

Restoring a Shropshire woodland

I can quite understand how woodlands fall into decline as a result of lack of management. When I was young my mother and I used to take the bus to my Aunt's house north of Shrewsbury. We used to pass this lovely old wood. Little did I know that about 50 years later I would be asked to manage it. The wood is a small Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland (12 Ha.) listed on the ASNW inventory and is a typical example of a wood that has lost its way. It is indicative of many unmanaged small woods throughout the Marches comprising a total area of 28,000 Ha, mostly situated on farms.

In the first instance, I had to draw up a Forestry Commission-approved plan for the new owners. I didn't know where to start as so much needed doing in the wood. Firstly, there was the rhododendron that was beginning to take over the understorey along the boundary fence-line. As a boy, I remember admiring the attractive blossoms in the wood opposite and thought nothing of it until I saw how much of the old wood itself had become invaded by the wind-borne seed from across the road. I realised something had to be done before the rhododendron took over completely. Rhododendron acts as a host for the disease *Phytophthora ramorum*, which affects larch. Firstly, I thought of cutting the rhodo and stem injecting the stumps with herbicide but the branchwood was a tangled mess and so dense it would have taken forever to clear, so about 4 years ago I brought in a contractor with a mulcher. Although this was expensive, the mulcher flailed the branchwood and grubbed out the whole root system. The whole block was cleared within about 10 days. The mulcher did a great job and the rhodo is ALMOST gone. I say almost because, would you believe that right up until this year I was still treating small clumps of foliar regrowth with herbicide, such is the nature of this invasive beast.

Talking of critters, the previous managers, who had the idea of felling small coupes of oak and replanting with mostly sweet chestnut, birch and oak, had failed to take appropriate action against grey squirrels. When I took over, approximately all of the sweet chestnut stems had had their bark stripped and their leaders topped. One of my earliest tasks was to girdle some of these irrecoverable trees, leaving some "sacrificials" so as to limit further browsing damage on some of the remaining intact oaks. Squirrel control has since been introduced annually with positive results.

The plan is to restore this beautiful oak woodland to how I remembered it with all of its rich native flora and fauna. There is still a lot of work to do to get it back into shape. To be involved in restoring an integral part of my history, is a real honour, but it requires embracing the changes and making appropriate and timely interventions.

A preparation harvest of 25% of the poorer quality oak was completed in 2014 and now it's a question of controlling the bracken and bramble with annual herbicide treatments until the next mast year occurs when I shall be further opening up the stand and removing another 50% of the volume so as to bring on the next generation of oaks. Of course, this whole area will have to be fenced off from deer and the better stems of the oak that had been previously planted in the 90s will have to be pruned and respaced at the appropriate time. Oh and then there's a native hedgerow to go in to replace that rhodo along the fence-line...

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