

A Personal History of Butcher's Wood



Amanda picking flowers in Butcher's Wood in 1964.



Amanda still enjoying visiting the wood.

Butcher's Wood has been under the stewardship of the Woodland Trust since 1988 and provides open access to the public. As a partner to the Woodland Trust's Lost Woods of the Low

Weald and Downs initiative, Action in Rural Sussex have been acting locally to promote and coordinate local activities to benefit the volunteers, the woods and the visitors to it.

In the following interview, conducted by Nina Thaddeus and edited by James Huggett, Amanda Felix shares some thoughts about her lifelong experience of the woods. The text details how important it has been for her and her community's wellbeing, as well as the role that people can play so that the wood continues to benefit all.

Could you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about Butcher's Woods?

I'm Amanda and I've known these woods all my life. My grandparents bought the bungalow that I now live in when I was eighteen months old and we used to visit weekly so I knew the woods from a very early age. My grandfather would often take my brother and me for walks in the wood and once we had clambered through the hole in his garden fence, we entered the wonderful world of the wood. He really enjoyed it too; he went in there most days to have a walk around. It was a great treat to go into the wood with my grandfather. We had particular spots that we liked to go to, such as a couple of old railway rails across the stream with wooden planks across it that made a little bridge. I suppose the farmer had built it at some point. Several of the planks disappeared over time but we used to play on the bridge and my grandfather had a long wooden pole he used to steady himself. The Spring was a particularly lovely time. First you'd see primroses; in those days there were plenty of them and it wasn't illegal to pick a few and bring them back to put in a vase for your grandmother. Then the anemones would come out, followed by the bluebells. The bluebells were always this beautiful hazy blue carpet - that was always a special time in the wood. He taught us what the different trees were, as well as the flowers and birds. I remember being given a little bird book to identify what we were seeing. The first time I saw a badger was when my brother and I were in the wood unsupervised (we must've been a bit older) and it just trundled past us. In the middle of the day that's quite unusual and made it a very exciting moment.

There's a funny story. When my grandparents lived here, the field beyond the wood was farmland with cows grazing. One morning my grandparents woke up and found the garden full of cows. They'd come through the wood and broken through the fence into in my grandfather's garden and were eating his roses. My grandfather was quite shocked and there would have been quite some consternation at breakfast that morning! He wasn't terribly happy and the farmer had to come and repair the lawn and the fence that the cows had trampled down.

The wood at that point was privately owned by the Champion family, a very long-established land-owning family who live in the area. I don't know what they originally used the wood for but it had been replanted after the First World War and you can see that the oak trees in particular are often set out in lines. So, clearly the timber was used for the war effort, probably to prop up trenches, then the wood was replanted. The hazel was grown for coppicing, for whatever purposes they needed, probably agricultural hurdles etcetera. I guess the wood was a commercial enterprise.

After my grandparents died, I bought their bungalow in 1991 as it had very happy memories attached to it. It was a bit run down because my grandmother lived on her own after my grandfather died, so I had to renovate it and replant the garden over the years. It's been lovely to live somewhere which has family associations and now the Woodland Trust owns Butcher's Wood there is open access, which is fantastic. I have a garden gate and, like many of my neighbours, can go for a walk in the wood whenever. It's a wonderful backdrop to my garden. You can see the change of seasons throughout the year and the wildlife and birds that come with that. It's a special place to live beside and a great place to go for a walk when you want a little downtime.

The sounds of the wildlife here are wonderful. I'm not sure that we have nightingales in the wood, but they are close by. It was lovely hearing them last summer. I regularly hear owls and foxes calling and it's lovely to hear the wildlife when you're at home in bed with the window open.

Were you pleased when the Woodland Trust took up stewardship of Butcher's Wood?

I remember being very relieved the Woodland Trust bought Butcher's Wood as it meant that it would be well cared for and wouldn't be sold to a property developer. When you're used to this lovely backdrop you don't want to lose it. So that was very reassuring. I was aware that a neighbour was the voluntary warden and had set up a woodland group that did coppicing and clearance work during the winter. I was always interested in getting involved but I was commuting to work throughout the week so my weekends were spent trying to keep up with the house and garden. Although I never had the time to dedicate to the group whilst working, I always thought that I'd volunteer when I retired. I'm really glad I did. They are an interesting group of people: mixed ages, mixed backgrounds, all very enthusiastic. We meet for a couple of hours on a Saturday morning from November through to early February, depending on weather and season. If the bluebells are starting to come up, we don't want to trample them or compact the soil so we'll stop coppicing. If we've had a really cold winter and they're slow to appear, we carry on a little longer. It's enjoyable to be working physically in the wood as a team. We have a coffee break midmorning and that's our chance to have a little chat about what's happening with the wood. It's been a good way to meet more local people.

Can you tell us about the coppicing?

In Butcher's Wood we coppice hazel, which is fast growing and can block out light to the woodland floor. We set out an area to coppice and then move on to a different area next winter. As hazel grows tall and straight, with six or seven branches coming from the centre, we cut them low down at an angle so they will regrow. In the past, the poles would've been used for bean sticks or farmers might have used them for hurdles and fencing but now we tend to pile the thicker branches and we use the brush to line the edges of the paths.

We ask people to keep to the paths as otherwise the woodland soil becomes compacted, which prevents the growth of woodland flowers. The piled branches provide a wonderful habitat for creatures, who may build a nest in there in the spring or live there all year round. There is also a host of insects, which are a food source for different mammals and birds. The brush that we put along the paths is smaller but, again, it provides fantastic habitat.

Can you talk about the wildflowers in Butcher's Wood?

I'm not an expert but I remember there used to be many more primroses in the wood than there are today, so perhaps people picking them killed the plants. The bluebells are still plentiful and wherever we've coppiced more light reaches the woodland floor, so the next year you see a fantastic display of bluebells. The anemones are still strong and there are some wild orchids in the wood as well, which I don't remember seeing as a child, perhaps we just didn't spot them. I do wonder if picking those primroses when we were little had a detrimental effect, but it wasn't illegal then. I'm glad it is now so that everyone can enjoy them.

There used to be lovely displays of primroses on the London to Brighton railway line, which runs parallel to the wood but unfortunately the rail maintenance company has put aggregate along the railway banks. That's had a smothering effect on the primroses particularly and there's been a loss of habitat for many animals, plants and pollinators.

Do you think that climate change is having a detrimental effect on Butcher's Wood?

It hasn't been a cold winter and the bluebells are about an inch and a half to two inches in height already this year. Everyone knows climate change is having a terrible effect, but what I have noticed is the recent impact of the storms on the wood. We've had three storms within a week and quite a few trees have come down. Only two fell across paths and our volunteer group quickly dealt with those. However, the wet weather is also a problem because we're on heavy clay. The oak trees don't have deep roots and we have lost some due to the rain saturating the ground. A few silver birch trees also fell in the last couple of weeks but other trees such as hazel are more resistant. Hornbeam, for example, is very sturdy. So, to answer your question, the recent wind and rain have made a significant difference.

Have ash dieback and other diseases been a problem?

Ash dieback has been a major problem in the wood. We've had many ash trees severely affected but the Woodland Trust have been really on the ball in Butcher's Wood. Last year they decided to clear the affected ash trees and ran a local publicity campaign to let people know why this was going to happen. The Woodland Trust Site Manager, together with Action in Rural Sussex, organised a walk in August for local people to be shown the problem and to have the felling work explained to them. In September, contractors cleared over ninety per cent of the ash trees although they've left a couple to see if they have any resistance and if

they might survive. The contractors were sensitive to the woodland paths and to the public, roping off areas as they worked around the wood. The timber was left to dry and the trunks have been stacked neatly so that the timber can be extracted later.

What part did Butcher's Wood play for local people during lockdown?

In the first lockdown we had lovely weather and I was pleased to see that the wood was enjoyed. It was a challenging time for people and, although we worry about the bluebells being squashed, I think it probably saved a lot of people's sanity. We're very lucky that we live in a village surrounded by countryside and having access to the wood was hugely beneficial. I particularly enjoyed hearing families on their walks. It was lovely to hear the voices of little children and I am sure it was very important for adults too. I hope they look back at part of the lockdown in a positive way as it meant that they could spend time with their children, enjoying being outside together when normally they would be rushing to work. Since the lockdowns, people are continuing to walk through the wood and it has revived people's interest in going outside. So, although it has churned the paths up hugely, it's good that the wood is being used. It's very important for people's wellbeing and mental health.

What are your hopes or fears for the future of the wood?

The wood is protected; it's owned by the Woodland Trust. In the past my major fear would have been that it became a building plot. However, now I think it's well-managed and as a group of volunteers we have a very good relationship with the regional manager who comes to visit once or twice a year, depending on what we need and he's always available for advice. But the fact that we've got people who are wardens, who care for the wood and check it regularly, is encouraging. One or two of the members of the woodland coppicing group are getting older but there are new people who are showing interest whose gardens also back onto the wood. The wood will have an incredibly good future; I'm not worried about the fact that the ash trees have come down because that gives the opportunity for something else to grow. New trees and plants will thrive where something else has gone.

How can people get involved in volunteering with woodland management?

Our little group uses a village magazine published once a month. The warden used to publish an article in the magazine once a year, stating that we'd be coppicing and working in the wood. She mentioned the dates and if anyone was interested in helping, they could contact her. In general, I'm sure if you were to contact your regional Woodland Trust and say you're interested in joining a group, they would be delighted put you in contact with a wood near you. I know they're very keen to have volunteers. It could be tree planting, or coppicing, clearing brambles, etc. The Woodland Trust is reliant on volunteers so I'm sure that anyone who wanted to be involved could reach out to their local Woodland Trust for information.

