

Living in the woods

Simon Fairlie argues for planning reform that allows woodland workers to make a viable living.



Roundhouse and kitchen at Tinkers Bubble.

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For an increasing number of people who are setting up full-time livelihoods in woodlands, the ability to live on site may be essential for the viability of their enterprise. This is particularly true for multifaceted enterprises which focus not just on timber, but on other products, such as charcoal, woodland crafts, pigs, poultry, fruit and mushrooms. Living on site is also vital for those people who want to take advantage of the subsistence benefits of living in a woodland: clean water, renewable energy, fuel, food, building materials and shelter from the elements.

Unfortunately, anyone who wants to get permission to live in their wood, even in a low impact dwelling, is up against some unhelpful planning guidance. Planning policy for woodlands, and for the countryside generally, is laid down in a document called Planning Policy Guidance 7 (PPG7), which is updated every few years. The last update took place in 1997 and soon, PPG7 will be thoroughly overhauled again.

Planning misnomers

When the consultation draft for the 1997 version of PPG7 appeared, a strange new paragraph was inserted into it which stated:

"Modern methods of forestry management use a largely peripatetic workforce. A new forestry dwelling is unlikely to be justified, except perhaps to service intensive nursery production of trees."

Where did this advice come from? Presumably the civil servants drafting the report had consulted somebody high in the canopy of the Forestry Commission who was out of touch with what was happening on the ground. In order to tackle this misapprehension, Chapter 7, an organisation that campaigns for a planning system which actively encourages sustainable, low impact and affordable homes, organised a joint submission to the PPG7 team. This submission was signed by some twenty forestry and coppicing groups and pointed out that the "modern" forestry industry was facing a collapse in prices due to global competition; that possibly the most vibrant sector in forestry was the burgeoning movement to recreate traditional forms of forest management, coppicing and woodland crafts; and that, far from being peripatetic, many of these forestry workers identified with their woods and saw a value in sustained management.

Amazingly, the final version was altered to read:

"Under conventional modern methods of forestry management, which use a largely peripatetic workforce, a new forestry dwelling is unlikely to be justified except perhaps to service intensive nursery production of trees."

This may not seem like a big change but if you examine the wording, you will see that the final version, unlike the original, does potentially allow for unconventional, non-modern, non-peripatetic forestry activities that could conceivably justify somebody living in their own woodland.

Planning successes and struggles

Over the last six years, some traditional woodland workers have done an extremely good job of showing that there is a case for allowing full-time workers to live in their woods. Since 1997, there has been an encouraging number of planning successes, which are listed below. But one mustn't be too sanguine. There are plenty of woodland workers whose permission has been refused.

For example, one woodland worker, who applied for permission for a timber-framed dwelling on 89 hectares (220 acres) of woodland in Dorset, had his proposal turned down, partly on the grounds that there was no "intensive nursery production of trees". In Wales, Rodney Waterfield met similar resistance when his application for a timber dwelling was rejected on the grounds that his charcoal operation, as an "industrial activity", should take place, not in the woods, but on an industrial estate. And, in south east England, a forester who runs a sawmill in his woods, had to demolish a log cabin after enforcement action, and was refused permission for timber drying sheds. He states that the planning "delayed us by 7 to 10 years, cost us between £30,000

Recent successful planning applications for forestry dwellings

Hugh Ross and Caroline Church: temporary residential planning permission on their 8 hectare (20 acre) coppice in Northamptonshire (see article on page 23).

Ben Law (author of *The Woodland Way: a permaculture approach to woodland management*): planning permission, after a long battle, for a timber house on his 3.3 hectare (8 acre) chestnut coppice.

Tinkers Bubble: after five years' struggle and two court cases, planning permission for a low impact community in 10.5 hectares (26 acres) of Douglas fir and larch plantation.

The Bartlett family: after seven years' living on the land, planning permission for a wooden building on a woodland, poultry and herbs smallholding in Devon.

The Spareys: temporary residential permission at appeal, after a local authority refusal, to produce charcoal and keep cows and poultry in their Sussex woodland.

David Gillen: temporary residential permission for woodland management and pig farming in Shropshire.

David Heritage: permission for a temporary wooden dwelling for woodland management and poultry in Sussex; given at committee despite planners' recommendation for refusal.

David Blair: permission for a wooden dwelling for producing charcoal and keeping poultry and pigs in Argyll and Bute.

Steward Wood: temporary permission, after a High Court challenge, for a bender community for woodland management and horticulture.