

Professional Woodsman, Teacher, Maker: Making Wood Work

John Waller's thriving Underwoodsman enterprise offers many lessons for woodland business success, by Nancy Wood

John Waller arrived at Bore Place in Kent in 1992 to begin employment as an ecologist. He had no idea that he was stepping into a working situation that would evolve over time into a near-ideal set of circumstances for his wood and willow-based enterprise, Underwoodsman Ltd, to develop and thrive. If you're making the move to a working life in wood – or in the woods – John's story illustrates elements crucial to your success.

Poised on the border of Kent and East Sussex, Bore Place is a remarkable enterprise, a productive farm for at least 700 years that is also a forward-looking project in modern methods of sustainability. It's a 500-acre haven of conservation and natural appreciation, an historic treasure with educational programmes that reach out to the future. Bore Place had undergone many turns of fortune over the centuries before Neil and Jenifer Wates, he of the Wates Construction family, bought it in 1976. This visionary pair was committed to environmentally sustainable farming and to education. To these ends, they established Bore Place as a land trust and later added an educational charitable trust. Neil created the first methane digester in the world, among many other projects. The dairy farm has been fully organic since 2005. They were conscientious and extremely thorough in their assessment of Bore Place's potential. When John Waller arrived, he found that most of the surveying work he expected to do had already been completed.

"This was the most surveyed piece of farmland in the country," says John. Rather than spending his time adding to the database, he took on the management of the neglected coppice lands, a combination of three main woodlands and a variety of shaws, totalling more than 65 acres in all. "I thought I'd have a play and see what happened," he says.

He began to restore hazel coppice and ash, the latter mainly for firewood. As he began to create material,

he learned bodging from Richard King and then basket making from Malcolm Seal. "I picked up hurdle making as well." And in keeping with Bore Place's educational ethos, he began to offer courses, a core set of half a dozen to a dozen, mainly centred around greenwood work and different forms of wood weaving.

"It took five to ten years to set up the courses. In those days, the biggest problem was getting in touch with people to publicise them. I spent a lot of time at craft fairs and county shows. Once people attended, though, they tended to repeat and the courses built up through word of mouth," says John. His clients tend to be local, from London and the southeast, though some have come from as far away as Dorset, Suffolk and Bedfordshire. They tend to be aged between 35 and 60, with a split of roughly 65:35 men to women, with a cohort of young people as well. "There's been an explosion of course offerings recently and they're more in demand than ever." He experiments with his courses, sometimes adding in one-offs, like the oak cleaving workshop illustrated on these pages.

He remained an employee for seven years until going self-employed in 1999, renting a former stables on the farm, negotiating a contract for woodland management and running his courses. "You do carry all the risk this way, but it works for me."

He advises anyone hoping to survive and thrive in any type of woodland business to find a working partnership with someone to handle the bookkeeping and admin. In John's case, it is his wife, Amanda, who was formerly an editor at Butterworth's Law Directory. John found that he was so busy in the workshop and the woods that it was easy to neglect the 'business' side of his business. "It's a tough lesson to learn."

Over time, John has continued to diversify his work life, becoming a qualified tree surgeon, building the willow weaving side of his courses and business, with a special focus on living willow garden structures, taking

John Waller in The Green Wood Workshop at Bore Place



“It's crucial to keep an open mind about education”