Summer 2025

National Coppice Federation

Supporting the Coppice Industry

Cleft Stick

News from the National Coppice Federation and the UK Coppice Industry



[Credit Tim Russ Event Photography]

From our Affiliated Groups

Updates from some of our groups around the country. If you don't see your group represented here, why not write something for the next edition? (Pages 5-10)

Weekend Gathering and AGM 2025

The highlight of the NCFed year. It's looking to be the best yet and for the first time it will be based at the Weald & Downland Museum. Read all the details inside. (Pages 11-13)

The Royal Sussex Trug

The first part of a pair of articles penned by Ashley Martin, describing the Sussex Trug & Woodland Craft Heritage Centre in Sussex. (Pages 17-19)

Feast or Folly - the economics of spar making

Pete Jameson examines the money making potential of making thatching spars. (Pages 20-22)

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The National Coppice Federation

Uniting regional coppice groups

The National Coppice Federation (NCFed) was formed in 2013 with the aim of uniting already existing regional coppice groups under one banner. Since then more local groups have formed and become affiliated to the NCFed, growing our membership and reach considerably.

National Coppice Federation

Supporting the Coppice Industry

Aims

The NCFed has three key aims:

1. to promote coppicing as a form of woodland management that provides economic, ecological and culturally significant benefits;
2. to bring together regional coppice groups and provide a unified voice for the industry; and
3. to encourage and promote best practice

ncfed.org.uk/news



[Credit Kiri Roberts]

Editorial

Welcome to Cleft Stick. I was going to wish you all an enjoyable summer, and much relaxation and recharging of batteries, after a winter season of cutting. However, I know for some, there's not much let up in the pressures of work, so I won't do that. But that's got me reflecting on the wonderful variety we enjoy through the year, as coppice workers, and on how lucky I feel to be able to earn part of a living from working in the woods and with wood. As I write in June, on a sunny afternoon, the mud-wading of February is a distant memory, only occasionally recalled by stumbles on sun-hardened ruts in and around the wood. The dry spring this year has made things so much easier than the wet of 2024. I guess we need to be prepared for more extremes of climate in future.



We deal with a lot of customers, particularly through the spring gardening season. It's one of the elements of our work I enjoy hugely but one that can lead to stress and some frustration. The text of a regular email runs something like… "I need some sticks. What do you think I should buy?" It's tempting to respond ironically but hopefully I'm always able to remain the helpful stick seller and talk our customers through the choices. I have to remind myself sometimes that it's fantastic that customers are willing to take the trouble to find locally grown sticks; most seem excited to have done so. A lack of precision in their ordering is a small price to pay.

In terms of precision, I revealed myself to be very fallible last winter when I got us involved with a large hazel coppice restoration project. It's a long story and one that involved a great deal of angst on my part, but through the support of some good friends, a couple of weather breaks and the arrival of a stock-hungry firewood merchant, it worked out ok, without the financial loss I had feared. I am now committed to a repeat performance next autumn. So I shouldn't criticise anyone who dives onto a deal without all the necessary information to hand.

Actually I will wish you all the very best for the summer – whether up to your eyes in charcoal, getting stressed by excited clients or swanning about on the beach. Have a good one.

Guy Lambourne, Editor



[Credit Kiri Roberts]


[Credit Guy Lambourne]

Tom Coxhead congratulates outgoing Federation Chair, Dave Jackson, at the 2024 AGM

Directors' Update

2024 was a year featuring quite a bit of change. Perhaps most notably, Dave Jackson stepped down as Chair after many years of service. I'm sure I speak on behalf of many in expressing gratitude for everything Dave brought to the organisation. It was great to get the chance to formally thank him at the AGM. The NCFed Directors decided not to rush into appointing a fixed Chair immediately, but instead to focus on recruiting a new director and getting settled in as a group.

Last autumn we recruited Mike Taylor, who has been a huge asset from day one. Mike has notably taken on the role of Chair for the Training and Standards Sub-committee (TASSC) and has joined Suz Williams on the coppice apprenticeships steering group. We are also pleased to announce that we have very recently co-opted Graham Morgan as a new director. Many of you will know Graham as he has been working, for the last three years, as the Project Manager for the NCFed Mapping Project, which has recently come to an end. Graham brings a diverse skill set and we are really pleased to have him on board to help steer the ship.

We didn't manage a directors' update in the last Cleft Stick so these thank yous seem a bit belated but special thanks are also due to Glenn Hadley (ex Website Officer) and Tim Cumine (ex Membership Secretary, amongst other roles). Both Glenn and Tim have been great contributors to NCFed, having both served as directors. Thanks again to both.

Most of you will have heard from Naomi our new Membership Secretary. Please do pick up the phone to her - we want to know how Naomi (and others in NCFed) can help regional member groups thrive. She's hoping to do a workshop session on this at the Gathering so do let her know about any thoughts and ideas for support your group might need.

More generally, Tim Roskell has been working hard, as ever, in supporting the Sussex and Surrey Coppice Group to prepare for the year's annual Weekend Gathering and AGM, which sounds like it will be a really good one. And Melanie has been helping keep us all in shape as we navigate the challenges of squeezing NCFed commitments into our spare time!

Summer again - it's hard to believe. I hope you've all had a good season, and that business is going well, whether you are busy crafting, processing firewood or just enjoying a pause and the peace of the woods.

The NCFed Directors are due to have an annual meeting in person soon, so hopefully we will remember to take a photograph to put in the next edition of Cleft Stick!

Tom Coxhead, Director

Peer Awards 2025

Once again the process of selecting recipients for the NCFed Peer Awards, to be presented at the AGM Gathering in October, begins and it's time to contact your Group Rep with suggestions as to which category we should recognise this year. In the past, awards have been made for Coppice Restoration, Long Service and Outstanding Contribution. There may be another category that we could recognise.

As always, there will be an award for a New Entrant. This is someone who has been in the sector for five years or less. Who in your Group might qualify?

So have a think about this and pass your thoughts to your Group Rep.

Martin Wise
NCFed Peer Awards Officer
Chilterns & Thames Valley CG



Smithing – just one of many activities being tutored on SSCG's popular skills days

[Credit Ashley Martin]

Sussex and Surrey Coppice Group

Another SSCG Skills Day...

What a fantastic day! Gorgeous Weather!
Number ?? - no idea - going on for nearly a couple of years though, our fortnightly 'Skills Days', where we share skills, have a go at stuff and generally enjoy each other's company; not to mention trying to attract new blood into the environment, and maybe into the industry.

Twenty four members came and shared their time and stories, knowledge and skills. Some learnt some blacksmithing techniques. Daisy made a gate with some advice from Jon, Roger knocked up another shave horse from up-cycled wood, amazing as usual. Some whittled spurtles, others started to make spoons. Mike did some serious strimming. A couple of our younger advocates chopped up some firewood after delving into blacksmithing - I love how these skills days create community and connections.

Ashley Martin
Sussex and Surrey Coppice Group



[Credit Ashley Martin]

Spurtles turned from coppiced wood in a Sussex woodland

Llangattock Community Woodlands Group



[Credit Barry Sandilands]

Members of the community turn out in force for Llangattock Community Woodlands Group

Autumn into Spring with Llangattock Community Woodlands Group...

Year three of our management licence arrangement with the Woodland Trust to introduce coppice at Coed Cefn (Bluebell Wood) above Crickhowell in Powys.

Llangattock Community Woodlands Group (LCW) is a registered charity (No. 1154649) formed in 2007. We currently have 29 active member volunteers meeting every Tuesday and some Fridays at our base on the edge of the Mon-Brec Canal in the Brecon Beacons National Park. It is funded partially by retail sales of firewood and charcoal from our local and sustainably managed woodlands, and otherwise with grant funding for training needs and some equipment.

The focus in these early years is harvest and clearance of six coupes in this previously unmanaged woodland, so each area has seen old birch, ash and blackthorn removed and new hazel and cherry plugs planted out. This spring the new brash hedges are alive with nesting birdlife and the woodland floor is seeing bluebells reappearing. Dry stone walls have been repaired and timber extracted for charcoal making – it's not just the birds that have been busy!

Back at our canal-side base, volunteer activity continues with willow weaving, bird box making and kilns producing charcoal. Workdays on Tuesdays and Fridays have been well supported as the group gathers for a sausage sandwich and tea while planning the planting out of 3,320 young trees across our sites and local farms.

After storm damage to our gazebo shelters over the last four years, we have opted to source the timber and materials to construct a more weather-proof meeting place. We have larch and Douglas fir felled for a 7 x 3.5m construction and training is being supplied on cutting joints and fitting bracing, before a clear tarpaulin roof is fitted. Winter 2025 hopefully won't cause the same problems for this structure! Summer blossom will surely enhance our seeded wildflower meadow in time for the community open day planned for August, and the home base will be ready to welcome residents, school children and other community organisations for a day of events, crafting and a fireside cuppa.

Fingers crossed for the weather!

Barry Sandilands
Llangattock Community Woodlands Group
llangattockfirewood@outlook.com
llangattockwoods.org.uk

LCW are award winners as a Powys Community Group and have been awarded a plaque in recognition by The Greenman Trust.



[Credit Matt England]

Members of HCG wait for a train that may never arrive!



[Credit Jon Fraser]

Jo Foat and Dorset Coppice Group member Mrs Fraser

On the 22nd February 2025, a members' meeting was hosted at Matt and Liz England's yard, on the subject of hands on tool sharpening. A full report can be seen on our Facebook page but I will repeat here, for any railway buffs, that their yard is called the Old Coal Yard as it was the siding where the coal was unloaded and carted around the town, when Ringwood had a railway. The photograph, taken on 22nd February, is from just outside the yard where Ringwood Historic Society have erected a replica station sign and bench at what would have been the end of the platform.

On 1st March 2025 there was a members' meeting at Alderholt Reading Rooms - an illustrated talk by Jo Foat on the wartime Lumberjills. This talk was secured by HCG's contribution to the crowd funding of Jo's third book. We thought it important to get the Lumberjills' achievement recognised whilst some of them are still about to see it. There seems to have been a synergy between coppice work - mainly using hand tools and the manual carrying of product from point of harvest to edge of ride, and felling trees with axe and crosscut saw and, particularly in the case of pit props - hand extraction. After the talk I had set up two inclined saw stools and some pit prop sized wood. Full report on the meeting appears on our Facebook page.

It is with regret and sadness that we announce the sudden passing of Paul Brockman BEM, on Saturday 26th April. A celebration of his life was held at New Milton Community Hall with, I estimate, over 150 people in attendance; an eclectic mix of bikers with grey hair and lady bikers (who looked as if they were wearing better than the men), musicians, dancers and coppice workers, representing the four facets of Paul's interests. There will be a full obituary in the next edition of The Teller, our group newsletter.

P S Jameson
Group Rep, Hampshire Coppice Group



Participants in the hazel hurdle making competition at DCG's Annual Woodfair

[Credit PE Jameson]

Dorset Coppice Group

Recent coppice group events from the county with no motorway...

On Saturday 12th April, Dorset Coppice Group held their annual Wood Fair at the living classroom including a Hazel Hurdle Competition (make a 3 foot hurdle in up to an hour and a half) and a Thatching Spar-making Competition (how many can you make in 15 minutes?). In addition there were fourteen traders and a horse logging display.

The weather was kind to the event and the bluebells were in flower. A lot of networking went on with the old passing on pointers to the young.

Our regular members' events of work parties, spoon club and the local Association of Pole Lathe Turners and Green Woodworkers meetings are on-going - see the group's Facebook page for details.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish our group member Peter Etheridge and Rachell bon voyage as they leave the Dorset Jurassic Coast and start their van life travels. You may shortly find them in a copse near you.

P. S. Jameson
Group Rep, Dorset Coppice Group



In-situ cleft hazel fencing made by LCW member Ned

[Credit Dave Petty]

Yorkshire Coppice Group

The coppice season never really ends. After planting and layering we move, at the end of April, from deer fencing to extraction of coppice products and delivering these to retailers and customers. Then on to extracting firewood while the tracks are dry, and processing the previous year's timber. In the meantime we can get the first charcoal burn underway.

The reality is slightly less tidy than this. As our coups become more productive following the layering done during the initial (restoration) cycle, the amount of processing to do increases and this takes up more time, and there still remain bits of this work to do.

Fortunately we are a big enough group now to split, most days, into two teams, so while one area is being completed, other tasks - deliveries, firewood extraction, fencing, or contract work such as hedgelaying or continuous weave fencing can take place.

We have had to work hard over the last few years to keep our numbers up, as experienced members have suffered long term illnesses, repatriated to Italy, emigrated to Wales or started drawing their pensions. Fresh blood has come this year in the form of funded placements for our Trainee, Ben, and Apprentice, Lucy. It's been great to have some fresh young energy in the team and to see how quickly they learn the skills needed for the job. We also have some good casual regular workers who bring their own experience and hard work.

Then there are volunteers. Our volunteer days offer people great satisfaction and enjoyment from being out of the city for the day and to spend time working together, hands on, in the woods.

It's always satisfying to head out of Leeds, against the queues of commuters heading the other way, into one of the eight or so woodlands that we manage, to spend the day in nature doing useful, productive, enjoyable work, restoring neglected coppice woods.



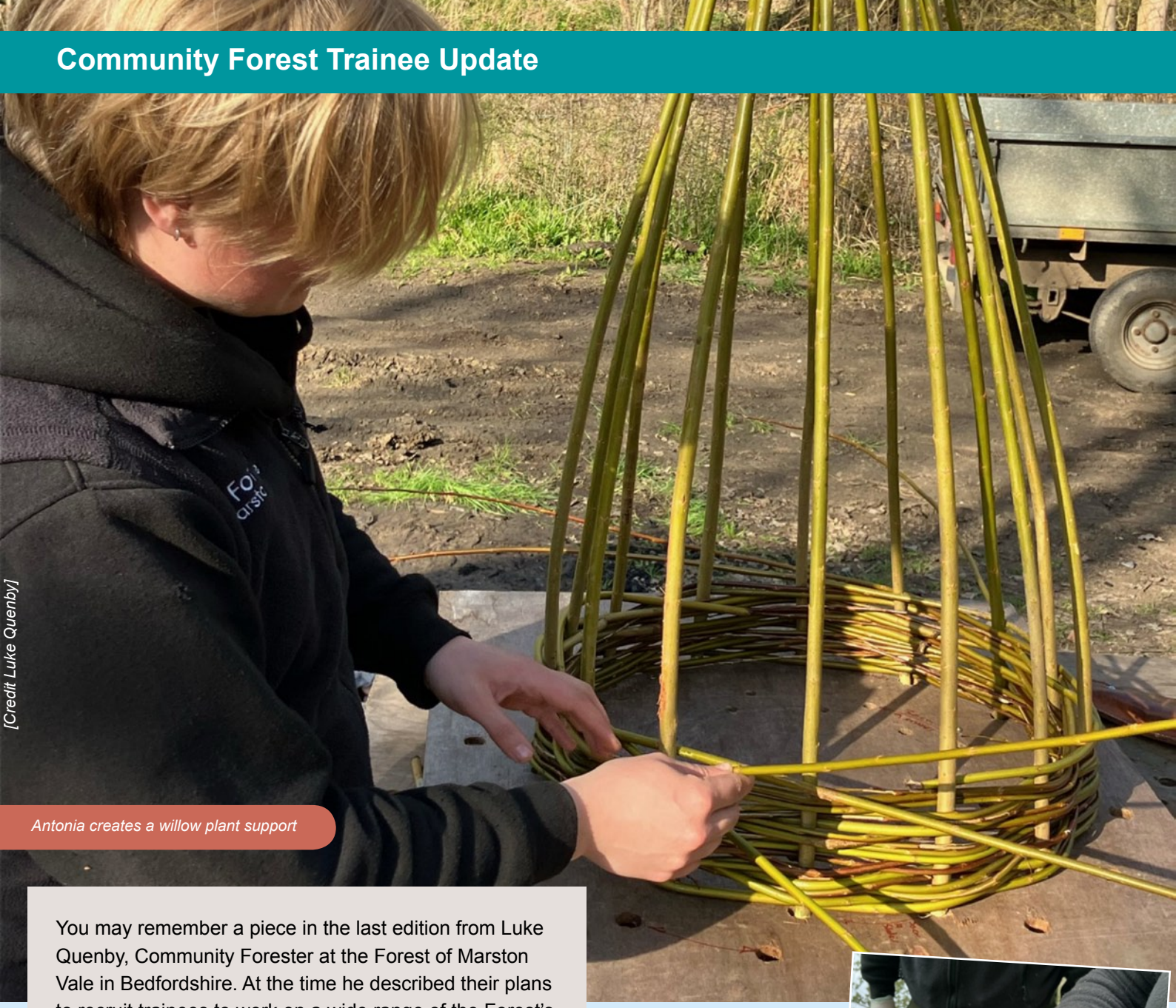
[Credit Dave Petty]

Leeds Coppice Workers in the coppice

None of this would be possible without the backroom work of Rowan sorting out our complex rota, Aled doing the website and communications with customers, and all the other behind the scenes work that keeps Leeds Coppice Workers ticking along.

Dave Petty
Founder member of Yorkshire Coppice Group
07852 315311

Community Forest Trainee Update



[Credit Luke Quenby]

Antonia creates a willow plant support

You may remember a piece in the last edition from Luke Quenby, Community Forester at the Forest of Marston Vale in Bedfordshire. At the time he described their plans to recruit trainees to work on a wide range of the Forest's activities and with local contractors of various types. It sounds like things have been going well. Here's an update.

Antonia joined us in early January, as our first ever Forestry Trainee. She has fitted into the team brilliantly and been involved in doing some great things. In her time with us, she has completed courses in first aid, PA1 (Level 2 Award in the safe use of pesticides) and tree risk assessment. She already had the CS30 and 31 chainsaw tickets. There are more short courses planned later in the year, to include soil science and tractor operation.

As well as these formal training courses, Antonia has worked internally, supporting teams across the whole organisation and has been involved with writing management plans, mensuration, surveying (trees, plants and animals), felling, coppicing, conversion, habitat management and conservation, planting and woodland design. Outside the Forest Team, she has also worked on a number of estates and with contractors learning more about all aspects of woodland management, forestry and habitat conservation.



[Credit Luke Quenby]

Huge contrast in experience on offer for trainees… Antonia with a newt

We will be opening up the traineeship again, with an advertisement going live on the 16th June, with a view to having interviews in August and two new people in place in early September. If you are interested in applying, please contact luke.quenby@marstonvale.org.

Luke Quenby,
Community Forester,
Forest of Marston Vale, Bedford



The 2025 NCFed Weekend Gathering and AGM

This year's Weekend Gathering and AGM, hosted by the Sussex and Surrey Coppice Group, will be held at the fascinating Weald and Downland Living Museum, nestled in the South Downs National Park, West Sussex. Sitting in some forty acres, the Museum accommodates more than fifty historical buildings (dating from 950AD to the 19th Century) which have been rescued from their original sites in Southeast England and lovingly re-erected and conserved. The Museum also boasts the award-winning Downland Gridshell Building (the first building of its kind to be constructed in the UK) which houses a collection of building fixtures and fittings (hinges, latches, doors, etc) plus larger structural building construction and conservation elements and materials. The Museum, of course, also plays host to the well-known BBC series "The Repair Shop".

Exciting new developments for this year's Gathering

As there is so much to see at this amazing venue, we are offering two new opportunities: arrival and registration from Thursday afternoon will be available to ALL attendees, and on the Sunday, for the first time ever, we will be open to the general public for part of the morning and afternoon.



[Credit Tim Roskell]


[Credit Guy Lambourne]


[Credit Tim Roskell]


[Credit Sussex and Surrey Coppice Group]

Gathering attendees invited to enjoy the Museum

This year we are inviting all attendees to arrive from 3.00pm on Thursday to enjoy the excellent local ale and cider at the Froe Up and Split bar, a bit of fireside banter and maybe a few games, some musical jamming and perhaps a singsong as well. We're looking at having some song sheets this year so you'll be able to keep up and still sing out of tune! Don't forget to bring those musical instruments folks!

All day Friday and throughout the weekend, everyone will be welcome to have a leisurely mooch around the Museum and check out all the fantastic buildings, collections of tools (from trades such as the making of walking sticks, trugs, hurdles, rakes and clogs), working woodland, farm livestock and much more. If you can't make it until later, join one of the onsite Museum tours on Saturday. All this is included in the Gathering entry fee.

Museum visitors invited to enjoy the Gathering

To promote more awareness of the National Coppice Federation, the coppicing industry and coppice products; and to provide an opportunity for public engagement, we and the Museum are going to be actively encouraging the general public to join us for an hour and a half on Sunday morning and then after lunch for a further one and a half hours until the Gathering closes. Everyone will be able to watch demonstrations, ask questions, chat to those involved in the coppicing industry and buy coppice products.

Pre-Gathering courses

We will be running the ever-popular pre-Gathering courses on Friday including besom broom making (in time for Halloween), skinning and butchering a deer, stool making, introduction to blacksmithing, hedgelaying, Sussex trug making and one more craft to be confirmed.. So, a varied choice offering something for everyone and what always proves to be a great day of learning and inspiration.

Demonstrations

Many of the pre-Gathering course providers will also be demonstrating, skill sharing and offering have-a-go sessions on Saturday and Sunday, and there will be others demonstrating pole lathe turning, walking stick making, using a treadle lathe, working with willow, natural soap making, weaving with a peg loom, working with sweet chestnut and more.

Fancy having some space to demonstrate, skill share, sell your coppice products or promote your woody business? You'll be welcomed with open arms! More details about this when ticket booking goes live.


[Credit Guy Lambourne]



[Credit Guy Lambourne]


[Credit Tim Russ Event Photography]


[Credit Guy Lambourne]


[Credit Guy Lambourne]


[Credit Tim Rockell]

Auction, Competition and Discussions

Dig out those unused tools and coppice-related bits and bobs and pass them on by entering the tool auction, always an entertaining and sometimes bargain-filled hour. The Coppice Crafts Competition will this year feature two new categories - get making, the standard is always extremely high. The Saturday afternoon discussion groups will cover some interesting topics, still to be confirmed at time of going to press. However one definite will be how we can integrate communities into understanding and being interested in their local woodlands. More to follow at booking.

Food, glorious food

Thursday and Friday will be self-catering BBQ and breakfast, with plenty of tea, coffee and biscuits available all the time. Saturday and Sunday will see a welcome return of fried breakfasts (yippee) providing for all tastes. The food, as ever, will be excellent and provided by our gourmet caterers.

Tasty lunches and delicious dinners

Saturday - lightly spiced squash soup with rosemary and garlic sourdough croutons, Cornish brie and Stilton with a selection of freshly baked rolls and salted butters.

Sunday - autumnal vegetable and pearl barley soup with additional accoutrements.

Saturday dinner - venison bourguignon with lardons, chestnut mushrooms and baby onions. And for vegetarians, a mushroom bourguignon. All accompanied with confit garlic mashed potatoes and leek mornay. We might top that off with a sticky toffee pudding with toffee sauce and cream.

Now we're talking! Hands up?

Live Music

Local band Sidewinder will be topping the bill on Saturday evening, so bring your dancing shoes!

Sunday site visits

Finally, there will be two sites to visit, away from the Museum, on your way home - one of which is SSCG's Shadow Woods, the group's base.

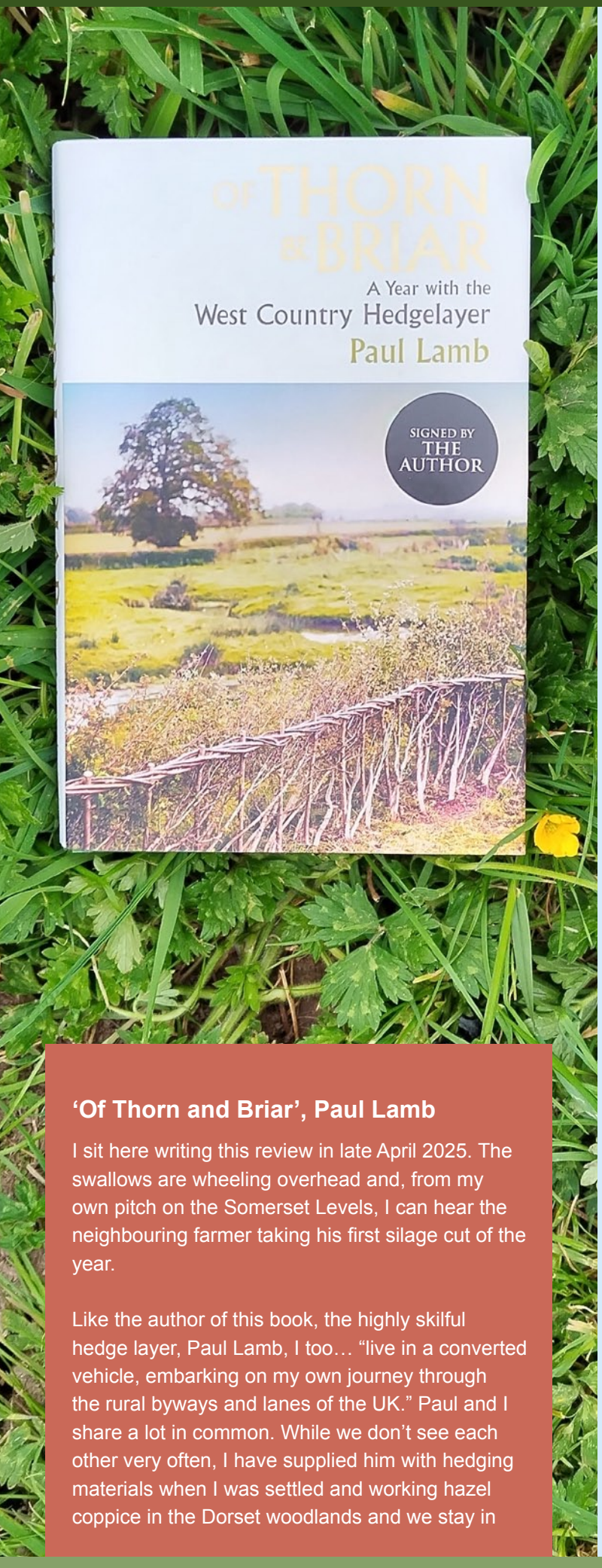
Ticket booking

The weekend will be open, via pre-booked tickets, to members of NCFed affiliated supporter and coppice groups as well as non-members. Full details will be available in due course. Keep up to date through the National Coppice Federation's website ncfed.org.uk and Facebook page.

This promises to be a fantastic weekend. We look forward to seeing you there.

The Sussex and Surrey Coppice Group
Gathering Sub-Committee
sscoppicegroup.co.uk


[Credit Guy Lambourne]



‘Of Thorn and Briar’, Paul Lamb

I sit here writing this review in late April 2025. The swallows are wheeling overhead and, from my own pitch on the Somerset Levels, I can hear the neighbouring farmer taking his first silage cut of the year.

Like the author of this book, the highly skilful hedge layer, Paul Lamb, I too… “live in a converted vehicle, embarking on my own journey through the rural byways and lanes of the UK.” Paul and I share a lot in common. While we don’t see each other very often, I have supplied him with hedging materials when I was settled and working hazel coppice in the Dorset woodlands and we stay in touch sporadically, sharing messages in the online world. It has been fabulous to watch Paul become such an accomplished ambassador for rural crafts and family farming, with the latest step in his journey being the publication of ‘Of Thorn and Briar’.

I had pre-ordered a copy of Paul’s book but, due to living on the road, I had arranged for it to be sent to my parents’ home. My dad, a lifelong countryman & conservationist, opened the parcel and read the book in a single sitting. His WhatsApp message to me was short & sweet: “Good read. Should be required reading in all agricultural colleges. Contains lots of knowledge. Recommend you read it with a pen and notepad handy.”

When I finally wrestled my copy from my dad’s grip, it took me less than 48 hours to read it cover to cover. As a part-time hedgelayer, charcoal burner, coppice worker and long-term West Country resident myself, reading Paul’s words were both life affirming and inspiring. I could relate to the days on the hedge, where the conditions are so wet that you’re soaked to the skin within minutes. When thorns are embedded so deeply within your joints, that they start to seize up before the day is done. When your chainsaw hits a rusty piece of barbed wire, dulling it instantly, on the first pleach of the day.

But I also recognised the upsides. The satisfaction that comes at the end of a day of hard labour. Looking back along a hedge that you have ‘tamed’ and preserved for another generation. The robin that follows you along the hedge – some say it is the spirit of hedgelayers passed. And the people. The friendships that are forged, the yarns that are spun and the camaraderie that is shared.

Hedgelaying is possibly the most rewarding work that I have ever undertaken and it is fantastic to see it celebrated in Paul’s book. But this is not just a book about hedges and those that frequent them – it is also a call to arms. It is not a romanticised image of the countryside, but a celebration of hedgerows, coppice and small family farms – and the vital role that they have to play in all of our futures.

Above all, it is about our connection to nature & heritage and how much richer that makes us. It is a reminder that, in this complex global world, there are still pleasures to be found in the countryside - in the copses, fields and hedgerows – amongst the thorn and briar.

Pete Etheridge
Dorset Coppice Group

Strauss - S7L Safety boots e.s. Alrakis

In spring 2023, I became increasingly aware that walking barefoot was becoming painful as a result of small hard lumps on the balls of both feet. I called on the services of a podiatrist and discovered these nasty things were corns - hard growths on the soles of the foot, apparently developed in an attempt to counter rubbing. A rather counter-productive development on the part of the foot, I remember thinking at the time – a callous usually protects but here it just causes pain.

I traced this to an economy drive and my choice of cheap, mail order work boots and wellies. Neither really fitted and returning them was a pain so didn't get done. Not great economy then. I struggled on with both, too mean to replace either pair. The podiatrist, waving her scalpel casually in my direction, advised a footwear rethink. By chance around the same time, a couple of customers recommended Strauss gear, particularly their boots.

Buying boots mail order can be difficult, but I liked the detail on the Strauss website and the continental sizing seemed to make getting the fit right first time more likely. Returns looked easy too. There's a choice of colour in both leather and laces! (I know that's not important, honest). As a result I bought a pair of these lovely safety boots later the same spring. The proof of course is in their use and now, two years on, and with quite a few miles on the clock, I can make an informed report.

They felt wonderful straight out of the box. Small details make a difference: the lacing system allows perfect tightness easily, the laces still show no signs of wear even though the boots are supplied with a spare pair - in a contrasting colour! The rubber scuff-cap on the toe is now well battered but has protected the leather from damage, the steel toe cap is somehow unobtrusive when kneeling (I do a lot of kneeling when weaving in-situ fencing jobs). All the stitching is intact and the boots remain pretty waterproof (if reproofed from time to time) and supremely comfortable even now they are getting on a bit. Most non-welly, non-chainsaw boots last me a year.

When I found these boots I thought they looked like a pair that would be happy on a mountain (in Bedfordshire we don't have those), so I wouldn't need to buy a second pair specifically for walking. Essentially they are walking boots with steel toecaps. And so it has proved. They have provided perfect comfort on some Scottish and Peak District hills. And unexpectedly, have become my go-to for a few thousand miles on the bike. As well as providing protection they are very comfortable to wear, out and about when I reach my destination. I've never found myself sighing "*$**@@% I'm glad to get them off!" at the end of a long day.

Having got through two years, at £143.88 inc. vat, they make financial sense compared to a pair half their price. They look like making it into 2026 which takes them into bargain territory. Include in the equation £90 for two podiatrist sessions and the constant discomfort of corns and I've vowed never to apply my parsimony to boot choice again. View them here.

Guy Lambourne
East Anglian Coppice Network



[Credit Guy Lambourne]



[Credit: Simon Weaver]

If you can find one, a sawset may be a sound investment

Widen Your Curf - Bowsaw blade tooth setting

Do you curse the sticking bowsaw? Does it frustrate the volunteers? If so, find yourself a 112 Sandvik Sawset or similar. Widen the curf of the saw blade and transform your wood cutting.

At one of the last Rudgwick Country Fairs there was a stand displaying various saw sharpening and setting tools. Hosted by a venerable gentleman who worked at Wakehurst Place. We have him to thank for this.

Make sure it has its sliding blade guide and set it to just bend the tooth not the whole blade. Use the screw to adjust the amount of set of the teeth.

This works with green wood and dry wood blades. Set alternate teeth, one side then the other. Don't over set the tooth, just a couple of millimetres each side and see how much difference it makes, do more if it's needed. Experiment - try it on old blades to get the hang of it and see what effect it has. It's not as critical as setting old tenon saws. Find a saw set and have a go.

Simon Weaver

Editor's note – A quick glance at a well-known search engine suggests this type of device might cost £30-70, used. A new 21" bowsaw blade costs around the £4 mark.





Caleb steaming

[Credit Robin Tuppen, Sussex Trug Heritage Centre Limited]

The Royal Sussex Trug

David Attenborough recently made a visit to deepest, darkest East Sussex. Here is a transcript of his experience:

Choose your own DA voice for this: *Here we are, in deepest East Sussex. As I push through the undergrowth, we can see the brick and corrugated iron clad roof of that fascinating but increasingly rare creature's lair, the trug maker. Behind these closed doors amongst the detritus of collected formers, blanks, willow, chestnut and lesser woods, of many years (they are a long-lived species – they have to be in the current climate) we find the territory of one of the silver backs – Robinius Trugius Makarius.*

For the rest of this episode turn to the Discovery Channel.

I popped down recently to see Robin Tuppen, CEO of the Sussex Trug Heritage Centre Limited. I've actually taken on a pseudo-apprenticeship role, as Robin is leading a drive towards the preservation of the craft and he's conned me into supporting this as a trustee. Actually, I'm looking forward to contributing to these efforts and the development of The Sussex Trug & Woodland Craft Heritage Centre.

It seemed a good idea that I should learn how to make a trug even if I am a somewhat part time apprentice.

I'm going to borrow some of Robin's spiel about the history of trugs and his no small contribution to keeping the craft alive, mixed with some of my own words.



Royal Sussex T flower trug

Way back in the 1820s, just before Queen Victoria ascended to the throne, a Man of Sussex, one Thomas Smith of Herstmonceux, made a decision about his life that was to have a profound effect on Sussex and the World. He invented the Sussex Trug. Taking an ancient idea dating back to Anglo-Saxon times, Thomas redesigned the historic 'trog' and in so-doing created a part of the English gardening scene that is now world famous.

THOMAS SMITH
The original makers of
The Royal Sussex Trug
Since 1829

A Step Back in Time

The trog was a wooden vessel hewn from solid timber in the shape of the round coracle boat that the Anglo Saxons used for their daily business. Because of the way these trogs were made, they were very heavy and made in several sizes for different measures; used by Sussex farmers to measure grain and liquids. They continued in use in this form until the mid-1600s. An inventory document has been uncovered from a farm in Newhaven, East Sussex, at about that time, where there were recorded “a dozen of trogs in the milking parlour”. Thomas Smith re-invented the trog, carefully designing a lightweight basket using sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) and cricket bat willow (*Salix coerulea*). He moved his lounge and kitchen to the first floor of his home, Hormes House, Herstmonceux, and converted the ground floor to his workshops. Hormes House can still be seen, sporting the Royal Warrant Crest on its eastern face.


[Credit Robin Tuppen, STHC Limited]

Mike cleaving chestnut

Thomas selected chestnut to make his handles and rims as it splits easily, is hard and resistant to rot. He selected true straight poles of chestnut (known as cooper poles or trug bats) and cleft (split) these in half down their length using a cleaving axe. The axe is placed on the top of the pole, hit with a wooden mallet to start the split and then worked through the wood by placing the pole in a ‘brake’ to finish the split. The chestnut is then cleft again to more manageable pieces before being hand shaved on one side by a craftsman using a shaving horse and draw knife, to produce a smooth comfortable handle and rim. These pieces are steam bent on round formers to produce the finished handles and rims which are then nailed together to produce the frame.


[Credit Robin Tuppen, STHC Limited]

Thomas Smith Robertsbridge at Tunbridge Wells Show 1933

For the boards of his trug, Thomas selected cricket bat willow which, because Herstmonceux is right on the edge of the Pevensey Marshes, was in plentiful supply. He split the willow using wedges and sledgehammers before sawing them into slats, by hand, in a sawing pit and then hand shaving these slats to form the boards of his trug. These boards were light in weight and perfectly complemented the strong chestnut frame. They were fixed using solid copper tacks and the legs added using copper clout nails. The larger trugs were not given feet but had two straps fixed from the handles underneath the boards to give extra strength. The No.8 trug (also known as a Half Bushel Trug) still has those straps today.

When Thomas made his trugs there was a ready market for them on farms and in gardens throughout England. However, it was not until 1851 when he attended The Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park,



Mike & Caleb shaving chestnut

[Credit Robin Tuppen, Sussex Trug Heritage Centre Limited]

London, that he made his true mark on the World. It was there, on the first day, that Queen Victoria visited his stand. She was so impressed by his product that she ordered some as gifts for members of the Royal Family. With that sort of patronage Thomas' enterprise was bound to succeed! Legend has it that when he returned to his workshops in Herstmonceux, mindful of the debt which he owed to Queen Victoria for this new-found patronage, he made these particular trugs himself. He then walked the sixty miles to Buckingham Palace in London, with his brother, pushing a handcart to deliver his prized trugs in pristine condition. He obviously sold more to the Queen in the coming years as he was awarded the Royal Warrant, hence the term Royal Sussex Trug. Thomas was also awarded a Gold Medal and Certificate of Merit at the show, and the shop still has the certificate on display.



[Credit Robin Tuppen, Sussex Trug Heritage Centre Limited]

In 1855, he attended the Exposition Universelle Industrie Beaux-arts in Paris, where he was awarded a Silver Medal and Certificate of Merit signed by Napoleon Bonaparte III. This is understood to have been the first time that trugs were exported outside of the United Kingdom, showing the true entrepreneurial flair that Smith possessed.

Over the years the Smith family continued to run their business in Herstmonceux. They faced competition from many other copycat companies which sprang up in Kent and Sussex and even as far west as Somerset. After the First World War the Smiths moved from their original base in Hormes House to a redundant army barracks further west in the village and it is here that he and then the Tuppens made Thomas's famous product until 2003. The wood and corrugated iron building meant as a temporary home for the British Army gave visitors a step back in history rarely experienced elsewhere.

Part 2 coming soon – 'Return of The Trug' – released by Metro-Goldwyn Mayer and produced by Cubby Broccoli!

Ashley Martin
Sussex and Surrey Coppice Group
With vast input from Robin Tuppen T.R.U.G (SSCG)
The Cuckmere Trug Company

The Economics of Spar Making



[Credit Tim Russ Event Photography]

At the last NCFed Reps' Zoom meeting, a question came down from the north – "How profitable is making thatching spars?" I will defer to the great and the good for a definitive answer, but as I believe there is money in spars (never enough) I thought I would put pen to paper with some personal thoughts.



Pete Jameson

Before I get into the nitty-gritty I must set the scene. A good spar maker can make 1000 a day. Exceptional makers (the late Ozz, the late Ern Steel in his prime, Ivor Parsons), regularly made 2000 spars a day. If you are not achieving the thousand a day you are not necessarily a bad spar maker; there are other factors at play, more of which later.

I started my working life as a carpenter joiner with dry seasoned wood, went back to college for a second time and presently work as a building surveyor five days a week. Coppice has been the Saturday job (and not necessarily every Saturday) since about 1990, specialising in charcoal since 1994. Mother used to describe the different trees as she pushed the pram under their canopies. I was given an axe for my 5th birthday and have been cutting firewood ever since. In about 1973 I cycled to Wimborne cattle market to buy my first bill hook from a farm worker who was taking a stall to thin out his hand tools after his 71st birthday. It was a nine inch Brades general pattern hook, sharpened and oiled prior to sale with this after sales advice – "Look after it lad and it will look after you". I still have that hook although these days tend to use something a little lighter. So although part time, having now seen 62 some summers I've done a little bit of coppice over the years.



[Credit Nigel Turton]

Spars on a finished roof

Terms used in this article

Spar - a thatching spar which here in Dorset is generally 29 inches long, preferably triangular, nominal 3/8 inch wide on the bark side and ½ inch on the other two sides. Pointed with 3 triangular cuts to form a point of ½ inch length. However, size, thickness and even length of point varies from thatcher to thatcher, so talk to your customers about their ideal spar. I notice that when they have no spars and need some in a hurry, thatchers can be quite happy with variations on length, size and point.

Gad - the rod the spars are cut from. My preferred stock size is 30 inches long, nominal 1-1.25 inch diameter, ideally knot free - more about that later.

Rod - the hazel stick that the gads are cut from

Mock or stool - the clump of hazel rods from a single rootstock in an in-cycle coppice woodland.

Faggot - a bundle of brushwood and sticks usually one foot diameter, two foot long, for bread ovens and 6 to 8 foot long for river works.


[Credit Nigel Turton]

Trainee thatchers watching a spar being put in with slope to expel rainwater

Willow and ash can also be used for spars but you get used to what you work with most often. Willow is softer than hazel so easier to point I find, but too soft for my muscle memory when cleaving out, and for me more difficult to cleave accurately and without waste caused by spars running out. In Somerset I guess I would recalibrate and get to like willow. Ash is too good to use for spars; let it grow on for other products.

I was first shown spar making by Len Lane (Peter Lane's father). That must have been pre-1988. Len, who had spent all his life on piece work could not slow it down enough to show me how. As a party piece, Len would close his eyes, pick up a gad, feel for the centre, knock in the hook, cleave on through and repeat. Four or six spars from a gad purely by feel! He did open his eyes to point his spars though. Considering health and safety I would not recommend this but then Len did have all his fingers after seventy years. I always impress on a trainee the importance of a very sharp pointing hook.


[Credit Guy Lambourne]

Hampshire spar maker Rod Miller, splits a gad

I have never made spars for whole days but on the basis of half a day times two, I am a 750 spars-a-day man, but I will continue on the basis of a thousand a day.

For 4000 spars you need 250 gads (sometimes a cleave will run out and you lose a spar or two but equally sometimes God makes six as opposed to four. So let's say 250 gads). If your rod has over 30 inches growth in a year, praise be, as the knots will be more than 30 inches apart. This type of material produces no knots in the middle where the thatcher twists the spar and no knot at the end to slow you down when pointing them up. If less than 30 inch annual growth, you have to position the gad to get no knot in the middle, or closer than two inches to the end, to achieve a good spar. This slows you down.

So let's say 1000 spars at £200 per thousand. This sort of figure conjures up visions of a very good income; a chance to buy a new truck and that piece of woodland you always promised yourself. But unfortunately it's not 200 notes a day. To quote the late Mr Ernest Steel, to get four days of making one needs to go one day cutting hazel and walking it out. So that day knocks you back £250. If you deduct the costs of petrol, wear and tear, PPE, insurance, etc. - say £40 of overheads, that leaves £110 a day or £550 a week. If that's a 40 week year (bit of holiday and God forbid a bit of sick), a grand total of £22K per year. Considering minimum wage is £12.21/hr times 40 hours a week, times 40 weeks = £19.5K per year. So that's £2.5k reward for the joy and risks of being self-employed.


[Credit Guy Lambourne]

Vigorous, in-cycle hazel

The quality of hazel

This makes a lot of difference to gad gathering as these three examples demonstrate.

1. Vigorous in-cycle hazel might produce 40 rods per stool and four gads to a rod, so one stool will yield 160 gads. Two stools are more than enough for a day's spar making - 250 gads with 70 gads to spare.

2. If the yield is 20 rods per stool and 3 gads per rod, then you'll need to cut 5 stools.

3. If 10 rods per stool and two gads per rod, you'll need to cut 13 stools for a day's making. That's 52 stools in a day for four days spar making – and that's not viable. Time perhaps to jack it in and go into the faggot business!

I make some spars from material that's fast grown on brick earth clay and some slow grown in thin topsoil. I can feel the difference in speed and muscle effort between the two. In terms of numbers of spars made in a day, how long is a day? Is it a day without disturbance, or do you have to pick up the kids from school? I always get more done in the morning than the afternoon.

Size of market

It is generally held that a square of thatch, ten foot by ten foot uses 1000 spars. A coat of thatch lasts twenty years and a re-ridge, which uses a lot of spars, lasts ten years.

I believe it is best to produce three or four products really well rather than twenty in a mediocre fashion. Thatching spars need nominal one inch diameter straight hazel; if you can't source this quantity it might be worth concentrating on other products. No one product pays well but all put together you are in with half a chance.

I know one spar maker that started off with a bicycle, a bow saw and a spar hook so for the cost of £40 spar hook, £7 second hand bow saw with a new blade, £40 second hand bicycle, knee pad made from an old car tyre. You are in business for under £100.

Other factors to consider… Is your thatcher collecting from your yard or are you expected to deliver? For a thatcher to collect it needs to be a fair quantity at one time. If you deliver it can be smaller quantities and you get some good views from the top of the scaffold.


[Credit Nigel Turton]

Spars bundled and ready for use

In small quantities I charge the going rate (I do not undercut those doing it full time) but I do lose out economically. I generally throw in free delivery which has a fringe benefit - over the years I've seen some interesting views in villages, 20 feet up, and met some interesting people.

A note to the vertigo challenged - delivery can be at ground level but the old "Put the invoice in the truck" ruse can be like putting it into a black hole, so I always like to put it in the thatcher's hand - so long may I be able to climb ladders.

P.S. Jameson
Woodcollier and occasional thatching spar maker
Hampshire and Dorset Coppice Groups



Stripped bark in coils. Centre – cherry. Right – sallow

[Credit Guy Lambourne]

Stripping and selling willow bark

Many years ago, a friend asked if he could have a couple of the young elms growing in a hedge by our wood. He wanted to try stripping bark for chair seating. I was intrigued and spent an enjoyable spring afternoon selecting and felling two small trees then watching in amazement, as he made parallel cuts with a sharp knife along clear sections of bark and pulled the strips off the stem. By inserting the knife into the end of the thick bark strip it could be split to remove the woody outer part, leaving the leather-like cambium. This he coiled and tied neatly with small strips of the same bark. All very pleasing.

Several years later, I was experimenting with sallow, Salix caprea, as a material for gate hurdles (very nice since you ask), at the same time of year and couldn't resist having a go at stripping bark using the same parallel cut technique. How addictive! And what a pleasing result. Sallow has thinner bark than elm and my attempts to split off the outer bark failed, but by selecting stems with smooth outer bark the results seemed pretty good. Not being a chairmaker myself, I had no use for the stuff so hung it on the workshop wall, where it collected dust but looked kind of attractive.

Later I started making besoms and tried sallow bark for bonds. Once soaked in water, it worked well and looked pretty good, but enough of them broke in the exciting head/tail joining process that I abandoned it and went back to cleft willow which is beautiful and much more reliable.

I carry out an annual, low-key effort to reduce the amount of sallow in the hazel coupes, so when I remember, I cut it late, when the sap's running and spend an enjoyable hour or two stripping bark. So my collection of coils grew.

In 2023 Selina MacArthur called. Selina is a Hertfordshire based maker of lovely things from willow and straw. She asked if I had any willow bark for sale. "Well" I said, "I do". She visited and it turned out neither of us knew anything about buying and selling bark so I gave her a few coils to play with. Some weeks later she returned with two beautifully bijoux, woven boxes made from my sallow bark, and promptly bought all the rest of the dusty coils in the workshop. We were both pleased.

Spring 2024 saw me harvesting more bark. Selina didn't call. Ever the poor salesman, I didn't chase her and those fresh coils collected dust. Hosting a chair making course in June this year, led by another friend, Tim, from Milton Keynes, gave me the opportunity to play with some cherry bark. This was lovely; thicker than sallow and with a sumptuous, leather-like feel when still wet. The outer bark can be removed with a hand or draw knife (a really skilful person would do this better than me). I haven't tried using it yet so can't report on its other qualities. I couldn't resist a bit of sallow debarking at the same time.

[Credit Selina MacArthur]

Occasionally in life, things align. I received an email from Selina the same week. Did I have any bark? “Well” I said, “I do”. She visited yesterday and once again bought all the bark I had, except a bit of cherry I kept to try as besom bonds.

Our financial negotiations would have upset Alan Sugar. Neither of us know what it is worth, other than the time it took to harvest. The strips vary in length and width and being dried in coils are impossible to examine without first soaking them. The answer would be to cut the strips a standard width, coil and label them individually with their length. That way, a price per metre might be decided upon. It would make the process longer but I will try to remember next year.

Do you have any experience of harvesting, pricing and selling tree bark? I would be intrigued to hear from you.

Guy Lambourne
East Anglian Coppice Network
info@wassledine.co.uk



[Credit Guy Lambourne]

Above: Selina’s beautiful, bijoux, bark boxes
Left: Selina at work on a box lid using soaked willow bark

May 2025

A flurry of activity to obtain a small tract of overstood sweet chestnut ended in failure. The purchaser had gone to Woodlands.co.uk. The price was a bit steep but that's what the company does, buy up big tracts at one price and sub-divide them at another. When it came down to the contract, there was a full management plan in place for the wider entity of this woodland across several hundred acres, the designation 'Ancient and semi-natural.' But the buyer contract made plain in red font: 'There are no obligations relating to (the management plan)'.



This confirms, to my mind, the semi-controversial nature of lotting. Yes, an enthusiastic new small wood owner might join NCFed or the Royal Forestry Society and start managing their little slice of England, but on balance it is sold as a dream with a cute little bench, a brilliant way to get out of inheritance tax and no mention of the need to 'do' anything. In my view there should be an obligation to manage it correctly, and if it's coppice it must be coppiced.

That episode has made me alert to the mad times we live in. Since my last column we've had a major, national who-ha over the illegal felling of the Sycamore Gap tree. Daniel Michael Graham, 39, from Carlisle, and Adam Carruthers, 32, from Wigton in Cumbria, were each convicted of two counts of criminal damage. And then more lately an arborist (who?) apparently advised the Toby Carvery to take down one of London's finest ancient oaks in Enfield on April 3, which they duly did. Cue similar outrage from Enfield Council, who talk legal action yet had never sought to put a simple preservation order on the tree.

The good news is that people really care about specimen trees so it may be that better protections are coming. The bad news might also be an overall incoherence about the purpose and point of managing woodland and cutting stuff down where needed, never mind coppicing, where that's the whole point.

To cut a long story short, I've been granted access to a nice Chiltern coppice where the landowner is 90, three acres of hazel is overstood by at least fifteen years, he's desperate to have someone sort it out, and the minute I sparked up my chainsaw I got a very upset passer-by asking me what on earth I thought I was doing.

None of these contradictory impulses would matter if there was a national plan to massively increase woodland in the UK. Professor of Forest Science at Bangor University, John Healey recently wrote about this. Britain has the lowest forest cover in Europe and only provides 20% of its wood needs, importing the rest. It has precious little 'wood security.' But we aren't putting in the work now to increase self-reliance by mid-century, let alone meeting any climate goals, he says. His advice is to revisit conifers that grow so well here, that 'forest management must be improved to sustain productivity under increasing stress from pests, pathogens and drought', and that 'wood must be used more efficiently. That includes reducing waste during processing, designing products for longevity and reusing wood products as many times as possible'. I don't know why he didn't mention coppicing but needless to say I view coppicing as most of the answer most of the time. It maximises growth rates, and carbon sequestration, and biodiversity, and plastic product substitution while reconnecting local supply chains that reduce the risk of imported diseases. On the big energy question, I'm sure renewables plus nuclear is a better choice than biofuel burning on a biblical scale (Drax etc).



Alex Musson, hedgelayer, by one of the over-stood but by all accounts magnificent hazel stools

Read John Healey's article in theconversation.com

Richard Lofthouse
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About the NCFed

The National Coppice Federation (NCFed) was formed in 2013 with the aim of uniting already existing regional coppice groups under one banner. Since then more local groups have formed and become affiliated, growing our membership and reach considerably.

Aims

The NCFed has three key aims:

1. to promote coppicing as a form of woodland management that provides economic, ecological and culturally significant benefits;
2. to bring together regional coppice groups and provide a unified voice for the industry; and
3. to encourage and promote best practice

Regional Coppice Groups

Regional groups are the backbone of the NCFed. Some have been established for many years and are very active in their local areas, organising regular social meetings and training courses for members and running events for the public. Others are smaller scale and focus on encouraging networking, cooperation and support between coppice workers.

Coppicing across the country

The National Coppice Federation is the umbrella organisation for local coppice groups from across the UK.

These groups in turn have individual members. They vary in size, both in terms of membership and geographical area, and also in scope, with some groups being extremely active and others less so.

Membership Benefits

• You'll be part of a national network that shares skills and ideas and better understands the bigger coppicing picture;
• You'll be part of a regional group that will connect you with local, likeminded individuals that you can cooperate, collaborate and socialise with;
• You'll be part of a movement that aims to improve the coppicing industry and to find solutions to problems and issues;
• You'll be eligible for discounted insurance through our Insurance Scheme;
• You'll be able to attend our fantastic annual Gathering at a reduced rate.

How to join

You will need to find and join your local coppice group; membership fees include a sum that is paid to the NCFed nationally. If there is no local group to join (coverage of the UK is not yet complete), why not consider setting up a new group? Alternatively, there is now an option to join a holding group designed for anyone not in an existing group's area. Full details on the website.



[credit Kiri Roberts]

Receive Cleft Stick and other important information from NCFed by signing up for our mailing list at:

ncfed.org.uk/news

National Coppice Federation

Supporting the Coppice Industry