



# Buying WOODLAND

Helen Babbs considers the **pros and cons** of **buying and owning woodland**, and how to go about acquiring **your own small space**



**Helen Babbs**

Helen writes, gardens and keeps goats on her family smallholding in West Wales. In the best HF tradition, her writing work is done in a converted stable block. Examples of her articles about all aspects of smallholding can be found on her website: [helenbabbs.co.uk](http://helenbabbs.co.uk)

**W**hether as a source of firewood and coppice poles, a wildlife haven, or simply somewhere to get away and walk the dog, an area of woodland can be an asset for any smallholding. But this doesn't mean you need to miss out if your holding isn't adjacent to a wood and doesn't have space for tree planting, as a separate block of woodland can be just as good. However, a quick glance at most rural estate agents will usually only show large blocks of very expensive woodland for sale, with very little suited to the smallholder wanting a small wood.

### MAKING WOODLAND AFFORDABLE

This was the problem Angus Hanton discovered when he bought a small wood for his family in the 1980s. Plenty was available, but very little of it was on a small, manageable scale. Consequently he set up the **Woodlands.co.uk** service to help correct this situation and make woodland ownership more available. It not

only buys and sells woodland throughout the UK, but also divides and develops it into groups of smaller woodland plots, ideally suited to 'family forestry'.

"My role is to assess larger blocks of woodland when they come on the market to see if they're suitable for buying and dividing," explains Chris Colley, the Welsh regional manager, who also owns a 7-acre wood near to his home in Ceredigion. These may be broad-leaf or conifer woodlands, although Chris finds people tend to prefer broad-leaved woods. Based on the natural boundaries within the woods, such as streams or rides, Chris divides the woodland up into plots of between 5 and 7 acres. "The aim is to make them a suitable size for one person or a family to manage, without needing heavy machinery," he explains. Apart from a securely locked entrance gate, most of the divisions are marked with posts or signs rather than an intrusive fence.

"I then supervise the improvement work," Chris says, "putting in tracks and such, and see to the woods going back on the market. The most important thing is access, as we want people to be able to



Top: A small wood can be managed without large machinery.  
 Middle: Divisions within blocks of woodland are lightly marked.  
 Bottom: A small wood needs a secure entrance way.

actually get to their woods! We might buy a wood with access tracks through it, or we can spend quite a lot of money building tracks.”

Depending on how much work the woodland needs, Chris finds the turnaround time can be from two months to a couple of years. “Once the woodland is ready, we list it on our website. The quickest a woodland sold was two hours later, though two weeks is more usual!”



### WHO MIGHT BUY A WOOD?

“We get all kinds of people buying small woods,” says Chris, “from smallholders to people with just a house and garden. Most people are looking to ‘do their bit’ for conservation of woodland and wildlife, and the general amenity aspect – a place to be out of doors, work in the woods and get the children away from their computer screens! Collecting your own firewood is often a secondary bonus.” He finds some people will look for several years for their ‘dream wood’, while others might find one quite quickly.

The actual buying process is the same as buying a house, “although there’s no chain, so it’s a lot quicker,” Chris points out. “It usually takes about 6–8 weeks from the offer to getting the keys. We actually offer a £300 discount for people who complete in less than six weeks.” Buyers through **Woodlands.co.uk** also sign an agreement to maintain the site as woodland and not subdivide it further.

Above: An all-terrain path gives access to the wood all year round.  
 Left: Buyers can even choose between old and new woodland.

One of these buyers is Luke Griffin, who now owns a 4.5-acre wood in the Welsh valleys. “We bought it because we love camping, but don’t like commercial sites with dozens of other people, and also like to be able to ‘get our hands dirty’ out of doors,” says Luke. After going on a bush craft weekend in August 2015, the solution seemed obvious, and Luke started looking for suitable woodland the next week. “I visited a number of woods across the country,” Luke recalls, “but didn’t find what we wanted until I saw this one in October. We’d bought it by Christmas. I don’t know how I thought it would work out,” he admits, “but it’s perfect.”



A stream is always good if you want to camp in your woods.



*A small wood offers the ideal spot for some outdoor wood carving.*

### WORKING IN THE WOODS

To be responsible for several acres of mature trees might sound a little daunting, but Luke finds it isn't difficult in practice. "I don't have an agricultural or forestry background," he explains, "so I've spent these first couple of years doing some clearing and thinning, then watching to see what the wood does and what's coming up from the ground. It's easy in a wood to just look up, and not see the new trees and other growth at ground-level."

To help new owners manage their woodland, there are many one- or two-day courses available throughout the country. The [Woodlands.co.uk](http://Woodlands.co.uk) sales package includes advice from the regional managers on choosing the best course for you, and a small grant towards the cost, along with a 'starter pack' of books about small-scale forestry. "I went on a couple of chainsaw courses," says Luke, "as I will want to fell some of the conifers in our wood as they get larger. It's important to know what you're doing with this – you don't want to drop a 30m tree on your head!"

While a wood does obviously need some management, it certainly doesn't need to take up all your time. "Some people do a lot with their woodland, visiting it every week," says Luke. "Ours is a couple of hours drive away, so I can't just pop over. I work on it slowly, and probably won't do everything that could be done to it, but I think it's important not to treat a wood like a giant allotment. It's better to work *with* a wood, it's a nice reminder of a pace of life that isn't instant."



*Of course woodland always contains much more than just trees.*

**To help new owners manage their woodland, there are many one- or two-day courses available throughout the country**



*A small wood can provide a good supply of firewood.*





A new access track dividing up a group of small woods.

## WOODLAND NEIGHBOURS

Along with courses, there are several societies that exist to help small woodland owners. “We’re members of the Small Woodland Owners Group,” says Luke, “who have a very helpful magazine and Facebook forums. If anything comes up, I know I can ‘pick their brains’ for advice.” With the small woods being subdivided from a larger block of woodland, buying a wood means you’ll have other small woodland owners for neighbours. Luke finds there’s a good deal of camaraderie among his. “There are five other owners in the larger woodland now,” he explains. “We chat, exchange ideas, and lend a hand if it’s needed.”

## INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

If this has you thinking you’d like to buy a wood, the crunch question is probably the cost. Woodland isn’t cheap, with small woods ranging from £30,000 to £70,000, dependent on size and location. It’s a lot less than a similar-sized smallholding, though, and does keep its value over time. “We put our savings into our wood,” Luke explains. “It’s nice to think we could get it back if we had to sell up, but it’s not a woody savings account! We didn’t want the money just sitting in the bank, so now it’s a fantastic wood and hours of fantastic adventures with the



Above: Fallen trees can be cleared... or simply left for wildlife.



family. If we can pass it on to the next generation, we’d be delighted.”

“If people do decide to sell up,” says Chris Colley, “because they’ve ‘done that,’ or moved away, or feel they’re getting too old to manage it, **Woodlands.co.uk** will often buy it back or act as the estate agent. Whatever their reasons for selling, a lot of people want someone to carry on caring for ‘their’ woodland, and we have a waiting list of people wanting to do that!” Whether it’s a newly-divided wood or one that’s been under family management for some time, could this be you?

## FURTHER INFO

All photos are courtesy of [Woodlands.co.uk](http://Woodlands.co.uk). Visit [woodlands.co.uk](http://woodlands.co.uk) to find out more. Further details about the Small Woodland Owners Group can be found at [swog.org.uk](http://swog.org.uk).



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