

Case Study

Improving site access for harvesting and sustainable woodland management

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**WOODLAND
TRUST**

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Accessing ancient woodland sites for restoration, harvesting and sustainable woodland management is one of the biggest problems faced by landowners, woodland agents and contractors due to the narrow rural roads and delicate, irreplaceable remnant features. Fingle Woods in Devon has undergone multiple entrance improvements to allow easy access for timber harvesting and the general public.

Assessing the local infrastructure

The restoration at Fingle Woods is one of the biggest large-scale restoration projects currently managed by the Woodland Trust and National Trust, making it unique in terms of area, timescale and public profile.

The 419 hectare site, purchased in autumn 2013, is recorded as being wooded since 1192. Past harvesting operations only achieved around 600 tonnes per annum which was felt insufficient to maintain the commercial viability of the crops and ensure they are worked at suitable thinning intervals. This was principally due to poor site access for timber-extracting lorries. Once restoration planning was complete, the aim was to increase the annual thinning yield to circa 3,000 tonnes per annum and return all the younger crops to a five-yearly thinning cycle. This required an evaluation of how to improve haulage access.

“As a result of these infrastructure improvements we are now able to bring articulated vehicles onto site which can accommodate larger loads of timber and longer sawn logs, increasing the value of the products we are harvesting while reducing the overall haulage costs.”

Mark Williams, Euroforest

As public access is essential to both the Woodland Trust and the National Trust, the thinning work around the track beside the river Teign, the most popular access route, was considered a priority for enabling restoration work to start. The view was that if this area could be completed it would not be necessary to return here for a long time, allowing uninterrupted public access. The most appropriate forest roads were selected and the relevant access points assessed to discover if gateways were up to standard in terms of surfacing, drainage and turning/loading space.

Key Facts

- Accessing the site from a completely different direction and associated improvements to the road network for larger articulated lorries has reduced the haulage cost by £2 - £3 per tonne.
- The Forestry Commission Woodfuel Woodland Improvement Grant was used to cover 60 per cent of the cost of entrance improvements.
- A civil engineer designed the improvements to the forest entrances to meet FC WIG requirements.
- It is estimated that the costs will be recovered after the first two to three years of harvesting operations.
- In 2015/16 2,602 tonnes of timber will be harvested from Fingle Woods compared to an average of only 585.2 tonnes per annum between 2003 and 2012.



Before Halls cleave improvements for lorry access



After Halls cleave improvements for lorry access

With the existing forest road network generally only able to facilitate smaller haulage vehicles, an improved network had to be designed for larger articulated lorries. It was calculated that by allowing larger haulage vehicles to enter these areas, the cost of haulage would be reduced by £2 - £3 per tonne and more timber could be extracted from the woodland on a regular basis.

The rural public road system was also assessed for its suitability for timber haulage. One of the veteran oak trees, situated at a major road junction in the nearby village of Cheriton Bishop, was restricting the space needed by haulage vehicles. The key was to take an alternative approach by accessing the site from the south instead, which involved widening the road junction. This was accomplished by using part of our land to accommodate the large turning circle required by articulated vehicles when negotiating the narrow corner at the woodland entrance.

Funding the improvements

The Forestry Commission Woodfuel Woodland Improvement Grant (FC WIG) was used to cover 60 per cent of the cost of entrance improvements. This grant was available to all private landowners until 2014, but funding for entrance improvements is still accessible via the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS). Following a successful funding application, the gateway improvements were surveyed and designed to meet the FC WIG standards.

Taking advice from the planning authority, the gateway improvements were packaged into small distinct geographical groups, two at a time. This eased the complexity of each application, preventing any potential delay and allowing the work to proceed in logical stages. It also helped to break down the tendering process to suit the capacity of local contractors carrying out the work.

Improvement works on the two main entrances between Clifford Bridge and Willingstone Cottages have also taken place and a full ecological assessment was conducted. To allow for the large turning circle of haulage vehicles upon entry to the site, the earth bank was widened significantly and native shrubs were replanted to maintain the natural habitats. The four main forest entrances were completed in winter 2014 and the harvesting work began on schedule.

Thanks to these entrance and access improvements, the harvesting at Fingle Woods is operating more sustainably and in 2015/16 over 3,000 tonnes of timber will be harvested from the woodland.

How the Trust can help

Restoring damaged ancient woodland requires careful management. Thanks to funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Woodland Trust is offering landowners and managers free, 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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Before Mardon down improvements for oversize machinery



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