

Revesby Estate

Woodlands that pay for themselves without impacting on other estate operations

The Revesby Estate lies 12 miles north of Boston in Lincolnshire. Once a monastic estate, the abbey sat atop the first hill from the sea, overlooking 11,000 acres of fen, farm and wooded land. Following Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries (1536–41), the abbey was redesignated a country estate and purchased in 1715 by the great-great-grandfather of naturalist Sir Joseph Banks, founder of Kew Gardens and funder of (and ship-mate aboard) Captain James Cook's first circumnavigation of the globe (1768–1771).

As squire, Sir Joseph improved the fenland waterways (covering a quarter of the estate), collected rent on the third Saturday of October (at the 'Tenants' Luncheon', still celebrated today) and spent leisure time shooting, fishing and caring for his imported kangaroos. Although no formal records exist of the exotic plantings that Sir Joseph made at Revesby, specimens such as a 300-year-old avenue of limes in the deer park, Wellingtonias in the shrubbery, numerous plane trees, veteran monkey puzzles and cedars, are most likely to have been introduced during his tenure.

Today, the estate covers 6,200 acres and, since 1958, has been

managed by the Wiggins-Davies family. Five years ago, Peter Wiggins-Davies (now 28) returned to help his father, owner Gavin, manage the estate. Together they are responsible for 2,200 hectares of farmland (half farmed in-hand), a deer park, two lakes with fishing concessions (including a reservoir dug by hand in 1860 to supply water to Boston), a site of light industry, a village of tenanted cottages and a shooting concession, which utilises their 531-acre mixed woodland.

Peter is in the estate office, whose walls are adorned with 'finds' unearthed on the estate, including a crude 5,000-year-old brooch, 3,500 BC flint scrapers, a Papal seal, holy-water amulets and a coin disfigured by some long-forgotten Cromwellian who enlarged the king's nose.

Peter says, "We have a wealth of history and tradition here. After the war, the woodlands were thinned sporadically, and not managed continuously as they should have been. My father took over in the 1980s. It was difficult to achieve income streams from the woods, and available resources were directed to the farming operation. My role has been to help consolidate

the estate enterprises and develop them. Building on tradition, we are utilising our assets and finding modern markets. A good example of this is the forestry enterprise. With markets for hardwood firewood improving, we can use our forestry resource to better effect."

Crossing the road to the estate yard, all machinery, including the John Deere forestry tractor, a Timberwolf drum chipper and the chainsaw cage, is kept under electronic lock and key. "Crime prevention is very important to us. We have had many break-ins. Being so rurally located, the police could not always reach us in time. All buildings, forest roads and field entrances are under lock and key with a fifteen-tier key system. This enables us to control who goes where."

Driving towards the woodlands, Peter says, "The majority of Revesby's woodlands are mixed hardwood and softwood, planted in the eighteenth century for shooting purposes (starting point and a flushing point). Our plantations range from half an acre to 137 acres in size. The general make-up is oak [some up to 700 years old], sycamore and ash, with the occasional cedar and chestnut [sweet and horse]. We have

100 acres of ancient, semi-natural woodland and two 1.5-acre blocks of conifer plantations [30- to 80-year-old Norway spruce and Scots pine]. We manage a large area of parkland trees, and have 15 acres of yew, which is unusual."

With the help of local Forestry Commission officer David White and Revesby's forestry advisor Andy Reynolds (who organises grant applications, felling licences and helps with strategy), a fifteen-year woodland management plan was written.

"Our plan gives us the ability to manage the woods at a pace that allows attention to detail, including replants and dyking. We will sell 250 to 300 tonnes' worth of hardwood firewood timber a year for the next three to four years, followed by intensive cutting in coppice areas when the stems reach a suitable size. The firewood comes from mature woodland compartments where oaks are being smothered by faster-growing sycamore and ash. The oaks give us our identity and we want to protect them."

Forestry operations began four years ago. Across the estate, retiring employees were not replaced and in order for the forestry

department to be economically, as well as environmentally, sustainable, one (of two) full-time foresters was let go.

Peter began by marketing and tendering two small spinney blocks of firewood (sycamore and ash). "These projects taught me how to work the woods in a way that was sustainable and beneficial for future generations. They showed that the woodlands could pay for themselves and would not impact on other estate operations."

Beside a small spinney block of conifer, Peter says, "Forestry contractor Jon Colley spent two years catching up on felling work. His large machines romped efficiently through the neglected areas. Without them, the compartments would not have been restored in a financially viable manner.

The only disadvantage of using mechanical harvesters is the damage that occurs to the understorey. Having caught up with our management, we will use motor-manual contractors until the next wave

of coppicing reaches maturity. Working manually, it is easier to protect the understorey and to achieve the perfect dappled light levels that encourage both regeneration and self-set trees. Our goal is to achieve several generations of trees in one compartment.

"As with many estates, our infrastructure needed attention. To date, we have built four kilometres of tracks, clearing one-and-a-half metres of brash either side (except for oak). We have changed the track lines, putting a swan neck at woodland entrances to decrease the chance of windblow. We have another three kilometres to build. We have also invested a large sum



Eco-heaps, which will rot down after 10 to 15 years and encourage wildlife. A tidy forest floor is easier to drive around during maintenance.

resurrecting the woodland dykes. They are cleared every three years, which takes two employees three months to complete."

Crossing over a dyke and drain separating Revesby's two fishing lakes, we stop by a small, wet oak plantation, which Peter has just sold standing. "I sell small blocks (50 tonnes) of timber standing, to be thinned with chainsaws. The person buying the timber organises haulage to a final destination. Working like this, the operation is easier to micro-manage. I select the trees for thinning by spraying (blue – fell, orange – retain, pink – high prune) every tree. While the felling contracts are active, I will return to spray more trees if I feel that the compartment would benefit."

Travelling along a newly laid woodland track, we arrive in Aske Wood, currently enjoying its first thin. A 60-tonne pile of 7'6" firewood logs awaits pick-up at ridside. "Our oaks are our most valuable crop and we try not to fell them. Here we have taken out every fourth and fifth sycamore and ash (and some very poor quality oaks), halo pruning half a metre beyond the canopy, giving the oak crowns a rounder shape. Increased light levels will encourage epicormic growth and regeneration (self-set saplings), so it is a balancing act."

Brash from forestry operations is piled into 'eco-heaps'. "Eco-heaps encourage wildlife and will rot down after 10 to 15 years. A tidy forest floor is easier to drive around during maintenance. Gleaners [licensed members of the public] come in and clear all the non-commercial firewood – unnumbered,

unstacked timber shorter than one metre – from around the eco-heaps and in the replant areas, which helps tidy up the roadsides and woods. Small bits of usable firewood are put into bags and used by tenants or sold on [at a small cost] to the public. It is important to us to help the local community and local markets."

In the last two years, Revesby has replanted several miles of roadside hawthorn hedgerows and created six acres of new oak woodlands. "At Wilksby Top, a bowl-shaped indent in the field was a pain for the crop sprayers. We straightened the woodland edge, which gave us an acre to plant up with 80% oak, 10% ash and 10% beech. An estate maintenance employee helps on hedge work and shelterbelts around the woodlands. He also high-prunes and straightens the tree guards in the replants, to make sure we get good tree structures."

In the reservoir plantations, a half-acre of oak whips grow in an area replanted after sycamore and ash was selectively felled last year. "We had twenty years of windblow in this area and have replanted quite heavily. Outside contractors do our planting and supply the trees. If the trees do not establish, then the contractor is responsible. We protect the oak replants with tree shelters and have found that if we do not mow until March, the deer do not attack the trees so actively."

Vermin is a big problem at Revesby. "Our gamekeeper checks the squirrel traps twice a day, catching up to 300 a year. We have approxi-

Peter and his father, estate owner Gavin Wiggins-Davies, have managed the estate together for the last five years. They are standing by the Main Park gate, bearing Joseph Banks Stanhope's initials.



mately 200 wild deer on the estate and cull 30 (roe, fallow and muntjac) a year. We are very fortunate in having a close relationship with the Lincolnshire Deer Group, who help with our culling operations.”

In the deer park, Tree Tech (a Lantra trainer provider) is running a climbing and aerial rescue course. Peter says, “Thirty or so training courses are held [for free] throughout the estate each year. We host the Revesby Country Fair (20,000 visitors) and the Lincolnshire Firewood Fair in the deer park. We have six miles of public rights of way, and one major and six minor roads passing through the estate. As landowners, it is our responsibility to manage and reduce the risk posed by our trees to the public, as far as is reasonably possible. We began inspecting and working our roadside trees last year and have only just completed this lengthy and costly operation.”

Already a qualified climber and chainsaw user (standard fell and cross-cut), Peter got his Highways and Tree Inspection tickets two years ago to reduce inspection costs. To remain impartial, tree surgeons Castle Tree Care also carry out inspections at Revesby.

In Waifs Park, we pass the 14,000th tree to be tagged on a Garmin GPS positioning finder. Peter says, “With the size and variety of our



Mature oaks in Roboroughs Wood.

operations, attention to detail is paramount. Members of staff carry Blackberries and dictaphones. If any work needs to be done, it is noted there and then. This attention to detail includes mowing and maintenance. The verges are mown twice a year and where required, the hedges are flailed back into a triangular shape, giving wildlife a

thick base for shelter. Roadside tree inspections occur at six months or annually, at different times of the year. Our roadside (and park) chestnuts are suffering with leaf miner and bleeding canker. Twenty have already been dismantled and 180 are showing signs. Where trees are taken out, we are creating a planting matrix. Driving from the

north you will see cherry blossom, from the south, softwoods and sycamore.”

Revesby’s main market for timber is firewood. “For three years, three local contractors, who work to our exacting standards, have bought our timber standing. *Forestry Journal* has helped us find different markets for our timber. We have poplar, yew and cricket-bat willow plantations that need thinning. However, I intend to wait until I find the correct market for these. We are also looking for interested parties to cut and take our hazel on a regular basis.”

By investing in infrastructure and putting standing-sale contacts in place now, Peter is generating future returns. “Oil prices are rising and the Renewable Heat Incentive has launched. I attended an Ignite renewable firewood course last week. We have an expert coming out to assess the viability of building a biomass CHP system for the office block, my parents’ house and the village, within the next year. Currently we are primary producers, adding no value to our product. I hope to change this in the coming years. Growing fuel for our estate houses is an idea that appeals greatly.”

www.revesbyestate.co.uk
Carolyne Locher



Deer under Lombardy poplar trees in the deer park. The park is the setting for the Revesby Country Fair. Revesby Park House, to be included in the biomass plans, can be seen in the background right.