

## Case study summary

The Startree case studies for Llais y Goedwig focus on small enterprises that use woodlands and specifically Non Wood Forest Products (NWFPs) <sup>1</sup>to generate an income in an innovative way.

They show how, with ingenuity and dedication woodlands can provide us with much more than timber.

## Coppicewood College

This case study tells the story of Coppicewood College, a charity, and Llais y Goedwig member that provides training courses in woodland management skills at Cwm Plysgog, a woodland in Pembrokeshire, West Wales.

## Coppicing

Coppicing is an ancient craft involving cutting stems of broadleaved trees on a rotation to provide small, pole-stage, products. It creates a varied woodland canopy that encourages diversity in woodland flora and fauna, increasing the number of NWFPs available in a woodland.

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<sup>1</sup> The NWFPs of interest here are described as 'embedded', meaning that the NWFPs themselves are not the product being marketed, but are an essential part of the product or service being offered.



## **Coppicewood College courses**

The courses cover all aspects of woodland management, including the manufacture of various products using NWFPs. Examples of these include using bark for seating on stools, colouring items with dyes made from woodland plants and basket weaving.

The main course run at Coppicewood College aims to provide students with all the practical skills needed to manage a coppice woodland, it run two days-a-week over 6 months. Students also learn hedge laying and basic craft skills to enable them to generate an income from a rural environment. The course is a mixture of class-based and practical activities; including cutting coppice, charcoal burning, pole lathe turning as well as making gates, hurdles and rustic furniture.

A number of short courses of between 1 and 4 days complement the 6 months course. These cover a variety of topics including green woodworking, spoon carving, making a shavehorse, hand tool sharpening, scything and basket making. In addition to the courses run at Cwm Plysgog, there is a volunteer day every Wednesday. Local volunteers learn new skills and help to manage the woods.

Minimal marketing is required as potential applicants usually hear about Coppicewood; through word of mouth, or their interest brings them to the Coppicewood website. The shorter courses are sometimes advertised with local poster campaigns, and they operate a facebook page as additional marketing.

A notable difference between the Coppicewood College courses and others is that traditional hand tools are used exclusively. Hand tools allow a better insight into the care with which woodlands would have been managed in days gone by. They also support the College's ethos of sustainability.

## **The original idea**

Nick Barnes and Barbara Goodwin founded Coppicewood along with Bruce and Kathy Slark. Nick and Barbara moved to the area from Derbyshire and saw the potential in the unmanaged local woodlands. They also realised that there were many people locally who could cut the woods, if they had the appropriate skills; 'we were in the right place at the right time.' A great deal of commitment, clear thinking and hard work followed. Nick already had a wealth of relevant knowledge from his background in nature conservation and comes from a long line of woodworkers; his father was a cabinet maker and grandfather a pattern maker.

The founders began the long process of finding a suitable woodland with a sympathetic owner, assembling a group of like-minded and committed volunteers, securing funding and then writing, organising and running the Coppicewood courses.

## **Inception – the first courses**

Before Coppicewood College began, the founders, after discussions with the owner of Cwm Plysgog, and with the support of a group of trustees, made plans for a pilot scheme. They wrote the notes for the course, assembled a group of suitable people and ran the course for the first time. Although the original setup folded soon after this, they had proved the point that it could be made to work. One exponent of this initial course later went on to make their living as a timber frame maker, and another is now a tutor at the College.

Coppicewood asked the owner if they could put the arrangement on a more permanent footing, and he agreed to a lease at a peppercorn rent in return for the management of the woods and access to firewood when he needs it.



## The woods

The woods at Cwm Plysgog cover 17 acres, most of which is mixed broadleaves with a few stands of Douglas fir. The majority of the site was planted in 1989 after a clear fell, with the Fir and some large oaks remaining from previous plantings. With the help of Colleges students, up to an acre of Cwm Plysgog is being coppiced each year.

## Charitable status

Coppicewood College is a charitable organisation set up in 1996 to promote traditional woodland management and the use of the associated hand tools.

The Trust has a board of trustees, who are all voluntary, and three paid staff who run the courses. Activities are coordinated by a management committee made up of four trustees, three instructors and six other volunteers who undertake specific jobs on the committee such as marketing, administration, and finance. Only two of the original trustees is still actively involved in the College. Replacements have been found, often from among the course alumni and volunteers.

## Cooperation

The very existence of Coppicewood depends upon cooperation. The owner of Cwm Plysgog has provided a suitable venue for use as a teaching establishment. In return, over time, he can look forward to his woodland being professionally managed, at no cost to himself.

The organisers of the college are free to sell any produce from the wood to generate an income for the enterprise. This relationship allows both parties to gain from an activity that would almost certainly not be possible without such a symbiotic agreement being in place.

## Infrastructure

Realising they would need warmth and shelter at Cwm Plysgog, the College built a workshop on site to use as a schoolroom. Realising later that such a structure would require planning permission, they sought the consent of the landowner and the Council Planning Department for retrospective planning permission. This was granted with the proviso that any structures erected were temporary and would be removed at the end of the lease.

Over time staff and volunteers have built a heated schoolroom, pole lathe shelter and composting toilet. This has made teaching and working in the woods, during the winter months and in all weathers, as comfortable as possible.

## Finances

The main products at Coppicewood are the courses, but sales of NWFPs, particularly charcoal help to provide additional revenue. Grant funding has also provided essential financial input, often at crucial times in the development of the College.

The full 6 month course fee is £1900 which Coppicewood will allow to be paid in instalments. They have been able to source funding to provide bursaries to help young people afford the fees and also run a membership scheme with the aim of raising funds to support further bursaries.

With the income from the 6 month course and that from up to 15 short courses a year (generally between £30 and £45 a day per person), the college can cover its costs. This does however rely on the main course having a full complement of 6 students.

The main source of grant funded financial support has been The Ernest Cook Trust (TECT), one of the UK's leading educational charities, who specialise in conservation and countryside management. TECT allow grant applications to be submitted every three years and, since they started, Coppicewood College have made several successful applications to support bursaries for young people. Coppicewood has also received a small grant from the National Lottery and an Environment Wales Grant.

The advantage of the TECT funding is that it comes with a certain amount of freedom in how it can be used. The main aim of the funding to Coppicewood has been to provide bursaries to young students who might not otherwise have been able to afford the course fees. However, if necessary, the funding can be used for salaries or equipment.

Coppicewood College currently makes a small profit, thanks to the various revenue streams outlined above. A key financial input continues to be the TECT grant funding. Indeed when TECT awarded Coppicewood their first grant it allowed the organisation to keep afloat; without it they would have been unable to continue. The enduring stability of the organisation is attributed to their never seeking to overstretch themselves and also their understanding of the importance of sticking to what they know and do best.

Lesson learnt: The ability to use grant funding for core costs has been of huge benefit to Coppicewood College. Most grant funders are only willing to provide money for something "new"; a novel project or additional piece of equipment (the organisation will still need to fund the maintenance cost for new infrastructure).

## 'Coppice Crew'

Another notable example of cooperation at Coppicewood is the separate Coppice Crew venture where current and former members of the College have joined forces to use their coppicing skills to generate an income for themselves in several local woodlands.

## Challenges

The day-to-day obstacles at Coppicewood remain the same. There is the ongoing requirement to fill the courses with people who can afford the required time and money. The organisers must give due consideration to obtaining sufficient income and grant funding to allow them to keep going. In the longer term, they must also plan for the day when their work at Coppicewood is completed. Before then they will need to find another suitable woodland, and another sympathetic woodland owner.

There have been no real conflicts during the time of Coppicewood College's existence. The organisation is mostly comprised of volunteers and course applicants, meaning that everyone who makes a connection with Coppicewood really wants to be there. There has been no tension with the land owner. He has been on board from the beginning and there have always been clearly defined terms for how long the college will be there and what work they will do.

Several of the alumni of the courses at Coppicewood have themselves gone on to form small local business. Former students are making incomes from timber framing, tree surgery, woodland management, coppice work, and charcoal burning. Collectively these form a support network of like-minded, independent-yet-interdependent people for whom cooperation is far more important than competition. This is, at least partly, thanks to the ethos instilled in them during their work and study at Coppicewood College.

## Summary and conclusions

There will be two main legacies of Coppicewood College. The first is that the woodland owner will end up with a properly managed wood, which is good for the environment and for the local ecology.

The second, and arguably more important, legacy will be the increase in local woodland knowledge and skills, not just in the local area but also further afield. There is now a network of small woodland managers and at least six woodland related business created by the former alumni of Coppicewood. As this new knowledge generates more work it increases the employment opportunities for those following in their footsteps.

Coppicewood College is a small, charitable enterprise which is not intending to grow. It has existed at more or less its present level for almost 20 years. It would be entirely wrong to measure the success of such a venture in terms of turnover or employee numbers. Instead, it should be judged on its positive impact on the surrounding human and natural environments.

When viewed in this way, Coppicewood College can be seen as a very real success story and is a huge credit to those involved. With its green ethos, it is almost unique in comparison to modern commercial activity in that it strives to have minimal detectable negative impact on its surroundings.

Finally, Coppicewood College provides a showcase to other local woodland owners of just what it is possible to do with their own properties, if the will is there.

It is unlikely Coppicewood would exist in its current form without the particular type of grant funding they have received. If the organisers had only been able to access the more prescriptive kind of grants that are typically available then this would have significantly hindered, or possibly prematurely ended, the activities of the college. For those responsible for designing future funding criteria, this is almost certainly the most important lesson to be learned from this study



**6 month Woodland Skills Course in action**

This case study was compiled by Maria Wilding and Adam Thorogood, for the Startree project.

It is based on a set of qualitative interviews with Coppicewood College founders.

Contact Coppicewood College:

[www.coppicewoodcollege.co.uk](http://www.coppicewoodcollege.co.uk)

Contact StarTree:

StarTree is a pan-European project supporting the sustainable use of forest resources for rural development, focussing on Non Wood Forest Products running from 2012 to 2016. Its aims - to strengthen and diversify rural economic activity. Llais y Goedwig is coordinating the project in Wales, working with a stakeholder group of representatives from the Welsh woodland sector.

[www.star-tree.eu](http://www.star-tree.eu)

Contact Llais y Goedwig:

Llais y Goedwig is a voluntary association of community woodland groups that formed in November 2009 to provide a voice for community woodlands. We want to share experiences, support each other and enhance local woodlands to benefit the people of Wales.

This resource is part of a growing series for association members, and others interested in community woodlands in Wales.

[www.llaisygoedwig.org.uk](http://www.llaisygoedwig.org.uk)

