

**Case Study**

# **Restoring ancient woodland in Mid Wales**

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**WOODLAND  
TRUST**

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The restoration at Coed Mitchen is not only bringing wildlife back to the woodland, but also allows owner Nick Burton to train others to extract timber using serious horse power.

Ceunant Melin-y-Grug is tucked away among the rolling Mid Wales hills, not far from the town of Llanfair Caereinion. The ancient woodland covers just over 11 hectares (27 acres), and for centuries it was dominated by sessile oak and birch. In the past century, it has been planted with conifers including spruce and larch. Today, only a few broadleaved trees remain.

Known locally as Coed Mitchen, the wood is now under the care of owner Nick Burton, who is using his own horse-logging business to extract the felled conifers and bring the wood under sustainable management. The current stand of conifers was planted about 25-30 years ago, and the continuation of tightly packed shady spruce on the site has meant that the native ancient woodland flora and fauna have continued to diminish.

Nick recently purchased the site with a view to restore it to its former glory. He wanted to produce a management plan to better enable this work to progress, but Coed Mitchen is a challenging site to restore.

Located high in the hills of Mid Wales, there is a real risk from windthrow and inclement weather, which can significantly impact the intensity of thinning operations. On the positive side, where windblow has already occurred, the fallen trees are helping to naturally create more structure, and encourage the variety of species within the woods to increase and flourish.

And the weather isn't the only consequence of Coed Mitchen's location: parts of the wood are difficult for vehicles to access, and this can be problematic when it comes to removing timber.

## Reaping the benefits

Nick hopes that by working to restore his woodland, not only is he helping native broadleaves to thrive once again, he is also providing a richer habitat for wildlife, and encouraging woodland mammals, birds and invertebrates to return to his wood.

The site also gives him the opportunity to use his own horse-logging business (Powys Forest Horses) to extract the timber. By using a horse, he is able to reach all parts of the site, including the areas that are unsuitable or inaccessible for vehicles. The horses drag the timber straight to the roadside, where it is stacked, and loaded onto lorries, allowing Nick to sell his produce by the lorry-load (25 tonnes at a time). The timber is cut into 8ft gate posts, 7ft and 5ft 7in fence posts, and some 16ft sawlogs. By working in this way, Nick can not only get



the most out of his wood, both economically and as part of the restoration process, but he can also practice his own skills. As part of this, he has recently opened up Coed Mitchen to demonstrate to and train other horse-loggers.

## Developing the plan for restoration

The Woodland Trust's ancient woodland restoration (AWR) project officer, Alastair Hotchkiss, was able to offer Nick support in a number of ways. The first was by helping him draw up a restoration plan, so that he could prioritise what work he'd need to undertake in the next five years. As part of this, Alastair carried out a woodland restoration survey, identifying remnant ancient woodland features that had survived the site's coniferisation, including plants that are indicative of ancient woodland, such as slender St. John's wort, common cow-wheat, and hairy wood-rush. He also recorded mature ash trees growing alongside the stream, with many of them supporting tree barnacles (*Thelotrema lepadinum*), an ancient woodland lichen.

Once the survey was complete, Alastair was able to draw up a plan for the wood. It divided the woodland up into compartments of easily manageable size, and a programme of recommendations that Nick could carry out as necessary. As well as this, Alastair and the Trust investigated current grant options and helped Nick get the land registered with the Welsh Government so that Coed Mitchen would be eligible for future grant applications.

Windthrow is a significant issue at the site, and to help combat its effects and maximise thinning work in such conditions, Alastair advised that all thinning should begin cautiously, commencing in the corner of the site that is most sheltered from strong winds and working towards the leading edge.

Nick has been able to reap both economic and conservation benefits from his wood. It has generated income through the sale of two 25 tonne loads of timber to a local fencing contractor, and though the restoration is still in its infancy, the wood is already becoming more structurally diverse. In the open areas, native ground flora has the chance to re-establish, and butterflies such as the speckled wood are already enjoying the increased sunlight. As the restoration process gathers pace, Nick hopes that birds such as the wood warbler, pied flycatcher and redstart – all summer visitors to adjacent oak woodland – will move into his wood and breed there.

“I have become increasingly impressed by the work of the Woodland Trust over the last few years, most recently in my capacity as a new owner of woodland, where I have received invaluable help and advice from one of your PAWS restoration officers.”

Nick Burton

### The future

In the future, further thinning will help to transform the wood into a continuous cover forestry system, avoiding the need for large-scale clearfell operations. Instead, it will be possible to prioritise thinning where it will have the most positive impact on restoration, and selectively fell trees as they are marketed. At the same time, it will be possible to open up the areas of woodland where native plants are starting to thrive, allowing more light to penetrate the forest floor.

Nick and the Woodland Trust are also working to investigate potential future grant schemes to help fund further infrastructure within the wood, including upgrades to the tracks. As well as this, in Spring 2015, they set up a monitoring system to provide evidence of how well the active management is working. Nick is keen to observe changes to the trees, including their height, diameter and growth. These same variables will be used to record changes to vegetation, birds and other wildlife, providing data that can be measured over time.



## How the Trust can help

Bringing damaged ancient woodland back into restoration requires careful management. Thanks to funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Woodland Trust is working to offer landowners and managers, professional support and training to sustainably manage and restore their woodlands.

If you own a plantation on an ancient woodland site we can help you discover its history, and provide independent and practical advice on topics including:

- How restoration can complement your woodland business and interests
- How restoration can support forestry certification
- Making the most of grant funding

### FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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