

Ancient Woodland Restoration

Background information

Natural treasures lie damaged and forgotten in more than a quarter of the UK's woods. Unless we act now we will lose them for ever.

Our ancient trees, forests and woodlands provide us with a unique link to our past. They give us intriguing insights into how we used to live and tell lost stories and legends of our ancestors. Ancient woodland is land that has been continually wooded since at least AD1600; some ancient woodland may even be a link back to the original "Wildwood" that covered the country around 10,000 years ago after the last ice age. Today, it contributes substantially to our natural and cultural heritage.

Ancient woodland is also our most precious habitat. It is scarce and irreplaceable and supports 232 of our rarest and most vulnerable species. However, ancient woodland is under increasing threat and today covers only 2% of the UK (around 450,000ha), making it a priority within the UK's Biodiversity Action Plan for preservation and restoration.

Almost half of the ancient woodland we have left is in need of restoration.



Contrast of light and dark; ancient woodland (left) conifer plantation (right)

In the years following World War 2 much of our ancient woodlands were felled and replaced with non-native conifers. This coniferisation was carried out on a large scale by the public and private sectors as a result of a policy drive to replenish the national timber reserve and to improve the economics of ancient woodlands.

At the time there was a lack of understanding of the biodiversity value of these important forests. Dense shade-casting conifers often smothered the remaining ancient woodland fauna and flora, resulting in the decline of many of these species.

The evidence base

Research by Oxford University and the Woodland Trust, has shown that some remnant features of the ancient woodland habitat survived, and that by slowly removing shading conifers and enabling light to gradually penetrate the woodland canopy, we can encourage specialist species to recover from their fragile state and reverse years of damage. To view the scientific evidence [visit our website](#).

Why does it matter?

It is the only way in which the area of semi-natural woodland with ancient characteristics can be increased. The UK is one of the least wooded parts of Europe with 13% woodland cover, only 2% is ancient woodland (around 450,000 hectares). Of this surviving ancient woodland, just over half survives naturally, the rest has been felled and planted with exotic conifers or damaged by invasive species like *Rhododendron*. These degraded ancient woodlands still retain many of the components of ancient woodland communities, including hidden biodiversity within deadwood and undisturbed forest soils.

Although habitats may have been damaged by plantations, they have not been destroyed. However, the longer action is delayed, the less likely it is to succeed. This is a time-limited opportunity because many of these planted ancient woodlands (PAWS) are increasingly due to be felled again and could be replanted with a further crop of conifers, compounding the damage done to wildlife that remains.

What's our role?

The Woodland Trust is a leader in this area of sensitive restoration. Increasingly now we are looking to work with other private landowners who own over 125,000 Ha of conifer plantations and whom we can assist with advice and guidance on the practicalities, processes, costs and funding, as well as the benefits of sensitive ancient woodland restoration.

The Trust will undertake a major UK-wide initiative to facilitate the restoration of our ancient woodland habitats. Working with a wide range of landowners and organisations within ten priority restoration areas around the UK, the project has identified the barriers that exist to prevent ancient woodlands being restored and the most effective means of delivery in these areas.

Many landowners have had little opportunity to learn about the benefits of a gradual woodland restoration approach. Without this opportunity there is considerable threat to our ancient woodland resource from unsympathetic and damaging management practices such as clear felling or from a lack of any management activity. The ancient woodland restoration project will work collaboratively with owners to help establish positive management and restoration techniques that will in turn deliver not only healthy, thriving restored ancient woodlands, but a range of benefits for people too.

The ancient woodland restoration project signifies a new approach to a large and difficult issue that will bring far-reaching and remarkable positive impacts that will change our wooded landscapes forever. It will signify a massive "step change" in the level of ancient woodland restoration activity across the UK.

Project aims

- 🌳 Establish contact with c. 1,200 landowners across the ten priority areas and provide them with advice and support on how to restore their plantations on ancient woodland sites
- 🌳 Hold a series of education and training workshops attended by over 2,400 people
- 🌳 Deliver bespoke training for woodland specialists

- 🌳 Deliver a volunteer training programme, engaging at least 64 volunteers
- 🌳 Deliver a programme of public talks engaging 11,500 people
- 🌳 Establish a programme of training and tools to enable 40 local groups and Woodland Trust volunteers to undertake research and survey work
- 🌳 Develop an AWR online "information hub"
- 🌳 Produce a new management guide for owners and managers
- 🌳 Deliver a range of project events, including conferences and webinars.

What will the project cost?

The overall cost of the project over five years is £2.92 million. We have now secured a £1.9 million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and £490,000 from volunteer in-kind support and partner organisations but we still need to close a **£530,000 funding gap**.

Thanks to the generosity of our members and supporters we are well on the way to reaching our target - but we're not there yet. Please help us by donating today and become part of the largest ever woodland restoration project.

When will it start?

The project will not get fully underway before we have completed the recruitment of Project Officers for each area later this year and fully developed a hub of information and toolkits to be available for landowners, woodland managers and anyone else interested. It is anticipated that the full project launch will take place in the New Year (2014).

How much ancient woodland is there to restore?

There are some 228,000 hectares of planted ancient woodland sites across the UK. The division between countries and the amount in public ownership vary and are given in the table below:

	Hectares 000's	% of UK total	% (ha) of PAWS held by the public forest estate
England	140	61	38 (53,200ha)
Scotland	59	26	52 (30,680ha)
Wales	28	12	46 (12,880ha)
Northern Ireland	1	1	53 (530ha)
Total	228		42.67% (97,290ha)

Are these Woodland Trust woods, or in private ownership?

The woods we are targeting with this project are in private ownership: and through the project we aim to engage with at least 1200 landowners.

Are private landowners going to be contributing to restoration costs on their land?

Yes, we anticipate they will contribute towards the restoration costs through the potential income from timber extracted as part of the restoration process. In addition, they may be able to access forestry grants to support the restoration work. The project will not directly fund restoration work on private land but provide the necessary training and support to enable landowners, contractors and countryside professionals to undertake successful restoration of ancient woodland.

Where are the ten project areas?

The project areas are distributed throughout the UK:

-  Great Glen and Three Firths
-  Cairngorms and Hinterland
-  South and West Yorkshire
-  Clwyd
-  Powys
-  Western Mid Wales
-  Herefordshire and West Worcestershire
-  Exmoor and West Devon
-  Low Weald
-  Northern Ireland

How did we decide on the 10 project areas?

The project areas were prioritised on the basis of where the greatest concentrations of planted ancient woodlands were in the country, that weren't already covered by existing restoration projects, and where we had partners to work with.