

Tottington Woodlanders is a small charity managing the hazel coppice in 13 acres of previously neglected, ancient woodland. The group has been working for 30 years and learning all that time. The initial driving force for setting up the group was the local council deciding to create conservation projects in the Adur valley.

The work parties meet every Sunday morning during the winter, from March clock-change to October clock-change. Each session has a nominated leader and First Aider.

We have 1-2 fires per plot, and they are kept to a square metre. More recently the fire is a tea-fire purely for warmth and to boil the kettle. To cope with large quantities of brash we build dead hedges. This provides an excellent alternative habitat and prevents the sudden release of carbon.

All the groups work force are volunteers. Working with volunteers presents a range of issues. Firstly, recruitment can be challenging. Thankfully the charity now has a steady workforce, providing 10-15 individuals every Sunday. There have been lean times and currently a better spell. The work must be adjusted to the number and ability of the people who turn up on the day; so, flexibility is essential. Families are encouraged to visit and talk to the workers. Young volunteers (13-18) are accepted provided they are supervised by an adult.

How we manage Tottington Woods

In the beginning, the cycle for cutting coppice was dictated by five-and ten-year management plans. This worked well in the early years, when cutting neglected and overstood coppice, but soon became untenable as the quality of the wood improved. Initially, we were working to an eight-year coppice cycle. This did not consider the actual conditions on the ground. This issue was further compounded by the shift in practice away from burning all the cut wood on site to selling product to raise funds to enable the group to be self-sufficient.

The group started selling woodland products such as beanpoles, pea boughs, stakes and hedging binders, the charity moved on to developing green woodworking skills and making added value items. This enabled visiting of local summer shows to demonstrate green woodworking techniques, promote the woodland and sell the crafted items.

By this stage there was a regular market for the product, and this further dictated the coppice cycle. There was no longer an imperative to cut the coppice to a prearranged plan, but rather to cut to satisfy the market. This allowed the coppice to be cut when it was market ready, rather than to an arbitrary plan. Some areas are barely ready for cutting in 12-15 years (due to over dense standard trees stealing light) whilst other areas are ready in five years.

The organisation is now fully able to pay for insurance, tools (including a small second-hand tractor and trailer), training and a range of incidentals. The landowner is very supportive and has supplied a shipping container to store equipment and constructed a compound to securely store cut product.

<https://www.tottingtonwoodlanders.org.uk/>
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/34961568074/>

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