

Name of example: Gordon Community Woodland Trust (GCWT)

Place: Gordon, Berwickshire

Headline: Self sustaining community woodland with a low key but replicable business model

Keywords: Stable group, self reliance, access, enterprise

Context: Gordon Community Woodland was purchased in April 2002

Original aims: The original aim of the group was to secure ownership of Kircal Wood as a resource for the local community of Gordon. The objectives of GCWT, beyond ownership, were to conserve, regenerate and manage local woodland for the benefit of the community of Gordon and Berwickshire. Forest management objectives are the sustainable management of the woodland and improved access for recreation and education.

What actually happened and what was achieved?

Reacting to the sale of an accessible and well used woodland within 1 mile of the village, the community of Gordon organised themselves into a charitable company and purchased the 84.9 hectare Kircal Wood in April 2002 for £90,000. The group were recipients of some 75% of the purchase price from the Scottish Land Fund, the first such assistance for a land purchase below the Highland Boundary Fault.

Borders Forest Trust, a regional charity originally established to work within communities of the Scottish Borders to assist in community woodland management and development, provided funding, legal and management guidance for the first dozen or so years.

Since purchasing the woodland the community group has managed it on an entirely voluntary basis (no employees) and they have achieved their original goals in relation to woodland management, public access and environmental education. The group has approximately 50 paying members, and the woodland is host to an estimated 200 monthly visits, over and above the membership.

The group has developed an extensive network of woodland paths (including sections of all ability path), built two car parks, constructed an educational facility and have managed tree establishment and woodland operations, much of it from within their own resources. The Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme (2004-2009) contributed significantly to the development of improved access.

The woodland has provided local benefit and opportunities to the village of Gordon, including community cohesion and physical and mental well-being benefits. The Branching Out mental health outreach group use the woodland twice a year. Much of these benefits flow from the improved access from the village to the woodland (easy walking distance) and within the wood.

The group contribute at least 60 hours of voluntary work per month for woodland work – 720 hours, 90 person days – doing strimming, footpath and boardwalk maintenance. Visitors to the woodland include joggers, cyclists, organised walking groups, campers, John Muir Award participants and New Caledonian Woodland volunteers (who assist with woodland tasks).

Other benefits include the provision of firewood supply, this in return for voluntary work such as woodland thinning, and extensive use by the local primary school as an educational resource. The wood is also regarded as a haven for scarce species and semi-natural habitats in an otherwise agri-industrial Berwickshire landscape.

The group benefited from receipt of an unexpected and significant one off payment for a wayleave across their land. This money has been carefully husbanded to provide a five-figure reserve and a 'safety blanket' for the group and the woodland.

The annual turnover is modest, the group operate a not for profit business model, with most income coming from the sale of Norway spruce Christmas trees. In 2014 Christmas tree sale netted some £2,000, which accounted for some 70% of their income, 20% of income came from donations and membership and 10% from annual wayleave payments. Average annual income from sales is approximately £1500. Supply of firewood has been considered, however there is some reluctance to compete with other local suppliers, and much of the maturing timber in the wood is poplar and consequently little value as firewood.

A locally resident mountain bike champion in Gordon is designing a Pump Track (a small mountain bike type track consisting of loops of dirt berms). This will be built in a section of open ground at the wood, and the group are hopeful that it will attract a number of the local young people to the wood, making the woodland more accessible and relevant to local youth.

What is the evidence for these outcomes?

The physical evidence of woodland management, including thinning, brashing, pruning, new planting, tree care, improved access and the provision of an all weather educational facility are tangible.

The claim to mental and physical well-being is less easy to demonstrate, however there is a strong narrative endorsing these benefits from within the group. The management group comprises a core of local people, with relatively little turnover of personnel. Consequently the GCWT, for the time being, is a stable, well functioning, if somewhat low key entity that enjoys strong local support from amongst the Gordon community.

What were the factors that contributed to those outcomes?

One of the factors contributing to the success of GCWT has from the outset been the presence of a number of engaged and enthusiastic individuals within Gordon who have provided drive and stability to the group and who have engendered trust within the wider community. They have plugged away at woodland management, volunteering and access tasks in a relatively low key but persistent fashion and the results appear to be appreciated and well used by local people.

Good fortune has played a part. The award of a significant lump sum by a utility company in lieu of access to the site for fibre optic cabling gave the group a financial reserve, which in turn has provided a measure of security and confidence. This is important when the group has to lay out some £500 per annum for public liability and woodland insurance – something that was previously covered by a group scheme for all community groups in the Borders by BFT.

Support from Borders Forest Trust was important to the development of GCWT. It came in the

form of woodland management advice, volunteering support and education input. This assistance however has gradually ebbed with little or no input currently forthcoming. BFT has refocused its attentions on wild land restoration, and GCWT, amongst other community groups in the Borders have little or no contact with BFT. The group was a member of the Community Woodlands Association but have allowed their membership to lapse, having decided they were receiving no tangible benefits from membership.

A local forestry consultant has provided the group with pro bono woodland management advice. This type of support is important for the group. It provides professional guidance on woodland management and it reassures the group that they are managing the woodland in a responsible and sustainable manner.

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

This experience is replicable, with some obvious caveats relating to the enthusiasm and drive of local residents and the proximity and condition of the woodland. Small, well-stocked and diverse woodland, within walking distance of a settlement, may be managed on a small budget. Gordon is a good example of a relatively under managed woodland being brought into more intensive, productive management, mainly as a result of increased and improved access for the local population.

Key messages: what would we want people to take away from this?

A motivated and stable community group can bring undermanaged woodland into sound management, and can make woodland more accessible to the local and wider community, without exerting much pressure on the public purse.

Voluntary input can be sufficient to maintain woodland management, however professional advice is important and technical tasks such as path laying or tree felling requires contract labour.

Support from regional or national umbrella/support organisations can be important in the development of such an enterprise, but community groups should not rely on such groups, whose objectives and commitment to communities may shift over time.

A little bit of imagination with a lot of hard work and local word of mouth can result in thriving local woodland based enterprises, such as Christmas tree sale.

Community woodlands can be important for bringing undermanaged broadleaved woodland into active management, and in making such woodlands accessible to a large number of people, local and regional.

New targeted woodland grants for management of existing woodlands would allow more work, better woodland management and would result in increased access to local woodlands.

Community woodland groups could benefit from increased sharing of experiences, specifically in relation to woodland management, small-scale enterprise and other, such as how to reduce the size of annual insurance premiums.