

Name: Barfad Willow

Place: Barfad, Ardfern, Argyll

Headline: Part time willow growing as a component of the household income, with wider social impacts

Keywords: appropriately scaled business, enterprise with a social purpose, small-scale woodland creation.

What is the context?

We moved to Barfad, Argyll 18 years ago, and our house came with a field, which we wanted to use productively. We had young children and wanted a business which fitted around child-rearing.

What was the initial aim?

Originally we aimed to grow short rotation coppice as fuelwood for the house: four plots of hybrid willow.

What actually happened and what has been achieved?

We discovered a market for living willow (e.g. fedges and sculptures), so we launched in, to see what would happen. Growing willow fitted around growing children and our involvement has evolved as the children grew older. It has been great as part time, seasonal work.

Initially we planted some basket willow, with the aim of making baskets ourselves; however Carol did not take to basket making. Then we met a local basket maker, Pip Weaser, who advised us on the market, and we started growing more basket varieties. We now grow 17 species, and are continuing to improve their stocks by removing poor species, experimenting with new ones and expanding the willow bed area. Originally our customers were mostly in central Scotland (and a family member in Nottingham). We now grow material that ends up in expensive, high quality baskets from makers such as Kathy Potter Irwin, and Monique Bervoets.

Initially we did everything ourselves, but this became difficult with young children and because other work increasingly occupied David. The cutting season is short (and getting shorter), and weather dependent, which creates difficulties. So Carol moved to employing people, but found it frustrating being inside while they were outside cutting!

A group called the “Wet Wellied Willow Women” evolved, i.e. a squad of people who came to cut every Thursday with Carol from December to March. They were given complete flexibility: they could come whatever the weather, whenever it suited them, and they were given a task and paid the minimum wage for their hours. This worked well as a seasonal employment opportunity for young mothers, for newcomers (as a networking opportunity), for retired people and for anybody who wanted to fit more employment around other work or domestic commitments. It was a low key, non-conventional business that worked for employer and employees. Occasionally there was a problem with people who thought it

was a social service, not a social enterprise. The “Wet Wellied Willow Women” also worked as a relief valve from day to day concerns for other people in the local community, with a strong social aspect, involving many people over the years.

The willow business is an appropriate sized enterprise for Carol, generating the right output with minimal financial input, and it also acted as a useful distraction when her main concern was raising children. However Carol was sometimes paying her employees more than she was earning (although she always valued the non-cash benefits of a non domestic role). As her children have grown up she is now increasingly relying on her own labour: and the business is evolving with her needs. Now that Carol has more time, she will be looking to develop the business, both by increasing the area under willow, by developing new products, and by marketing.

What is the evidence for these outcomes?

- 0.2 ha of willow beds have been created.
- All next year’s basket willow production is already sold.
- Aspiration is to earn £3-4k pa, though income has never been our only metric.
- Over 20 people have been involved over the years.

What were the factors that contributed to those outcomes?

- We had available land which we wanted to use productively. We were prepared to experiment.
- A mother looking for an activity that fitted with childrearing and contributed to the household income.
- Demand for craft and living willow.

How replicable is this experience; what is its potential as an element of a better approach to forestry?

For people who have a small area of ground, and local basket maker, this is very replicable. There are issues around scale (Carol has made it work at a small scale, but a larger scale enterprise might face different hurdles), and potential competition in a limited market, including a perceived danger that outsiders with more resources (especially with grants) may swamp the sector.

Key messages:

- This is an example of a micro-business suitable for small areas of ground where activity can grow gradually.
- Willow growing has worked well as an element of income for those involved, and often a springboard to other things (especially for newcomers to the village). It has generated winter work and social engagement in an area dependant on tourism. The scale of the business can be tailored to individual circumstances – in this case a mother wishing to fit activity with child-rearing.
- Financial and time constraints have been limitations on the business.