

MANAGING ANCIENT WOODLANDS, GREAT BRADLEY WOOD

INTERVIEW WITH PETE OLIVER, FORESTER



MY DAD, CHRIS OLIVER, THE FORESTER

“My dad, Chris Oliver, moved to Maiden Bradley in 1958. He came from Welshpool where he’d been managing woodland on the Leighton Estate. He lived in Maiden Bradley for a while, and then moved to a house that he built at Gare Hill, in 1965. He retired in 1996. At first, he was employed full-time by the Estate and then gradually he worked on part-time basis as a consultant, like me. I did an environmental degree, and trained as an ecologist, and I started work here in 2007.”

“I was born at home at the house in Gare Hill. As a new-build, it was modern, with storage heaters and an inside bathroom. We’re the only house in Gare Hill that is in the parish of Maiden Bradley, so we look west a bit more than the rest of the Parish – I went to school in Somerset.”

“My dad trained in forestry on the job, while working in the industry. He’d done his national service in the navy, and he was a really keen ornithologist. We have photos of him with a bird under his arm aged four. His interest in birds influenced his approach to forestry.”

FROM CONIFERS TO OAK TREES, HOW WOODLAND MANAGEMENT IS CHANGING

“British policy toward woodlands across the Queen’s reign has been a ripple-effect from the wars. Timber supply was limited in the wars by sea blockades and so woodland across the country was heavily exploited to get timber for construction and mines. After WW1, the Forestry Commission was set up in 1919 to make sure that the country had a strategic reserve of timber in the future. They did that in three ways: First, they bought land and planted big forests like the Forest of Dean; second, they leased private land that was used for planting – there were three leasehold areas on this Estate; and third, they took out contracts with private estates like this one, where the estate was paid to plant and produce timber over repeated 5-year period. This was known as the ‘Dedication Scheme’, which continued through to the 1980s National policy was to plant fast-growing trees to get a timber reserve as quickly as possible. This meant softwoods (conifers) and on the Greensand of the Maiden Bradley Estate particularly Douglas Fir, which grows three times faster here than the native (hardwood) oak and has similar use in construction. So there was a wave of planting conifers between the 1950s and 1980s and these are maturing now, which is one reason why you see quite a lot of felling here at the moment.”

“After the 80s, the national security imperative of growing timber inside the UK has become less important – international supplies are readily available (about 85% of timber is now bought from abroad, including Russia) - and the focus has shifted to the environmental objectives. Now, we are incentivized to plant native species like oak, rather than conifers. So, it’s odd how things turn out - the state incentivized my dad to fell oak and plant conifers, and now it incentivizes me to remove those conifers and plant oak!”



Conifers down in storms and (below) valley cleared to be replanted with oak



WHY OAK TREES ARE THRIVING ECOSYSTEMS

“Native species are much better for the environment – conifers are mostly introduced species, and they make it very shady on the ground, so it is difficult for plants to grow underneath their canopy. The biodiversity under a conifer in the UK is much less than under an oak tree. Several hundred insect species are associated with oak, whereas this is in single digits for Douglas fir. The shade means there are fewer wildflowers too.”



“So now we are felling conifers and converting areas of woodland back to native species – that means planting oak and supporting the natural regeneration of other species. Typically, we plant the oak in groups of four-by-four. Gaps around these are left for natural regeneration.”

“It takes an oak tree 120 years to grow to a significant financial value and a conifer more like 50 years on this ground.”

“We’ve felled about 80% of the target area so far and there is another 20% to be done in the next five years. This is specifically around Ancient Woodland (woodland that has been continuous since at least 1600) and we’re also looking to extend the rare native woodland in the Bradley Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) up the valley below the spring line.”

THE LIFE-CYCLE OF TREES

“Because you work at all stages of the life of the tree, you do feel as if you achieve something – even if it takes 120 years for an oak to grow. Just by clearing this valley of conifers, you can see immediately the growth return and the alder trees along the spring thriving. The alder helps other trees – they grow in wetlands and put down roots which provides stability for trees like oak that need drier land. I never notice the mud when we’re clearing, but this is the main thing the public sees when they’re walking on the paths – I’m thinking about the future and the outcome for the trees.”

THE ECONOMY OF TREES

“It costs about £4.00 to plant an oak tree, and the average value of a felled oak might be around £700-800. A Douglas Fir costs about £1.50 to plant, and the total value when felled is about £400-500, but remember they grow faster. So growing conifers is the steady income – the annual harvest – whereas oak trees are like a capital fund or pension fund.”



deadwood

DEADWOOD AND FUNGAL ASSOCIATIONS

“We leave deadwood as it creates its own ecosystem. We leave long piles of wood, or tree stumps. Along with supporting a range of wildlife, dead wood helps to create fungal interactions which help trees to grow better – a tree that grows next to another will grow better because it can connect to that fungal association – it can access more resources. So a tree grows more successfully in a wood than if it is on its own in a field. And Ancient Woodland support better growth than newer woodlands.”

CUTTING TIMBER

“We fell and cut timber to specified sizes: we know what size of timber is needed by a sawmill for particular purposes in construction or for fuel, for example, and then we cut the logs to the right size – that log goes to the sawmill and then comes out as the finished product.”

“In my dad’s time, the trees were felled by smaller tractors and chainsaws, and they could drive through the trees, but now we have massive machines. That means we have to cut ‘racks’ – clear swathes - through the forest so the machines can pass through.”



DISEASE

“Ramorum is a disease that affects larch trees. If it is discovered, then you have to fell a large area to prevent the spread. I think in 2013 we had about 120 hectares of larch and now it is down to 40 hectares.”

THE OLDEST TREES

“Usually, you find the oldest trees on boundaries and in fields, less so in the woods. We have what we call ‘veteran trees’ – there are about 26 veterans that are targeted in management, although many more that are retained and encouraged. They’re old trees, often with significant character and often some cultural meaning.”

WILDLIFE

“You’ll see a range of mammals in the wood including dormice, brown hares, foxes, stoats and weasels here. Red kites arrived in the last 20 years ago. There used to be more curlews and lapwings on the fields. With more oak returning, we would hope to see more Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, which have declined across the country in recent years.”

“Roe deer are part of the ecosystem because they graze and keep the undergrowth under control, without eating the soft vegetation. But if they are not culled, there are too many and that impacts the trees. Fallow deer are not a native species, and they are more destructive. Wild boar were reintroduced about five years ago. They can cause a lot of damage if the numbers get too great. For such large species here are no natural predators so that’s why they are managed.”



veteran tree



sawn logs



*tree stump and (below)
Chip Cottage*



The photo shows 'Chip Cottage' which was situated at the entrance to Bradley Woods on the Bruton Road. Grace White lived there until about 1910 when the then Duke of Somerset had the cottage demolished. Chip Cottage had no drains or running water, and Grace used to walk about a mile to get all her water from the stream and yet no traveller passing by was ever refused a drink. Older villagers always referred to the entrance to the woods as Grace's Hill and the woods as Grace White's Woods. Her great grand-daughter is still living in Bath.