

Name: Old Grantully Castle Wood and Angus Ross Furniture

Place: Aberfeldy, Highland Perthshire.

Headline: A local syndicate of 10 people, including a small furniture business, owns and manages an ancient oak woodland, which increasingly supplies timber for the furniture workshop; with the woodland providing local benefits.

Keywords: Local ownership, micro-business, timber utilisation, land reform.

What is the context?

It is difficult for local interests to buy a small woodland to use as a productive asset, and for local benefit, due to local woods being held by large estates. Fortunately this 20 hectare woodland became available as a result of a large estate breaking up in the 1980's. By pooling resources it was possible for a local syndicate to acquire the wood before it came on the open market. Local furniture-makers are turning to Scottish and local timber, and the idea of a furniture business owning its own timber supply has several advantages.

What was the initial aim ?

The woodland: Five families, including furniture-maker Angus Ross, formed a syndicate to buy 20 ha of ancient oak woodland that came available for purchase 5 km from the furniture workshop. The aim was to manage the wood productively, as part of the members' livelihoods, as well as for conservation and recreation and local benefit.

The furniture business: The business aimed to gradually shift from using timber from the general hardwood market (UK and imported), to using first Scottish, then later local wood for its products.

What actually happened and what has been achieved ?

The woodland: The syndicate bought the woodland in 2005 for £45,000 and incorporated as a limited company with each of 5 families holding 2 shares each. The syndicate included two foresters, a mobile sawmiller as well as the furniture maker; and 80% of the owners live locally. The wood is being thinned, with small volumes of timber sawn by Woodmizer and sold to Angus Ross furniture; and the owners extract their own firewood. The woodland is used extensively for private recreation by the owners and their families; and by local interests for events.

The furniture business: Angus Ross furniture now sources the majority of his timber from Scotland, and in the last few years the proportion supplied from the wood is a 50-80%.

Outcomes woodland

The syndicate achieves a reasonable standard of woodland management using the labour of syndicate members; and the woodland is better managed than comparable local woods. Financially the woodland stays in the black. Labour by syndicate members does not appear on the balance sheet; and neither does most of the income, because it accrues to members as firewood. Modest income from sales (timber, non-timber products) pays for outgoings (tree protection, paths and access road works, tools). No SRDP funding has been received to date, but there was some early support under SFGS for path works and thinning.

The social networks that ten owners have within the community mean that a basic level of community engagement happens easily; and yet in running the wood, the owners have several advantages of private ownership. The wood has become more relevant to local needs, and outdoor events have started to happen (scout camps, school projects, weddings, parties, informal camping); with the wood being chosen because the local social networks make it easy for everyone involved. Local users report that they value that fact that sympathetic local interests own and manage the

wood. The syndicate has operated well with no tensions among the members; and both the syndicate and the wood are highly prized features of the members' lives.

Outcomes furniture business

50%-80% of timber used annually in the business now comes from the wood (mainly oak, a little birch), and is used in high quality furniture. Marketing has been enhanced by becoming a licensee for Scottish Working Woods label which guarantees local, ethical and sustainable wood is being used. Open days for clients including field visits to the wood have proved popular. Furniture has been designed to suit the timber characteristics, and several of the steam-bent designs in local wood have been recognised by nominations for TRADA (UK) The Wood Awards. Furniture has also been exhibited at prestigious exhibitions internationally.

Shortcomings

More ambitious woodland management objectives have not been met, due mainly to limits on time that syndicate members are able to devote. More sawn timber and firewood could be harvested if organisation was better and if members could devote more time. The wood could host commercial events (workshops, field visits, classes) to generate more income, and there is a local unfulfilled demand for volunteering in the wood.

What is the evidence for these outcomes?

The Woodland

During recent years approximately 12-15 m³ of hardwood firewood has been harvested annually, worth about £1000-1500 delivered. In the last 3 years 7 m³ of sawlogs were sold to Angus Ross furniture (raising £500); and harvesting created 6 person days of paid work worth £1000 for syndicate members. In the last 4 years the wood generated £3300 in sales of acorns and £1400 in sales of woodland wild flower seed; of which £500 accrued to the wood, and the remainder to syndicate members as income. Four paid courses have been run in the last 2 years raising about £1000 for syndicate members. The capital value of the wood has probably increased 4 fold during the 12 years of ownership.

The following have taken place in the wood: forest schools (one year), training courses on conservation, regular scout camps, occasional outdoor events for local children, school geography projects, an archaeological demonstration project and a wedding. The wood contains some 2 km of paths used fairly heavily by the public, with about 800m being new. Recreational usage is estimated to have increased about 4 fold over the last 12 years.

Furniture business

Angus Ross Ltd employs two furniture makers and an apprentice, plus a part-time administrator. Annual turnover is £130k and the proportion attributable to timber from the wood is approximately £80k. The local link between the furniture business and the wood enables flexible trading of small volumes of timber, which suits both parties. Positive feedback from the clients demonstrate that they value the use of local wood and the link with the woodland; and that this represents a market opportunity.

What were the factors that contributed to those outcomes?

The wood is easily harvested using low-tech equipment because the topography, soil conditions and access are favourable. Collective ownership works because members are committed to this, and have a relaxed attitude to how much work members do, how much firewood they each take out etc. The furniture business uses innovative high quality designs suited to private sector and public clients, which maintains income.

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

forestry?

Collective ownership of woodland by local interests is highly replicable model. Including a timber business in a woodland ownership syndicate would be feasible in several types of circumstance.

Key messages

- Collective ownership of woodlands by local interests is an important under-represented model of woodland ownership and combines the advantages of collective private ownership and local community benefit.
- The break-up of traditional estates, sold off in lots, can provide opportunities for local economic development which otherwise would be very unlikely to happen.
- The strong local link between a furniture business and a local productive wood is beneficial to both parties (a local scale example of “vertical integration”).
- The link between the furniture products and the specific local wood supplying the timber is appealing for clients and forms a marketing opportunity for the furniture business.
- The social networks that a syndicate of local owners have within the community mean that a basic level of community engagement happens easily; and the wood can become a convenient locus for local activities.