

# Forestry plan is mending the years of neglect

A CAMPAIGN to encourage the restoration of Suffolk's 25,000 acres of neglected broadleaf woodland, much of it medieval in origin, is starting to bear fruit.

More landowners are seeking advice and grant aid from Suffolk County Council as they attempt to make it commercially viable to manage their woodland.

The Forestry Commission's broadleaved woodland grant scheme has made it more financially attractive to landowners to plant new woods.

However, it has done nothing to help the restoration of existing woodland.

Suffolk County Council is contributing towards the cost of initial restoration and to advising the commercial opportunities for the timber produced.

The campaign, launched eight years ago, is showing that woods can once again be managed commercially and, in doing so, rich and varied wildlife habitats can be re-created.

There are an estimated



**DAVID GREEN**  
Environment  
Correspondent

13,000 small woodlands in Suffolk covering 33,000 acres.

## Dense thicket

About 10,000 of the woodlands have, however, become neglected over the past 150 years, often developing into a dense thicket, suitable only for certain species of animal and excluding the necessary light and space to stimulate plant growth.

More than 440 of the county's woodlands, covering nearly 11,000 acres are of ancient origin.

Eighty-five woodlands, covering 3,300 acres, are Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

The Suffolk Farm Woodlands Campaign was launched in 1981 after the publication of a survey which showed that, contrary to popular belief following the agricultural clearances of the post war decades, seven and a half per cent of the county was still covered by woodland.

Also contrary to popular belief, it became more widely accepted that active management, not neglect, is beneficial to most species of plant and animal.

With the loss of many miles of hedgerow, ripped out to make fields larger, it was clear that the woodlands had a crucial role to play in both landscape and wildlife terms.

The trouble was that few landowners wanted the expense of restoring and managing neglected woodland just for the wildlife value.

A commercial return on timber had to be feasible,

and grants would be necessary to partly offset the capital cost of initial restoration.

One of the biggest success stories so far is at Home Farm, Parham, near Framlingham, where the ancient Queen Mary Wood is being restored.

Trees are being coppiced on a 20-year rotation, one quarter of the woods every five years.

Open areas are being replanted and "rides" opened up to improve the wildlife potential.

Timber from the eight-acre woods has already been cut into weatherboards for the restoration of a listed barn elsewhere on the 570-acre farm and for fencing and firewood.

Mr. Paul Briscoe, one of the farm's partners, said the restoration of the wood had led to the appearance of many wild flowers whose seeds had laid dormant for many years, and to the creation of habitat for various species of animals.

"Though their policies have changed nowadays, the advice from the Forestry Commission in 1976 had been to grub up the wood and plant conifers," said Mr. Briscoe, a former schoolteacher and builder who has previously worked on the restoration of Orford Castle and Saxstead Mill.

He and the other family partners in the farm had already set out to improve

the wildlife habitat, shooting potential and general farming landscape by the planting of small areas of woodland.

In the past decade they have also planted four main plantations and three-quarters of a mile of hedgerow, to provide corridors for wildlife in between the woods.

## Saplings growing

Many of the new hedges have saplings which are being allowed to grow into trees.

Mr. Briscoe said that trees felled in Queen Mary Wood had been converted into boards for use in the restoration of an ancient barn on the farm.

The total cost of producing the boards had been £290, 35 per cent of which had come from the Ministry of Agriculture, whereas the price of buying them would have been in the region of £3,000.

The boards are now stacked on the floor of the barn while they season before becoming the building's exterior cladding.

Mr. Briscoe said that coppiced timber from Queen Mary Wood was being used for fence rails and posts, and firewood was also sold.

It was hoped to sell coppiced hazel to thatchers for brooches, the pins which hold the thatch in place, said Mr. Briscoe.

Twelve ponds on the farm are being slowly cleared.

"We employ four people and woodland management, and farm building restoration is done in the winter at times when there is not much else to do," said Mr. Briscoe.

"So far the woodland side has proved economic and is not being a drain on our resources, in money or labour terms."

Some damage to the farm's woodland is caused by the presence of a small herd of wild red deer, a growing problem in Suffolk.

The man currently at the helm of the county's farm woodlands campaign is Mr. David Pengelly. He took over from Mr. Harry Barnett who had nurtured the scheme since its infancy.

As woodlands advisory

officer Mr. Pengelly draws up management plans for woodlands, and helps in the provision of grants for initial restoration work.

This year £9,000 is available from the county council for grant-aid, two-thirds of the money coming from the Countryside Commission.

Mr. Pengelly said the grant, 40 per cent of the cost up to a limit of £500 per farm, was for certain uneconomic operations including felling dead elms, thinning, coppicing, ride management, pond and glade reinstatement and planting.

He said there had been a change of attitude among some farmers towards their woodlands over the past few years. They now looked at them as assets rather than liabilities.

"We are trying to encourage farmers to use their own labour and equipment for woodland management. A lot of the woodland skills have been lost since woods become neglected," said Mr. Pengelly.

"The increase in public awareness of nature conservation has meant that many more farmers are looking for areas of the farm where they can actively carry out management for the benefit of wildlife," he said.

"However, the more economic woodland management becomes the greater chance there is that the woodland will survive into the future."

Since the campaign was launched, more than 150 management plans have been drawn up and restoration achieved in about 120 woods, covering 500 acres.

## Open lanes

It has also been responsible for nearly 200 acres of re-planting in 60 woods.

Twenty-four miles of rides, the open lanes through woods, have been widened or cleared of overhanging shrubs and trees. Deep shade is of no use to game birds or to wildlife.

The success of the Suffolk scheme was demonstrated when the Nature Conservancy Council used it as an example of what could become a national initiative.



Woodlands advisory officer Mr. David Pengelly, left, and farmer Paul Briscoe in the coppiced woodland at Parham. Pictures by John Kerr.



Farmer Paul Briscoe of Parham with oak planks cut from his own woods which will be used to restore a barn on the farm.