

TINKER'S BUBBLE



Summary

- Tinker's Bubble is in Somerset, to the west of Yeovil.
- The site occupies 16 hectares, half conifer plantation, the rest broadleaved woodland, orchards, gardens and meadows.
- The land is owned by a cooperative.
- The Tinkers Bubble Trust owns the woodland with the resident group making many of the day to day decisions.
- The landowning cooperative is a trust.
- The key aim is to provide a place for people to work and derive a living from the land, "organically, sustainably and collectively".
- The project began in January 1994.

Why ? A small group of friends, living in the south of England, found they shared a common passion for working in woodlands or on the land. Each had, for some time, been looking for his own piece of land to rent or buy. It was discovered that Norton Covert (the name of the 16 hectare woodland now known as Tinker's Bubble), near Yeovil in Somerset, was on the market. While it seemed an ideal site, it was larger than any of them had been considering and beyond any of their individual means. Therefore, the obvious approach was to consider some kind of co-operative purchase. In fact one individual invested a significant proportion of the total capital required.

The principal aim at the time was to gain access to woodland that could be worked. Individual dreams or visions were not identical at the outset, though most shared a common outlook having met through road protests and similar initiatives.

Who? The project benefits the Tinker's Bubble shareholders and residents, though there are widening connections and benefits to others.

The land is held by a co-operative of shareholders (currently 15). These comprise the original purchasers plus a few others who have bought into the co-operative. Not all

of the shareholders live on the site. There are currently 3 women, 8 men and 4 children living and working on the site. Not all of these are shareholders.

All decisions about the project are made, collectively, at monthly meetings in which all participate. On the very rare occasions where there is any dispute, the fully paid up shareholders – i.e. the landholding co-operative - have the power of arbitration or veto. There are also weekly Monday morning meetings where practical decisions are made and tasks allocated.

Each member works on the infrastructure and necessary common works for two days per week. The remaining days (usually 5!) they work in their own areas on their own projects. There is a target of £9000 pa revenue from timber which is currently achievable but which may not be sustainable once the current thinning regime is over unless the group can add value on site.

Tinker's Bubble is adjacent to a local authority owned country park- Ham Hill, which has public footpaths crossing it and is open to the public. As yet there has been no formal relationship with the local community of Stoke sub Hamden but there have been visits from and demonstrations in the local primary and secondary schools. The relationship with the village is being gently grown.

What? The south facing site covers 16 hectares of which 11 are wooded. The remaining 5 ha are orchards, gardens and meadows. The woodland consists of 8 ha of conifers, mainly larch and Douglas fir planted in 1960. The rest is a mixture of broadleaves- ash, sycamore, old hazel coppice, beech and 2 small stands of hornbeam. Part of the site is a County Wildlife Site and part of the woodland has been identified as ancient and semi-natural. Since planting there has been little or no management of the conifers and the main tasks are thinning and replanting with selective clearance of significant areas of laurel undergrowth.

Since its inception there has been a policy that no fossil fuels should be used on the site, nor should there be any use of mains electricity. All work is therefore undertaken manually and with the help of a gentle Shire horse and a wood driven steam engine, which powers a 20ft long sawbench, housed in a strawbale barn. Targets are therefore achieved fairly slowly.

Some members consider that it might have been better to do some of the basic work needed with machinery before moving in and establishing the non- fossil fuel rule. The possibility of a brief relaxation so that the tough hazel stools can be tackled with a chainsaw, has been considered.

The woodland is being managed under a system of group selection to provide a continuous cover mixed woodland with approximately 50% broadleaves and 50% conifers (revised from 100% broadleaves). There is a policy that no trees should be felled until there is a market or clearly defined purpose for them

The main objective for the woodland is to introduce species and an age structure that will be most beneficial to the needs of the community and to wildlife. The proportion of the conifers will be slightly reduced. Young transplants, from a local supplier or growing wild in the wrong place, are being planted in groups in small

clearings. Most groups are a mixture of broadleaves and conifers. Felled timber is used for planking, fencing and building construction. Surplus timber is sold and there has been no problem finding buyers.

The site also houses 3 goats, a loaned cow, some pigs, a cider press, various timber-built workshop buildings, residential 'benders', a communal roundhouse and a kitchen. Three photovoltaic panels and a small windmill together supply enough electricity for lighting, a small fridge and electric fences.

Vision ? The vision for the project is of a place for people who want to work and derive a living from the land, "organically, sustainably and collectively".

The principal aims for the woodland are:

1. To manage the woodland sustainably without ecological deterioration; and to enhance its biodiversity
2. To provide a constant source of useful and potentially saleable timber, and a source of employment.
3. To provide an agreeable and varied environment where local people can walk and ride.
4. To provide a safe and agreeable habitat for humans and animals.
5. To contribute towards a policy that will enable Britain to become more self sufficient in timber and less dependent on foreign sources of questionable sustainability.

There are no specific long-term objectives - the group is conscious that they are still in a gestation period and feeling their way forward within agreed principles rather than towards defined goals. There is a feeling that the various nebulous and sometimes conflicting 'dreams' with which the project first started are beginning to coalesce into a clearer common vision.

The group is very much aware that the structure of the community and the development of common goals is an essential foundation of sustainability. One specific aim is that within 5 years each resident should be receiving an income equivalent to income support from the project.

The project is also deliberately pushing at the boundaries of planning law. To this extent, it is seen as an experiment, and has received considerable media attention. Paddy Ashdown is a supporter of the Tinkers's Bubble experiment "even though it clearly falls outside the accepted planning regulations". The group wishes to demonstrate the appropriateness and sustainability of low impact development i.e. development with 'low adverse environmental impact'. There is currently a planning limit of 12 residents (people staying longer than 28 days) in "easily dismantlable wooden structures". The group believes that this is in fact the most that the site can adequately support, at present.

Another planning issue which is crucial to this project (and relevant to other community woods) is being vigorously researched and pursued by one member of the group. It relates to the fact that they only have planning permission to saw their own timber. If they saw timber for their neighbours, which would make sense from the

sustainability point of view, it could be classified as an industrial process. If they 'add value' by making craft products from their own timber, similar restrictions could apply. The broader issue of people wishing to live on the land on which they are working is also being researched.

How ? The project started off as a woodland owned by a small collection of people with similar skills and interests. In the early years of the project the focus was on the management of the woodland and the production of revenue from timber products. However, it became apparent that consolidation of the basic infrastructure- the living conditions and personal relationships, was crucial to the sustainability of the project and this is the main focus at present.

In terms of the organic vegetables, apples, juice and cider, production has been growing fairly steadily, and the building of an earth roofed timber building to house the cider press has been an important milestone. Timber production has not been so smooth. At the beginning of the project a wood powered engine was set up in a field near the road and in the first month enough timber was sawn on the attached 20ft saw-bench for the group's needs for the first year plus a significant injection of income through sales.

Undoubtedly one of the biggest **challenges** the project has had to face has been the subsequent enforced shutting down of the machine for two years due to a neighbour's objection to its noise. This has led to a long battle involving an appeal against the noise abatement notice and two planning applications.

Permission to use the machine in the new straw-bale barn (granted August 1999) was therefore another significant milestone. However, the barn cannot be used for other activities such as crafts or courses. This has restricted the development of the group's plans. On the positive side, relationships with the local planning authority and the Forestry Commission are slowly strengthening.

Greatest achievements ? The site in its current condition is testimony to the enormous number of man hours which have been expended. The greatest challenges have been the amount of work required from members (with few days off), the consolidation of goals and the development of the site infrastructure.

One problem the community faces is people who want to come and live on the site for short periods of time without making any contribution to the physical work. Various people, who were originally involved, have now left and there seems to be more stability within the core group.

Sources of help and advice ? One of the non-resident shareholders has professional forestry skills, one resident has agricultural qualifications and another horse management skills. By and large, each person is steadily acquiring the necessary skills as the project evolves. There has been help and advice from the Forestry Commission, from the National Small Woods Association of which they are members, from the Soil Association and from the Horse Logging Association (now subsumed into FCA). No one has received any specific training since the onset of the project.

WWOOFers (Working Weekends on Organic Farms) and BTCV groups put in volunteer time and the project is also part of a local LETS (Local Economic Trading Scheme).

Income comes from WGS management grant, a small grant from the Soil Association and sales of timber, organic vegetables, apples, apple juice and cider. Living costs for each member are £17 per week – wages are £3 per hour. Because living costs and therefore labour are so cheap, the group can produce goods, such as larch shingles, competitively without the use of petrol powered machinery.

Future activities ? The general intention is to develop slowly, the first main target being to bring the woodland into steady production (50m³ pa average). Subsequently, the plan is to develop opportunities for adding value to the timber and possibly to expand the site and timber production potential by acquiring some adjoining conifer woodland and grazing land.

The group would like to improve/replace the existing buildings. In the future, there could be a few more people and their own livestock.

There is no end point to the project – it is very much an evolving enterprise. It is felt that 10-12 people are currently optimal but that the level of physical work would ideally be reduced. Initially inputs may have varied but it seems that all currently involved are more or less similarly dedicated. The weekly Monday meetings are seen as key to sustaining commitment and ironing out problems and differences.

Lessons for Others ? This project is probably at one extreme end of the spectrum of community involvement in woodlands. One of the main things that the group would like to demonstrate to others is ‘that it can be done’ i.e. living off the land with minimal environmental impact and producing a sustainable revenue.

They believe that their main challenges have been agreeing goals “When you start something up ensure that you have a vision and a plan – not just a dream”, and then implementing the goals once they have been agreed on.

There has been a long gestation period “It takes time to iron out all the wrinkles” and quite a time to overcome local negative attitudes to the people and project.

Finally, again from Paddy Ashdown, “after two or three years the outcome has been to add to not diminish the quality of life in our village. We have had to cope with different life-styles and different ways of looking at our world.”

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