

# Restoring Ancient Woods as Compensation

## Why we need to restore ancient woods

Ancient woodland is land that has been continuously wooded since at least 1600. Over centuries it has developed rich communities and assemblages of plants and animals, and a wealth of historical and archaeological interest, including clues to past land use and management practice. Ancient woods are some of our most valuable wildlife habitats, and many are beautiful places to visit.

During the last century, due to a government drive for timber self-sufficiency after the World Wars, many ancient woods were felled and replanted, often with non-native conifer species.

These Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) suffered through the impacts of harvesting and drainage on their soils and hydrology. The dense shade of fast-growing conifers suppressed the sensitive flowers and other plants associated with ancient woodland. In other ancient woods, rhododendron or other game cover shrubs have been introduced and have a similar smothering effect.

However, these woods have potential to be restored to something like their former glory. Remnant features of the original ancient woodland remain: veteran trees that escaped felling; archaeological sites and features; ancient woodland soils; and “hotspots” of ancient woodland flora in areas where shading is less dense.



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Restoration of PAWS is a target under UK biodiversity policy. Maintaining and enhancing the biodiversity of these woods is a requirement under principles of sustainable forest management and is also a Government commitment.

However, it can be costly for landowners to carry out restoration, which is best done by gradually thinning and felling conifers to alter light levels so that ancient woodland remnants are given time to recover and expand.

## Ancient woodland restoration and HS2

Restoring PAWS is the only way to increase the area of ancient woodland with semi-natural characteristics in the UK, and is one of the most important things we can do for woodland biodiversity. Almost 50 per cent of the ancient woodland that exists in the UK is PAWS.

While PAWS might be deemed to be in “poor condition” these sites are actually vital reservoirs of biodiversity and archaeology, and Government planning guidance states that they are irreplaceable, and should be treated in the same way as Ancient Semi Natural Woodland (ASNW – woodland that has evolved naturally). Where we cannot prevent loss, we would therefore wish to see compensation for loss of PAWS on a par with that for any ASNW (see our other factsheets).

However, restoration of PAWS could also form part of a compensation package for loss of or damage to ancient woodland (or other woodland habitat) along the route of HS2. Where it is not possible to create

suitable new native woodland, or where restoration of PAWS might be more of a priority – or even as part of a mixed package to create a network of habitats that are “bigger, better and more joined up”<sup>1</sup> – compensation proposals could include provision of support for landowners to carry out sensitive, appropriate restoration of their PAWS.

Where restoration of one ancient wood is offered as compensation for loss of another area of ancient woodland, the ratio of areas should be high, in the same way that it should be high for new planting as compensation, since ancient woodland is an irreplaceable habitat (see our factsheet on compensation).

## What does restoration entail?

Landowners can find out more about restoring PAWS from our practical guide.<sup>2</sup> The Trust also works in partnership with others to provide advice on restoration. Contact us for more information.

Restoration is not simply about returning a conifer plantation back to native woodland. It is about securing and enhancing those important features of an ancient wood that have been damaged, and creating conditions in which they can flourish in the future. For each PAWS, the management required to achieve this may be different, depending on the species planted, the conditions onsite, and the quality and quantity of remnant features.

Because restoration of PAWS requires great sensitivity and usually a gradual approach, it will generally incur a financial cost, even where the trees removed can be sold for timber.

To make it attractive for landowners to carry out this type of conservation management, additional funds can be helpful, and including restoration as part of a compensation package for developments like HS2 can fulfil this need.

## References

1. Lawton, J.H., Brotherton, P.N.M., Brown, V.K., Elphick, C., Fitter, A.H., Forshaw, J., Haddow, R.W., Hilborne, S., Leafe, R.N., Mace, G.M., Southgate, M.P., Sutherland, W.J., Tew, T.E., Varley, J., & Wynne, G.R. (2010) *Making Space for Nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network*. Report to Defra.
2. Woodland Trust (2005) *The conservation and restoration of plantations on ancient woodland sites: a guide for woodland owners and managers* <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/pdf/policy-and-campaigns/woodland-restoration/paws-guide-09.pdf>



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