



Coppicing in Dorset

What is Coppicing?

Coppicing woodlands is a truly sustainable practice involving the harvesting of the Underwood species i.e. hazel; while maintaining the higher canopy through the careful stewardship of larger standards such as oaks.

For thousands of years man has made good use of this natural resource, discovering that many rods would grow from the stump of a tree he had previously felled. Coppice stools or stools are completely self-renewing and capable of living indefinitely as long as they are not overshadowed by timber trees.

In numerous Dorset woodlands there are stools up to a thousand years old. This is a completely sustainable form of management as in many cases these stools are as productive now as when first coppiced. It can be stated that our woodsmen forefathers were the first true conservationists; harvesting poles yet preserving their woodlands without the need for planting.

Dorset has a particularly strong connection with this type of woodland, as a glance at any local map will reveal with the prevalence of woods named "... Coppice". However, a closer inspection of such named woods exposes an alarming trend with many historic coppice sites in the county now being seriously neglected or worse grubbed out.

The reason for this decline can be attributed to a loss in the traditional market for coppice products; due to changes in tastes, the plastic revolution and cheap poor quality imports. The woodsmen of Dorset are seeking to reverse this process through the promotion of their skills and the products they supply.

"A WOOD THAT PAYS IS A WOOD THAT STAYS."

Coppicing History

Dorset Woodland

Many of Dorset's woods are adapted for the traditional management of coppicing. Less than 10% of the area of Dorset is woodland, of this 2-3% can be described as ancient.

Before the second half of the 18th century woods were rarely planted and depended on natural regeneration. Planting of broad-leaved trees and conifers became popular during the Victorian period. Dorset's woods were heavily exploited during both World Wars, producing valuable quantities of timber. Conifers were later planted as replacements.





Recently there has been a change in attitude, with more emphasis on conservation. Woodlands are being managed and regularly coppiced, and replanting programmes including broad-leaved trees. This has a great impact on the environmental issues with the return of wild flowers, and providing rich habitat for wildlife.

Working Life

Before the industrial revolution, Dorset's woods were its most important source of raw material. Nearly every trade and craft relied on its supply of wood. Yesteryear's woodsmen did not have the advantage of transport that our woodsmen enjoy today, and getting to the wood was either walking or a bicycle ride. So many would have rose by moonlight, to get an early start at the copse. They would probably have hid their heavy tools under leaves or behind a certain tree.

Wages were similar to agricultural rates, but with the bonus of fewer working hours at the weekend. The other benefit was free wood. Self-employed men could earn considerably more depending on how long and hard they grafted. With the exception of the large woodlands where men worked in teams, woodsmen worked in isolation. Most woodsmen started young, working in the coppice from a very tender age, sometimes as young as eight or nine. They would work with their Father as soon as they could leave school.

Their training would have been a very, long and slow process, starting with the most basic of skills. Speed and accuracy was essential, and each job would have to be performed to the Father's exacting specifications. The actual completion of say a hurdle by this young apprentice could have taken up to 7 years of training. As in all industries there were good and bad years, a good year meant high demand for their products. Bad years, a shortage of work and woodsmen and craftsmen undercutting each other's price to earn a living. This lack of organisation within the woodland industry was the route to their demise.

Coppicing Now

Woodland Trades

Today's woodsmen have better facilities, vehicles that are capable of access to the woods each season, slighter less working hours, and better tools for the job. They have to now encounter different problems that our Yesterdays woodsmen did not have, such as less demand for their products with the increase in choice such as plastic. One of the biggest threats to their livelihood is from cheap foreign imports.

Some coppice workers tend to lead quite isolated lives, often tucked away deep in the woods with few people knowing of their existence, some travel daily to the same woodland that they have worked all their lives, while others work a different wood each season. But whatever our lifestyle we are all committed to promoting the coppice industry and to informing landowners of the importance of having the traditional coppice woodlands firmly back in production.





Environment

The majority of our native and naturalised hardwood trees can be coppiced. These include hazel, ash, oak, birch and chestnut which can be converted into a range of products encompassing; fencing, furniture, firewood, walking sticks, thatching spars and charcoal.

The members of the Dorset Coppice Group as well as producing the above, continue to develop new innovative designs for the home and garden. There is a direct link between the purchase and use of these products and the conservation of the wonderful habitats that coppice woodlands provide.

Almost every wood of which the coppice stools still remain is worth preserving, normally re-coppicing is the best conservation policy for it brings to life the traditional working of the wood and all its plants and animals.

Broad-leaved woodlands represent the most diverse collection of plants and animals in any habitat outside the tropics, and the cyclical nature of coppice growth is vital to countless forms of wildlife ecosystems.

Newly cut coppice provides sunlight to the woodland floor which is required by many species of flowers, such as bluebells, and butterflies; whereas growth from the stools over the following few years provides an ideal habitat for many species of birds, including thrushes, finches, warblers and nightingales.

After a number of years however, coppice becomes overgrown and dark leading to a decline in wildlife, therefore requiring the cutting process to start once again. So providing the coppice work is undertaken sympathetically with due care for the numerous habitats, it can be stated that the best way to protect these unique and precious environments is to have a healthy and thriving coppice industry.

Dorset Coppice Group is developing a range of educational resources and activities for local schools. This material will soon be made available through a new website - www.livingclassroom.org.uk – supporting our new woodland learning environment in North Dorset.

We would be delighted to hear from schools who would like to take advantage of this new and exciting resource, or who want to know more about Dorset's woodlands and the ancient craft of coppicing.

