because of the type of site required. The site needed to be in an area of diverse woodland cover, suitable for a large Travellers site with hard-standing for vehicles, space for yurts and benders and grazing for horses. A large number of private and public landowners were approached, many of who were very keen for the training to take place on their land. However, due to the negative stereotyping of Travellers, all were too worried about how the local community would respond to a 'Traveller site' in the area – irrespective of whether it was a training programme or not.

Eventually, a site was secured at a private Plantation near Dunsford in Devon. The site was secured through personal assurances and contracts as a result of negotiations by Mike Gardner and the willingness of the owner to allow his woodland to be manage via an innovative training programme, despite local opposition. He was also keen to promote alternative markets for woodland produce.

Planning permission was sought from Teignbridge District Council which was refused on a variety grounds such as precedent (i.e., if they granted permission, it would then set a precedent which would potentially allow similar 'Traveller training sites' to be established nation-wide). Although planning permission was refused, the council set the enforcement order for breach of planning permission to come into effect a few days before the courses were due to end. In effect, this meant that the training was allowed to happen without official planning permission, the granting of which would have been too politically controversial.

Potential beneficiaries heard about the training programme via a range of avenues, including personal contact with FFT and Mike Gardner, the FFT newsletter, information stalls at a number of festivals and word of mouth from the previous year's participants. More than 250 people showed interest in the courses, all of whom consequently received a questionnaire in the post requesting personal information and the type of training required. It was felt that a strict selection process was necessary to identify those with a strong interest in the field and most likely to use the skills learnt in the future. As a result, small hurdles were placed in front of potential beneficiaries to eliminate those who were not prepared to make an effort or were simply looking for a winter park-up. This was felt to be justifiable as to make a living from the skills taught requires dedication and commitment in a competitive field of work.

A selection of applicants were then invited to an interview at the FFT Advice & Information Unit (then situated in Glastonbury) or interviewed at various sites and festivals throughout the summer. Some interviews were carried out by phone when appropriate. Following on from the interview stage, successful applicants were then offered places on the courses during late August and early September 1998. An acceptance deadline was given to applicants but, as with 1997/98 courses, this proved somewhat problematic as most applicants were receiving post at c/o addresses. As a result of this, many acceptance notices came in late and the final student lists had to be repeatedly altered to accommodate for cancellations, short-falls and complications.

Work started in mid-September to set up the training site, supervised by Mike Gardner with the help of two full-time employees and one full-time volunteer. Once courses started at the end of September, a full-time cook was employed to prepare two meals a day for beneficiaries and staff. The meals were subsidised (at £1.00 to £1.50 per meal) and enabled beneficiaries to spend more time concentrating on learning.

The Woodland Skills training site consisted of a large forestry loading bay in the woods that was made up of sticky clay and poor drainage. It was therefore necessary to cover this area with hardcore at considerable expense to ensure vehicles could come and go throughout the winter. More hardcore was put down in the New Year to increase the parking area for more living vehicles. This area accessed onto a small public road at one end and onto a woodland track at the other. The rest of the camp, adjacent to the loading bay, was divided into a kitchen area, a communal living area including a 20ft. yurt, a large lorry body (which served as a secure tool storage unit, office and First Aid point), a children's play area and yurt, and covered workshop areas with various aids, including steamers and a charcoal kiln. Surrounding this area and progressing further into the woods were camping areas for non-vehicular accommodation. The toilet block was situated at the far end of this accommodation area.

The basic training course was designed to last ten weeks. The first week consisted of an introduction covering Health & Safety, basic woodland management and ecology, the use of various woodland tools and work aids, ways of working wood and the manufacture of various simple produce such as tent pegs, gate hurdles, brooms, shaving horses, etc... The second week covered more detailed wood working and woodland management as well as charcoal making and coppicing in a variety of different woodland settings in the area (on both Forestry Commission and private land). The remaining weeks of the course were made up from a selection of modules of either one or two weeks in duration. Students could choose from a number of modules to make up a total of ten weeks training. However, in practice, some students did less while those who showed enthusiasm and initiative were encouraged to do more.

Different instructors were employed for each module. The instructors were chosen on the basis that they were self-employed quality practitioners of their chosen craft who were actively making a living from their skills for a good proportion of the time. It was deemed important that they have an obvious love for their craft and be good at imparting their knowledge and experiences to others. Having been Travellers themselves, living close to the Traveller community or having a good understanding of the Traveller way of life was also an important factor in the selection of instructors.

However, Mike Gardner was keen not to isolate the courses from the rest of society and consequently, neighbours and the general public were encouraged to see what was going on and vice versa.

In order to facilitate this, an open day was held at the training site in March 1999. The first half of the winter season's training ran from the end of September to the 18th of December 1998, after which those who had completed the ten weeks of training had to clear the site to allow for the next set of students to arrive following a break over the Christmas and New Year period.

The students made many products, some of which they kept themselves and some of which they were able to sell to neighbouring landowners, at car boot sales, local markets, shows and through trainers' and other contacts. Part of a log cabin was also built during the training period that was then completed by students employed by one of the trainers. A small timber frame structure was also part-built on the courses and this was finished off and erected with paid work by one of the students. A few hedges were laid in the neighbourhood as well as a couple of dry stone walls. A dry stone wall and cleft chestnut fence were also erected at the entrance to the site.

## **Project Outcomes**

In total, 44 students trained full-time and an additional 12 students received part-time training. Some of the part-time students were the partners of full-time students and for the most part were mothers with children or students from the 1997/98 courses returning to improve and expand their skills. Outcomes for the second year of the project were as follows:

- **71% of beneficiaries were unemployed at the start of training.**
- **94% of beneficiaries completing the training.**
- **35% of graduates went directly into employment by another or self-employment.**
- **10% of graduates went on to further training.**
- **90% of beneficiaries were homeless and living in rural areas.**
- **100% were satisfied with the training delivered.**

### **Project Follow-up Support**

All beneficiaries, including those who received training during the winter of 1997/98, were asked if they would like follow-up support and, if so, what type of support they will require. The type of follow-up support offered includes advice on grants for setting up as self-employed (supported by the Prince's Trust), workshops on tax, national insurance and business plans and personal counselling / guidance. Due to the revised nature of the project, a greater degree of individual support and counselling has been offered to beneficiaries during the running of courses. They have also been assisted in develop links within the forestry industry. As no formal follow-up support was given last year, this will be relevant in informing us of the level of follow-up support required under the revised programme.

### **Shortfalls**

It was hoped that more childcare facilities could be provided during training, but the provision of a crèche was hampered by the legal requirements necessary for a formal childcare environment as a result of the site location. As a consequence, a system of sharing of childcare on site was set up and worked well for a while, but was not viewed as completely satisfactory by either trainers or beneficiaries.

### **Difficulties and Drawbacks**

One of the greatest difficulties in running innovative training courses such as the Woodland Skills Training Project is the dependence upon large funding bodies such as the European Social Fund (ESF). Every process, from applying and securing funding, claiming and receiving payments was fraught with large amounts of paperwork, bureaucratic obstacles and delays. The experience of FFT in this instance was that ESF funding is not designed to be accessed by small grass-roots voluntary organisations, but is tailored more to universities and large well-funded non-government bodies with substantial reserves. Without well established and fully resourced administration and finance departments, small grass-roots organisations are placed under tremendous pressure simply through the servicing of grants. This can and does undermine and detract from core activities, increase workloads and place additional and unreasonable pressure on already stretched resources and staff. In order to complete the project without jeopardising the continuing work of the organisation, it was necessary for FFT to secure an interest-free loan from a charitable trust to cover the final 20% of the project cost. It was impossible to access the final payment from the ESF at the end of the project in June of 1999 as the final claim forms were not issued by the ESF Unit until the end of February 2000. Payment is anticipated by May/June 2000, one year after the conclusion of the project.

Considering that 45% of the project cost (coming from the ESF) was specifically intended to targeting marginalised and difficult to reach groups, we found that the ESF funding structure offered little support or understanding of the logistics and practicalities involved in delivering such an innovative and successful training project. It is virtually impossible to develop any form of constructive relationship with a funding body which by nature is an impassive and impersonal bureaucratic machine incapable of interacting with or supporting the project and staff. It may be argued that this is not the role of such bodies as the ESF. However, having over five years experience of working with a wide range of funders, FFT has never encountered such level of difficulty with any other funder.

Due to complications and delays from the ESF regarding funding for 1999, Mike Gardner had to entirely redesign the second half of the project over the 1998/99 Christmas period. We found out by mid January that this was no longer necessary and the project reverted to its original structure. As a result of this, Susan Alexander and Sorcha Rogers (a book-keeper brought in to help service the ESF grant) at the Advice & Information Unit ended up having to devote weeks of work, which had not been accounted for, solely to deal with the ESF funding. The added workload and stress this situation caused to every level of the project delivery was staggering. Had it not been for the determination of the project staff, the patience of the trainers over late payments and the offer of an interest-free loan from the Charities Advisory Trust to cover the final ESF payment, the project would have undoubtedly failed as a direct result of ESF involvement.

## **The Future**

It is clear, from the success of the two years of training and consequent feedback, that there is a great demand for the courses to continue. However, the bureaucracy and time scales involved in applying for funding and securing payment once funding is secured for this type of project requires considerable human resources and adequately supported administrative structures. As a consequence, it has been decided by FFT and Mike Gardner not to do so for at least the next winter season. Furthermore, delivering and managing such an innovative training course in the middle of the woods, in winter, in addition to controlling a residential training site, was very demanding on all involved. Any future project would have to be altered to spread the work-load and provide adequate administrative structures so as not to overburden individuals.

However, in order to support the graduates from both years of the project and to keep the momentum of the project going, a Woodland Skills 2000 coppice association has been set up for graduates of the project by Tony Thomson, a long standing FFT volunteer and central participant in the development and running of the Woodland Skills project.

## **Project Statistics**

### **Description of Training delivery:**

<b>Theory</b>	<b>61hrs</b>
<b>Practical</b>	<b>102hrs</b>
<b>Work experience</b>	<b>15hrs</b>
<b>Vocational guidance</b>	<b>41hrs</b>

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## Student Profiles

### Beneficiaries for winter season – Sept. to Dec. 1998

Ages	Male	Female
24 or under	01	02
25 or over	17	12
Total	18	14

Unemployed	Male	Female
Up to 6 months	10	04
Up to 1 year	06	04
Up to 2 years	01	06
Total	17	14

### Outcomes at completion of training

	Male	Female
Completed	15	07
Part time	02	06
Early leavers	01	01
Total	18	14

	Male	Female
Further training	04	02
Self-employment	04	01
Employment	05	02

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**Beneficiaries for winter season – January to May 1999**

**Student profiles**

<b>Ages</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>24 or under</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>02</b>
<b>25 or over</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>08</b>

**Outcomes at completion of training**

	Yes	No
Homeless	20	02
Living in rural areas	20	02
Any vocational qualifications	7	15
Ethnic minority	3	19

**Course Feedback:**

	Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory
Course delivery	22	00
Guidance/counselling	22	00

	Yes	No
Request for Follow-up support	09	08

Intentions upon completion of training:	
Full time work	05
Self-employment	13
Further training	03