

Woodland wonder set to soar

Doug and Claire King-Smith have spent seven years regenerating a pocket of diseased Dartmoor woodland but now face a planning battle that could mean a devastating end to their enterprise, writes CHARLOTTE DEAR



The Hillyfield is 45 acres of wooded tranquillity, biodiversity and ingenuity

JUST SECONDS from the busy A38 lies The Hillyfield, 45 acres of wooded tranquillity, biodiversity and ingenuity. Slopes of ancient forest give way to the serene River Harbourne where dragonflies dance in dappled sunlight and a timber bridge leads across to a sun-soaked organic meadow of grazing sheep, clucking maran hens, productive hives and a nursery of seedling fruit trees.

At one corner of the meadow is a canvas canopy, where one volunteer is taking a much-earned tea break from splitting firewood in the blazing sun, while in the next field two young WWOOFers are busy lugging timber to the mobile sawmill, which, thanks to a network of skilled local makers, will later become somebody's garden shed, patio bench or raised bed.

"I've always loved wood, but I came to it backwards," explains owner Doug-King-Smith, "rather than from the seed up, I admired the finished product before working my way to the roots."

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Doug fell head over heels with the site in 2007 but was at the time working at Bowden House, so would volunteer at The Hillyfield twice a week to help thin the larch. A keen sculptor, Doug set up The Woodshed, a community artspace at Bowden House where he met his wife Claire, owner of Ola Chiropractic in Totnes, and, having introduced her to his real passion, the couple bought The Hillyfield two years later. "Untouched for 35 years, when we arrived it was like walking through a jungle steeped in un-thinned woodland and carpeted by cherry laurel."

Phytophthora ramorum, a vicious disease that can affect 150 species, was found in the Japanese Larch, while Chalara Fraxinea threatened the ash. With the help of Rupert Lane, senior woodland officer at Dartmoor National Park for 29 years, Doug and Claire wrote a 25-year forestry plan to fell the



Top left: Doug and Claire King-Smith **Top right:** Wood sculpture features heavily at the Hillyfield **Left:** The Hillyfield is 45 acres of wooded tranquillity, biodiversity and ingenuity **Right:** Woodland skills are being put to good effect

diseased trees and re-plant with native stock to create a diverse, well-managed woodland that could withstand future disease and encourage biodiversity. "It has been a serious labour of love, but I hope that today, seven years later, we've reached the top of a very steep climb," explains Doug.

In this relatively short space of time Doug and Claire have transformed this once neglected site into a land of promise, not only for the couple and their two small boys, but for the wider community, local businesses and, hopefully, the future of sustainable woodland regeneration on Dartmoor.

Doug explains: "The aim is to make a living by selling wood, which has meant investing in expensive machinery. But simply growing trees and chopping them down doesn't make any money; it's only when you turn the tree into firewood, planks

Logging on to new idea

Doug will soon be launching his new product, The Rocket Log, a free-standing flaming candle made from 100% sustainable home-grown timber. Each log is hollowed out by hand using a chainsaw to create a blazing centre-piece, perfect for outdoor gatherings and ceremonies.

rocketlog.co.uk

or products that the value is added."

Keen to support other local businesses, the couple have planted nine varieties of willow for nearby basket makers, sell eggs to the local community and plan to supply their apples to a neighbouring cider maker. For Doug and Claire, education is a crucial part of the Hillyfield vision, and, once the felling of infected timber is complete, they hope to welcome local primary schools for afternoons of forestry skills and games: "What we'd like to impart on children is an understanding of cycles."

This is taken one step further at the bi-annual Woodland Olympics, an action-packed day of music, craft, wood chopping relay races, wild cookery demonstrations and squirrel stew washed down with locally-brewed ale. "Having launched in 2012, last year we welcomed 300 visitors – it's a fantastic way of combining the productivity of the forest and the skills needed to sustain it. We'll also be the only woodland on Dartmoor to take part in Open Farm Sunday on 11 June and we'll be celebrating woodland culture at the South Brent Wood Fair on 9 September." This uniting of community epitomises Doug's so-called 'benefit stacking', the process of building an enterprise through mutually beneficial opportunities for local businesses, individuals and families.

Sadly, the future of The Hillyfield is uncertain as Doug now faces a planning battle with Dartmoor National Park Authority that has, rather than championing the cause, issued enforcement notices against a wood drying barn and machinery store. Without these unobtrusive structures, both the crucial tree management and Doug's firewood business – for which he would be offering employment – would grind to a halt.

However, thanks to a Crowdfunder Appeal and incredible support from the local community, Forestry Commission and numerous experts, Doug and Claire have successfully raised the £35,000 needed to stand up in court in March and hopefully safeguard the future of sustainable woodland management and its many social, economic and educational strands. ♦

Thehillyfield.co.uk

Savehillyfield.co.uk

'A COMPLICATED ISSUE' SAYS DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK

In a statement to Devon Life, Dartmoor National Park responded to the issues raised by Doug as follows:

"The site and development at Hillyfield is complicated, by legal requirements around what is reasonably required for forestry purposes and what does not need formal planning permission. We

have told the owner that he needs planning permission for the buildings he has erected on the site. He disputes this.

"The Authority indicated to Mr King Smith that a building, for the storage of machinery and equipment might, on its own, be acceptable and that he could apply for just one. We do not consider a building for the

storage and drying of timber is reasonably necessary for the purposes of forestry.

"As for the residential use of the land whilst temporary seasonal use is allowed you don't need to live on the land all year round to look after the woodland. "There are structures on the land, such as the Yurt, caravans and van bodies which, are not

reasonably necessary for the management of the land.

"Mr King Smith could make a planning application for his proposals, but he has chosen not to do so. We had no option other than to serve enforcement notices, as people cannot simply build where they like within a National Park without the relevant permissions."