

# Trials and tribulations

Establishing a woodland on agricultural land is not without its difficulties. In planting up nine acres of Northumberland pasture, now known as Gorfenletch Wood, David Parkins has gained first-hand experience of the trials and tribulations – as well as some of the rewards – of such an undertaking.

**S**EARCH the Ordnance Survey maps of south-east Northumberland for Gorfenletch Wood and you won't find it named yet. Snipe Plantation, Moorhen Plantation and Blackcock Plantation, on the other hand, retain the names recorded by the early OS surveyors. The former two woodlands survive on the charts but it must be many decades since the black grouse established their territories in this area of south-east Northumberland. Only a few scattered trees remain now on the land. Neighbouring Toddhill and Aubone Plantations have also lost their tree cover and have been converted to agricultural use.

When David Parkins first arrived to view a field for sale a few miles north-west of the market town of Morpeth, he had already studied the maps carefully. He knew from the names of the surrounding woodlands that for many generations this had been 'plantation' country. The six-and-a-half acres of 'Field No 3' on the Gorfenletch Farm sale would possibly be a suitable location for the woodland he was determined to establish.

As a child in Kent, David remembers his gang's unofficial den in the woods being razed as the trees were cleared to make way for the Sevenoaks bypass in the sixties. A family move north to Newcastle upon Tyne followed. David enlisted in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, training as a tank fitter. In the mind of the army, woodlands were considered good hiding places for tanks and so featured, unsurprisingly, in his new career. In Germany, he remembers, the superbly armoured Chieftain tank was, in automotive terms, unreliable. Manoeuvres on the German plain took their toll and it was in the forests – usually during hail, rain, snow or blistering heat – that the fitter was called upon to climb under, in, or on top of the

brutes and sort them out.

Returning to Northumberland, David joined the police. Problems stemming from an injury sustained whilst executing an arrest eventually saw him pensioned off from the service earlier than he had expected. Woodworking, caring for his MGC sports car and fixing vintage thermal-valve radios took up plenty of David's time. A sense of purpose and contribution was still, however, missing.

The woodlands were beckoning again. Applying for a post as a volunteer gardener on the National Trust's Wallington Estate in mid Northumberland, David soon had qualifications in chainsaw use and pesticide application. He was able to assist with the work in Wallington's woodlands. In touch with the trees again, David had the idea to plant his own woodland. He admits that he was not going to allow a lack of land, a shortage of experience and a pair of dodgy knees to get in his way.

The field at Gorfenletch was the twelfth site to have been inspected. Some were just plainly too expensive – even after the sale of the restored sports car and the rare 'collector's item' valve radios. David was being very thorough in his investigations, however, and many more were discounted for security, access, utility wayleave or legal issues. Sorting out complex covenants can soon multiply the sale price and lead to escalating legal costs.

The details of the sale came up by chance. Informed by a rural estate agent that the property he called in to enquire about had been withdrawn from the market,



Left: David Parkins with the Gorfenletch oak. The germination of one of a pair of acorns produced by one of the oaks planted in the winter of 2002/3 has given rise to the first of the second generation of trees in the Northumberland woodland.



Above: Ashes established on the spoil mound from the digging of Long Pond have succumbed to disease and the infected material awaits burning. Replanting with other species has taken place. The tall Cricket bat willows in the background formed the western boundary of the first area to be planted.



Right: The pines established in the north-eastern corner suffered from weak root development followed by burial under a heavy snowfall. Most were salvaged and have revived despite exhibiting sinuously twisted lower stems.

David wondered if there was anything similar on the agent's books. A search in the filing cabinet brought out the details of Gorfenletch Farm. It had failed to sell at auction as a whole and had been divided into lots open to offers.

'Field 3' looked interesting. Being within twenty miles of David's home and just within the self-imposed 6–12-acre limits he had prescribed, it fitted two bills immediately.

Access for half a mile along a private track could be a bonus. The shells of burnt-out cars, truck-loads of fly-tipped refuse and even the evidence of theft of recently planted trees had ruled out some other sites.

David Parkins brought up the issue of covenants with the lady in the estate agent's office. The only one found, this time, was to his advantage. While he would need to negotiate his share for the upkeep of the track with other landowners, unless he sold his rights, nobody had the legal authority to deprive him of the access to his new woodland.

Before a decision to go ahead with the purchase was made David spent a day with a spade and pH meter testing and

mapping the soils; the acidity was close to neutral and life in the form of earthworms suggested the ground was in good heart. A local authority search revealed no nasty surprises such as archaeological ruins or sites of special scientific interest. A gas pipeline running across neighbouring fields and below the access track was initially a worry. On investigation it turned out to have been laid in the 1970s at a depth of 2 metres and had never been damaged by regular overrunning of heavy agricultural machinery. It was safe to assume that when Gorfenletch Wood started to produce timber there would be no problem for extraction machinery accessing a suitable timber landing near the main road.

Even before the first trees were in the ground, David was considering the practicalities of timber harvesting. He felt the land purchase was almost 'in the bag' and, armed with the sale documents, took some time to discreetly survey the influence on his future property of the surrounding fields and woods. With the contracts signed, the compacted topsoil was ripped in the summer of 2002. September saw tree stakes knocked in and then the planting positions were treated with herbicide.

The first trees went into the ground on 8 November – twenty-five hazels. The first season's planting plan did include what may be termed 'productive timber'

species. One of the oaks planted in that first campaign produced a couple of acorns at the age of seven years. David's wife Elizabeth carefully planted and protected the seeds near the centre of the site. One succeeded in germinating and the resulting 'in-house progeny' has been christened the Gorfenletch oak.

Another success story was the acquisition of the neighbouring plot that had been used for some years as a paddock. David's investigations had led him to believe that blocked drainage channels had diverted water run-off through this area and the expansion allowed for the introduction of water features to Gorfenletch Wood – Top Pond, Long Pond and Bottom Pond.

Study of archived maps also showed that, until the Second World War, this part of the property had been productive forest. The southernmost section of the now curtailed Moorhen Plantation was thought to carry a crop of pines that were probably felled by Italian prisoners of war and converted into pit props for the Northumberland coal mines.

The soils of the new section were different and also incorporated the spoil heaps from the pond construction. This furnished the opportunity to introduce Sitka spruce, both bare-rooted and cell-grown. Although hare damage resulted in some losses, the growth of the spruces, first established in 2013, has been encouraging. Not every project undertaken in Gorfenletch Wood has, however, been an unbridled success.

The stand of Scots pines established in a block in the early days in the north-eastern corner of the woodland presents a most curious sight. The leaders are reaching for the Northumbrian sky and producing the fine straight timber that David was hoping to harvest. The lower couple of metres of the stems, on the other hand, twist and curve sinuously from the planting positions. The scene is reminiscent of the



The tell-tale diamond-shaped scar characteristic of ash dieback infection has been seen amongst the young ash trees since 2014. Over a couple of years it became apparent that any attempts at control – such as removal of infected branches – were not going to be effective.

LOCAL FOREST NURSERIES HAVE BEEN THE PREFERRED SOURCE OF PLANTING STOCK FOR THE WOODLAND PROJECTS

# ESTABLISHMENT

maritime pine forests that battle against the Atlantic blasts on the Portuguese coastal dunes or the groves of shore pines that struggle for survival on the exposed cliffs of the Pacific Seaboard.

The preferred source of planting stock for the woodland projects are a couple of local forest nurseries; Trees Please in Northumberland and Cheviot Trees just across the border in Berwickshire. There has never been a complaint about the planting stock the businesses have supplied to Gorfenletch. David admits that it was the protection afforded to the seedlings that caused the problem.

The pines flourished inside the mesh tree shelters and when the leaders were judged to be clear of roe deer damage the protection was removed. Unfortunately, the side shoots inside the shelter had supported the impressive upward growth at the expense of the development of a sturdy root system. The removal of the support saw the saplings struggling to stay upright and many laid their heads down upon the Northumberland earth.

Much time was spent raising the Scots pines and securing them in the vertical position with stakes and tree ties. The weather was to intervene the following winter with persistent heavy snowfall accumulating upon the saplings, breaking the ties and laying the pines down for a second time. When the thaw eventually came, David could get back into Gorfenletch Wood and, despite his huge disappointment, work out how to try and salvage the situation.

A very early thinning was in order and the season's planting programme was adapted to conform to what appeared to be, at first glance, a complete disaster. Spaces were made for oak seedlings to be nursed amongst the stalled pines. The few birches that survived the heavy snowfall are now showing the way forward; growing strongly with stout and sturdy clean stems putting on the timber.

Pests and diseases have also taken their toll on the young trees of Gorfenletch Wood. Some species of willow succumbed to infections of rust fungus and were culled. The hundred specimens of fast-growing cricket bat willow in Gorfenletch Wood did not appear to be susceptible and have survived. The shrubby-like bird cherries attracted the tortrix moth and the shoots were killed by the tented caterpillar colonies. Application of a natural biological control in the form of a spray eradicated the pest. The same treatment should be

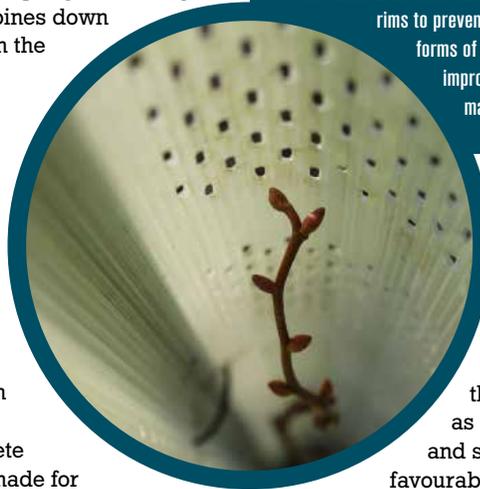


Above: David Parkins has been experimenting with the new designs of tree protection developed over recent years. Combinations tubular wood vole protection with mesh to keep the roe deer and hares from the higher bark of the young trees can allow the components to be reused in later planting campaigns.

Right: The TimberWolf 17/35G compact gravity-fed chipper is the ideal unit for converting plantation arisings into chipped woody material. The machine's 13 hp Honda petrol engine provides the power to turn woody material up to 3 inches in diameter into uniform woodchips at a professional rate.



Below: A small-leaved lime transplant in a ventilated tree tube. The tube-type shelter is now becoming the norm in Gorfenletch Wood. Rounded top rims to prevent chafing and various forms of ventilation are technical improvements that have been made.



efficacious in the event of an attack of oak processionary moth.

Ash was always, in David's view, an essential element of the English woodland; as long as climatic and soil conditions were favourable. The definitive detection of ash dieback in the south-east of England in 2012 was certainly a threat to a fair proportion of the trees in Gorfenletch Wood. In daily work around the plantation, ashes were regularly checked for symptoms of the disease.

All seemed well until 2014 when – almost 'out of the blue' – the tree disease struck the woods of the Northumberland coastal plain very hard. Some of the ashes were removed and diseased material pruned from others and burnt. After a couple of years 'ADB', as David refers to it, looked as if it would savage every one of the 900 ashes planted in Gorfenletch Wood.

Sycamore was chosen as an alternative to ash in the planting programme and the spaces left by the fatalities replanted with

oak or Norway maple. Walnut was also introduced as an experiment. Gorfenletch Wood's oldest trees – a couple of ashes growing in the east hedgerow – seem to be the only ones of the species able to brush off the fungus. The larger of the two was a significant landscape feature even in 1866 as it is recorded on the OS map produced in that year.

When it comes to record keeping, David's previous careers have stood him in good stead. The Chronicles of Gorfenletch Wood, as he terms his diary of events in his little patch of Northumberland, covers every aspect of woodland establishment. Planting methods and species choice are covered. The 'pros and cons' of different methods of tree protection are laid bare and the efficacy of recent developments in tree tube design evaluated. Successes and failures are logged and the dates and conditions noted when pests and diseases are detected.

David has condensed many of the practical, technical and scientific forestry facts and figures into his thoroughly readable account of his journey into woodland creation: *Saplings and Spades: A Woodland Returns*.

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**H.C. Burke**