

CoppiceCuts

Spring 2007

For suppliers and users of coppice materials



Shedding light on coppice

The latest OCN coppicing course was packed with enthusiasts wanting to learn new skills

The Open College Network Coppicing course Level 1 and 2, which was held in Worcestershire in mid February, was a great success according to both students and tutors.

The five-day course was held at Hornhill Wood, a Worcestershire Wildlife Trust woodland reserve, located near to Droitwich Spa. The wood is one of the best examples of hazel coppice with standards in the West Midlands and provided an ideal venue for training. Seventeen candidates attended the course, were supported by two tutors Richard Wellings and Ron Smart, and the course organiser Richard Thomason.

The course was run as part of the Light is Life project, which aims to document and promote the unique system of coppicing that was practised by Worcestershire woodsmen within the area.



The five-day OCN course was a huge success with 17 students attending at Hornhill Woods in Worcestershire

Candidates undertook all the OCN units for Level 1 and 2 following the local traditional techniques. Bundled coppiced material was moved to the road gate with the help of Doug Joiner and, the star of the week, his horse Ella.

Images collected from the course will be used on a DVD and in a book that are being produced to record the

Worcestershire woodsmen's techniques and terminology and as a guide for good practice.

Members of the Worcestershire Coppice Network visited the wood at the end of the course to discuss the work and its relevance with issues facing the industry today. Although Hornhill Wood is one of the few remaining examples of hazel coppice in rotation within the West Midlands, the quality and quantity of material and the degree of biodiversity bears no resemblance to the woods that the Worcestershire woodsmen enjoyed working 100 year ago. The issues facing this wood and the relevance of using traditional techniques will be discussed in future articles.

If you would like further information on the Light is Life project or the Worcestershire Coppice Network please contact Richard Thomason on 01952 432769

Doug Joiner's Ella moved bundled coppice material to the road gate



COPPICE CUTTINGS

Garden crafts

Ruth Thompson is teaching various courses at the Garden Station this spring (www.gardenstation.co.uk, 01434 684391). There's Willow Wigwams and Plant Trainers on 19th April; Willow Spirals on 26th April. She is also running a Willow Wigwams course on 11th May at Shepherds Dene, Riding Mill, Hexham, Tyne & Wear (01434 682212).

Selling well

Bryan Smith at West Dean Woods Nature Reserve in West Sussex is reporting the sale of coppice products is going well. "There's been a big demand this season for hedging stakes and heavy-duty binders for continuous woven fencing, and we're racing to fill orders," he said back in February. "Since January we've been working on a cant of out-of-cycle hazel; it is hard work and all we are salvaging is firewood, but it is important to have a further acre of in-cycle coppice to give us two acres to work every eight years."

CoppiceCuts

Brought to you by the Green Wood Centre, CoppiceCuts aims to keep readers informed of developments at the GWC, while serving the coppicing community. So if you have any news or stories you'd like to share, please send them into the Smallwoods by email to coppicecuts@smallwoods.org.uk or by post to CoppiceCuts, The Hope, Ampney St Peter, Cirencester, Glos GL7 5SH. Thanks for your support.

Falling in love with hazel



Alan Hedger makes 'wigwam' plant supports from hazel

Alan Hedger explains how he established hazel coppice, and how he devised the radical idea of slowing growth of the tree he's come to love

My background is in computing and I had no experience of forestry, or even gardening, prior to my purchase of a 10-acre field outside the village of Swepestone in NW Leicestershire. My original idea was to buy an existing small wood and spend time contemplating the scenery. However those available were either too far from my home or stocked entirely with conifers. I have nothing against conifers, just that I prefer broadleaves. My wife then suggested that we should consider buying

farmland and plant our own wood. In 1999 we purchased our site via the good offices of the National Forest Company. A keen gardener herself, my wife agreed to help me with the planting of the field: in all we have planted around 8000 trees and shrubs.

Prior to purchasing the site I read all that I could about growing trees and creating a wood. However I found that all of the literature then available, although no doubt the result of generations of good experience, was concerned with new planting in the impoverished soils of existing woodlands and not for a fertile agricultural site such as mine.

My initial hopes of simply planting a few trees and then standing back and watching them grow serenely, and inevitably, into majestic titans did not survive the initial spring growth surge, let alone the sustained onslaught of determined and ruthless rabbits. With deep soil, good

light levels, a sheltered position and little browsing, hazel will grow into a large, multi-stemmed shrub around 6m in height. Typically, there will be a thick, contorted central trunk with an abundance of suckers growing from the base. New suckers will grow each year, thus producing a range of stems, of differing height and thickness, to each shrub, thus ensuring its continuity. As the canopy of a stand closes, the reduction in light will cause the smallest shoots to die off. Eventually some of the older stems will fall and create clearings, enabling more new shoots or seedlings to grow.

Planting and maintenance

Forestry Commission rules stated that to get the-then production subsidy, I had to plant at a rate of 2250 plants per hectare unless I agreed to plant less than 3 hectares, for which I only needed to plant at the rate of 1100 / hectare. After discussions with the Forestry Commission, I was allowed to apply for 2.95 hectares and planted at a rate of 1500 per hectare. This is because, although I wanted to plant at 2m spacings I also wanted lots of nice wide rides and glades; not realising all the nice mowing that I had in store.

I had read that years of compaction by heavy farm machinery would have created a hard 'pan' just below the normal ploughing depth. I therefore had my field sub-soiled, ploughed and harrowed by a contractor: to give the trees a good depth of soil in which to grow. Unfortunately, in my eagerness to plant I neglected to have a grass sward established: thus ensuring that we did all the first season's planting in Passchendaele.

When we planted the first batch of 300 hazel their protective plastic tubes had still not arrived. At that time I thought that if one didn't get the bare-rooted plants in the ground straight away they would all tragically die; so we planted them unprotected. The tubes duly arrived the next day so I immediately rushed out to put them onto the hazel. Sadly, overnight those dastardly rabbits had lain waste to my precious plants. In order to save what was left I spent the entire day, in a snowstorm, hammering in stakes and putting on the shelters.

I have since found that plastic tubes are not much protection against rabbits. If they can't get at the stems then they will just dig down and eat the roots. Hazel is even worse because the new shoots have an annoying habit of growing outside of the tubes, no matter how wide their

diameter. The larger tree shelters simply act as comfortable winter homes for mice; the trees inside being treated as some kind of emergency rations, leaving me to spend the following spring pulling out dead saplings. Furthermore, leaving the tubes on for too long, particularly for trees such as wild cherry (*Prunus avium*), risks causing the bark to rot and peel from the trunk. Spiral tree guards also cut into the bark and are very difficult to remove without further damage to the tree. One method that did appear to stop rabbits digging out the roots was to surround each tree with a ring of bamboo canes. The rabbits would scratch around the canes and, on finding no roots, move on. Unfortunately, they merely went to the next tree in the row. Eventually I decided that surrounding thousands of trees and shrubs with a dozen or more canes each was impossible.

After a couple of years I gave in and



Newly-cut hazel coppice. Notice how Alan retains some shoots to reduce vigour of growth

PHOTO: HEDGER



Female hazel flowers appear as the male catkins are opening

rabbit-fenced my entire site. It was the best decision that I have ever made: the effect on the hazel was nothing short of miraculous. Instead of miserable, stunted little shrubs I had hazel rods rocketing skywards in absolute abundance.

Coppicing

I made the initial coppice cut after about four years of growth. Following all that I had read about coppicing, I clear-cut all of the stems cleanly, as close

to the ground as I could. I even tried to make the cuts on a southward facing, 30-degree slope. The following year I had extremely vigorous, lush growth on all of my hazel stools. I was so proud. Then the first, 'unseasonable', storms set in and all of the new hazel stems promptly collapsed (Pic.2). The new shoots, being very close together, had rubbed against each other near to the base, damaging the bark. The masses of large leaves acted as 'sails' which the soft stems, with their damaged bases, could not support in the winds.

Mine is not a particularly exposed site. The problems seem to lie in its fertility and in my zealous management. I was doing everything I could to make the hazel rods grow quickly, and they did: rather too quickly. Now that the hazel are established, I do everything I can to slow the growth down. Most importantly, I do not clear-cut the stools: I leave as many of the small sticks as possible to grown on; I also leave one or two of the large rods.

I now make the coppicing cut about 6in above the ground, because cutting any lower causes new shoots to be produced from below ground and stimulates the production of a root system for each one, thus boosting growth even more. Leaving existing stems on the stools appears to reduce the amount of energy available to the new shoots. This seems to slow down both the quantity and height of the new growth next year. Fewer, shorter stems initially, eventually results in larger, stronger rods.

This approach has other benefits: a) I can see where the newly cut stool is and avoid it when I am mowing; and b) the stool has fruit at an earlier stage in the next cycle. This approach is not completely successful, as some of the uncut stems experience die-back, particularly those on the edge of sections and along rides. I have stopped coppicing trees on the outer two rows of each section, to act as a windbreak.

Another way to improve the internal rigidity of each stand against wind damage is to increase the stocking density. My aim is to have a maximum of 1m between plants, with only the access lanes having wider gaps than this. I have found that, whilst hazel will root freely from any dormant bud

in contact with soil (leaf mould which has fallen into the protective tubes is sufficient), it will not propagate from unrooted cuttings. Layering has been used traditionally but I find that it is not particularly reliable and I tend to keep tripping over the layered stems. I would not recommend that trees, especially hazel, be established from transplants. In my experience it is essential to

Alan is increasing density to reduce wind damage (Pic.2)



Wide glades have had an impact upon the Forestry Commission density guidelines, and increased Alan's mowing!

have a plantation properly fenced from browsing animals. When this has been done the best course is to plant seeds or nuts. I would still plant in rows for ease of maintenance and use a bamboo cane to mark the planting positions. An initial application of weedkiller is a good idea to suppress the growth of grass and weeds until the seeds have germinated; but after that weedkilling is unnecessary. Finally I would plant several seeds in each location as insurance against predation and the possibility that not all of the seeds will be viable.

Produce

My aim is to produce hazel rods of a quality acceptable for use in traditional crafts: hurdlemaking, hedgelaying, etc... I have tried my hand at these skills: in order to understand the requirements of my potential customers. I also make and sell 'wigwam style' plant supports, and other garden planters, out of hazel.



Alan recommends planting nuts, marked with bamboo canes

The hazel has produced a good crop of nuts this autumn. Enough for my wife to sell at the local WI Country Market, with enough left over for me to continue planting. Grey squirrels have not yet discovered us, possibly because our wood has no trees of sufficient size and we are isolated from any established woodland. When they do I can say goodbye to my hazelnut crop, as grey squirrels can digest them whilst they are still unripe.

The initial coppice cut from the stools yielded mainly thick twisted stems, which I turned into charcoal using a 40-gallon metal drum. Unfortunately, such was the lack of demand, and cheapness in DIY stores, that I could barely give the stuff away. I have now had a woodburning stove, with internal boiler, connected to the existing gas central heating system. I use all of the thicker stems, and everything else that I can lay my saw on, to give me lots of free hot water and heating, whilst retaining the advantages and convenience of the existing of gas system.

As a bonus, the ash from the fire is an excellent low-nitrate fertilizer for my wife's vegetable garden.

The methods Alan Hedger has used are his own, and can't necessarily be endorsed by SWA. If you'd like to comment on them please email us at coppicecuts@smallwoods.org.uk.

Bundling good tip

A teacher of willow courses, Ruth Thompson has a tip for bundling coppice materials



At Mickley Coppice in Tyne & Wear (above) I've found it's better to coppice a modest pile of rods and then sort them, rather than cutting huge swathes and then tripping over them trying to pull out the willow of different sizes.

To cut biomass willow, and sort it into piles of different lengths, cut an area of a few square metres, with extended loppers. Then pick up all the willow in a bundle near the butt ends, stand it upright and lower it to the ground so all butt ends are lined up. Then walk to the tip ends, and grab the tips (of the longest rods), and pull out of bundle and put in one pile. Take the next longest ends and put them in another pile, and so on. I usually end up with four or five piles, from longest to shortest. To do this efficiently you need a balance between cutting a bundle small enough to carry, and swapping between cutting and sorting to stop either job becoming tiring or boring.

Underwoodsman

John Waller and colleagues have a wide range of courses this spring and summer in Kent. There is Charcoal Making with John Shepherd on 22nd April and a Green Wood Weekend from 5th-6th May, run by Peter Jameson. John Waller is running a four-day Green Wood Workshop from 18th-21st May and a session on Tools on 9th June, at which he promises you can "get to grips with sharpening!". The day will be spent restoring old and damaged tools. For more information contact John on 01892 740303, by email at info@underwoodsman.co.uk or visit www.underwoodsman.co.uk.

Dorset coppice

The latest edition of the Dorset Coppice Group Newsletter reports on the opening of The Living Classroom in Bonsley Wood in April by the Princess Royal. "Bonsley Wood and the new building are a fantastic resource for the group," writes Pete Moor. "We now have the opportunity to run courses, have more school/

student visits, educate the public at open days, produce products and hopefully improve our businesses too." It has to be said, though, that the website, which is simple but effective (www.dorsetcoppicegroup.org.uk) could do with some updating!

Full membership of the Dorset Coppice Group costs £12, and you can join by contacting Mandy Joyce at Sturminster House, Market Place, Sturminster Newton, Dorset DH10 1AS, or call on 01258 472299.

Coppice products

The Green Wood Centre is running an OCN course in Coppice Products from 14th-18th May. It is part-funded by the Defra VTS scheme; call Beth to check your eligibility (01952 432769). On the course you will learn how to stack a charcoal kiln, and make a saleable product. There will be sessions on 'cleaving and weaving', which are used in fencing, hurdle-making, hedging, basketry, willow work and much more. Details from 01952 432769 or www.greenwoodcentre.org.uk.

GWC welcomes Ironbridge Woodland

The Green Wood Centre is embracing the history of its neighbourhood by branding itself as The Ironbridge Woodland Experience. Paths (below) have been improved through the coppiced woodlands so that visitors to the famous Severn Gorge can experience the relationship between woodlands and the historic industry. Historically coppiced woodlands fuelled industry before coal.

