GOOD IN THE WOOD:

Hill Holt Wood celebrates 10 years as a social enterprise
2002 – 2012
In 1995, Nigel and Karen Lowthrop were a new couple with a dream. They wanted to find a woodland and turn it into a sustainable community space and run it as a business. The best option they could find was the somewhat derelict 34-acre Hill Holt Wood site on the borders of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. It wasn’t long before they’d moved into a small caravan on the site and transformed the space for locals.

By 2002, the business was fully up and running as a sustainable community woodland being used for alternative education, job training and much more. That year, they decided to turn Hill Holt Wood into a social enterprise, handing over management to a board to ensure the place continued to be run for the good of its community.

They lived in the caravan with their two children until 2005, before all moving into the eco house they’d built in the wood.

This collection of articles shows how Nigel Lowthrop’s original dream of running a sustainable woodland for the community has not only come true, but has exceeded everyone’s wildest expectations.

The wood has gone from employing one person to 30, from its first contract, to turning over £1 million, and won a clutch of environmental and social awards.

Happy reading!
Hill Holt Wood celebrates 10 years as a social enterprise 2002 – 2012

A POTTED HISTORY: 10 YEARS OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

• An E2E (Enterprise to Employment) contract is secured which sees around 45 people aged 16-19 come in over the course of the year to gain job skills and experience.

2003

• A contract with Lincolnshire Council sees the start of alternative education schemes at the wood, where 14-16 year old boys, who’ve been excluded from school, come for training in practical skills, as well as academic subjects.

• The wood now employs 6 people, including 2 graduates and 4 rangers with diverse backgrounds.

2002

• HHW becomes a social enterprise with management handed over to a board of directors.

• Royal visitor, the Earl of Wessex, comes to see HHW.

2004

• HHW wins the Enterprising Solutions Award, the Social Enterprise Coalition’s prestigious industry accolade.

< < <
How it all began...

Nigel Lowthrop, co-founder of Hill Holt Wood, on the building of a dream

Claudia: Take us back 17 years, why did you buy the wood?
Nigel: My dream was to manage a wood in an environmentally and financially sustainable way. To keep Britain’s woods alive, I think they need to have value. We wanted to run the wood like a business, providing activities and training for the local community, while protecting the environment. The idea being that the activities would also bring in money, which would be put back into the business to keep it alive and make sure the wood stayed green and healthy.

Claudia: How did you begin to bring your dream to life?
Nigel: We started off with a local authority contract to bring in people on unemployment schemes to provide them with work and training, and we moved to also do alternative education schemes. We get paid by the council to take young boys aged 14+ who’ve been excluded from school. They come here and learn. We also get paid for taking young people who need a break to get into work – this is through schemes like the Future Jobs Fund.

Claudia: What do they work on?
Nigel: They manage the wood, largely. The young people also have to do things like computing and life skills, but beyond that, there’s a range of more technical skills they can develop. Other things they can learn are site management, working on vehicles, in the kitchen, or they can do pure forestry. Some go off and do litter picking and environmental work off-site, and they also have the opportunity to do eco construction. We often have ongoing green building projects. >
Claudia: Do you think your experiment has worked?

Nigel: Originally we thought that if we could achieve an income for a family and maybe one other member of staff, that would be a great success in such a small woodland. Now, we have thirty employees and more than a million pound turnover. We’ve over-achieved on our aspirations by a long way. I think it’s demonstrated that it works to have this diverse business model with lots of different income streams that all mutually benefit each other.

Claudia: Could there be other woods like Hill Holt?

Nigel: We think the future will be replicating the Hill Holt Wood model. I don’t mean replicating it in a typical franchise model because I think every woodland is unique and its management requirements are unique and its potential is unique. Every community is unique in its aspirations about what it wants from that woodland are personal. It might just want a green space, it might want activities, or both, or something else. But managing a woodland sustainably is something that is eminently replicable, particularly if there is local political will – that helped us immensely.

Karen, Nigel and family move into the eco house they’ve built on site after 10 years in the caravan.

- HHW receives a Grade 2 in its Adult Learning Inspectorate.
- Wins a Lincolnshire Environment Award.
- First year of Knowledge Partnership with the University of Lincoln. Moving from connecting with just architecture departments to lining with business sociology and geography departments too.
- Currently employs 15 people.
I was out of work off and on for about six or seven years before I started here at the end of 2009. I was trying to find somewhere to work where I fitted in.

I don’t have any formal education; I come from a travelling circus family – I’m a professional unicyclist, clown, stilt walker and trapeze artist.

I find that the things I believe are important in life are marginalised in mainstream society and workplaces. I find it very difficult to fit in.

About a month before I got this job, I sat down with my wife and wrote down everything that I wanted from work. It seemed like a massive long shot to get anything close, and then I saw a Hill Holt Wood ranger job advertised. It was a Future Jobs Fund position through the Job Centre. I liked it straight away and I think my ‘can do’ attitude impressed them – within two months they offered me a full time ranger position.

Using my skills
I find the work here really suits me. Because of my background I have lots of practical skills. I’m a mechanic because you have to fix stuff yourself in the circus; you have to know how to weld, build, everything. As a ranger now I do all sorts, including going into the woodland to fell trees before cutting them up into logs and preparing them for construction. We also do gardening contracts for local authorities and litter pick the streets and by-ways around this area.

“From trapeze to trees

Stuart Bailey, 43, has been a ranger for three years since coming to Hill Holt Wood via the Future Jobs Fund. He grew up in the circus, but says he feels more at home than ever working at the wood.
Sometimes I’ll find myself as part of the construction design team, doing green building works. The list is endless. There isn’t a physical job that I won’t tackle and succeed in. I hope to be given a senior ranger position soon.

When I drew up my ‘ideal job’ list – one of the things that was important for me was to be able to give kids direction somehow. I like to instil a work ethic in kids – the ones here and my own. I have four children and I’ve always had a master plan to get them all well educated. Two of them are in university, and two of them are working towards it.

The kids here need time spent on them. Most have been excluded from school, but with a bit of time and respect, they turn in to quite nice individuals – I’ve seen it time and time again.

Hill Holt Wood has made me feel part of society, I suppose. I talk of society as if it’s a separate thing to me because I came from outside and showmen don’t tend to mix outside their own society. So, when I left that world for mainstream society, I found it very difficult.

In mainstream society I’m seen as a bit weird or strange because I treat everyone the same, whatever position they hold in society. When I left my former life, I wasn’t used to the hierarchy of regular society. I just see people as humans and that’s how things are at Hill Holt Wood.

Feeling connected
I’ve had other little jobs and things, but I’ve never felt such a part of something before, ever, anywhere. I think this place is quite special for doing that. There’s no one up high, looking down, it’s everybody together, and I’ve just found that wonderful.

I feel like I’ve found my niche. It’s like I’m on the trapeze again, that’s how good it feels.

“
Student architects shape up at Hill Holt Wood

Richard Lawrence, 23, is spending a year at the wood as part of his architecture training. He’s having a fantastic time designing and building eco structures, while his peers are mostly based in offices, he says…

Richard: In my second year of studying architecture, we had a project at the wood designing some off-grid housing.

After I graduated from the degree part of my course (a full architecture course is seven years including two years in industry), I had to do a year in industry, and after six months at Lincoln City Council I was really happy to get an internship at the wood.

We are the third set of interns. The first designed the Artists Studio. They put the project through planning permission, and in their free time started building some on-site accommodation for interns.

Claudia: Tell us how you came to Hill Holt Wood?

Richard: The next team developed the accommodation and created a kitchen alongside it, with the help of rangers and learners on site.

Claudia: So, what are you and your fellow intern working on?

Richard: Myself and Ruben have been tasked with connecting the kitchen and the sleeping buildings with a small lobby area, as well as putting the finishing touches to the kitchen. We might also put in a rain water shower in the lobby using a filtration system of charcoal and sand. We’re looking at improving the heating system too, so there would be hot water in the shower.
Claudia: How are you finding your internship so far?

Richard: It’s fantastic and very different to a conventional experience. Most architect interns expect to find themselves in a CAD role really, ie, computer-aided design. You might toy with planning a little, you might have a go at meeting clients and maybe specifying some materials, but still, the architect would take full control of the project. As interns here, however, we are taking projects from concept to completion. We are learning huge amounts.

Claudia: Tell us a bit about your working week...

Richard: As well as finishing the kitchen and doing the lobby, we also do adult education courses and courses for university students in construction. We teach rendering principles and a bit of timber-cladding and so on.

Once a week Reuben and I go to lecture and tutor some of the students at the university. This provides an additional income for the design team and gives us some really valuable experience in teaching, which is something that I’d quite like to get into in the future.

Claudia: Do you get paid for the internship?

Richard: Yes, we get about £12,500 a year, but if the business does well, we get a bit extra, so I’ve seen the money rise over time. That’s the beauty of working with a social enterprise - the money gets re-invested. And, here, if the business does well, everyone sees some of the extra money.

Claudia: What will you do when you finish at Hill Holt Wood?

Richard: I’m keen to get my Masters now – the next part of my architecture training. At the end of this internship, I’ve decided to continue my studies at the Centre of Alternative Technology in North Wales where they have a similar approach to architecture. I’m really looking forward to the next chapter and will stay in touch with Hill Holt Wood.
Nigel Webster,
49, Forestry Expert

Nigel is currently working with a team to build a small log cabin village in Big Wood. As part of his work, he teaches young people and works with unemployed people on government job schemes

Claudia: Nigel, how did you find yourself working at the wood?

Nigel: Earlier in my career, I managed a forestry estate for twelve and a half years, but they eventually closed my department and I ended up in a clothes factory. After four months, I was pulling my hair out, it really wasn’t for me!

I spent two months on the computer every night, typing in anything to do with trees, woods, weed, chainsaws, anything, and eventually a forestry expert job came up at Hill Holt Wood.

They wanted someone to teach young people with difficult backgrounds as part of the job. I had no experience of teaching 14-16 year olds other than doing some work with the Scouts. I ummed and arred, but they said they’d train me to work with the kids. That was four years ago. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to manage it, but I am.

Claudia: Tell us what you’re working on at the moment…

Nigel: We’re building a small, moveable, log cabin village – it has to be moveable because Big Wood is ancient woodland and those are the planning restrictions. The village will have a polytunnel and a gardening department for the Ecominds mental health project. We’re using the expertise of one of the lads at Hill Holt who actually went to Finland on a log cabin building course.

This was part of a HHW initiative, whereby staff who’ve worked here for a number of years are encouraged to do something they’ve always dreamed of and Hill Holt Wood will pay for it. Ideally it will be something that will benefit the organisation as a whole.

Claudia: And who are you working with?

Nigel: I’m training volunteers from the Job Centre on a flexible support scheme. They come to Big Wood for two days a week for seventeen weeks, as volunteers. We try to give them twelve weeks of physical work and after that they spend some time in the office.
Last year, I was working with the people who came through the Future Jobs Fund – young people who’d been out of work for more than six months. There were well over a hundred people who came to HHW and we managed to train about 30-40 of them in forestry. At the end, 80% went on to get a job, either here or elsewhere.

**Claudia:** Do you enjoy working on the job schemes?

**Nigel:** Yes, it’s satisfying. When they come here a lot of them are low, they’ve constantly been told they’re not good enough for work, some of them have probably never had a job. So they come here, pick an axe up or a de-barker for the first time and after half an hour, they’re stripping perfectly good logs or felling trees. If they show promise they can then do a chainsaw qualification or a chipping one or something similar. One guy eventually went on to be a tree surgeon, and is now working for a major gardening contract firm.

**Claudia:** What about working on the alternative education scheme?

**Nigel:** Every one of the kids has their own character. And you learn to adapt to each one. You do get that sense of satisfaction when they leave.

We do things like teach them maths through doing archery with them. They count up and average their scores. I wanted to train to be an archery coach and HHW organised this for me; they’re very open to any training you want.

Every year there’s a presentation day for the kids and it really gives you a glow when the parents come up to you and say ‘Oh, you’re Nigel…my lad likes you, you’ve really changed his life’. You think, well, yeah, I’ve done something there.

---

**I wanted to train to be an archery coach and HHW organised this for me**
It’s a chilly, damp day in April, and I’m here in Big Wood sat under a canopy drinking tea with a group of Ecominds volunteers. There are about 15 people of all different ages here today as part of the Ecominds mental health project, run by HHW. Some are chatting, others are warming their hands on a hot drink and being quiet. Another volunteer is sculpting a fantastic piece of art from wood.

“We work on all sorts of things, like rhododendron burning, making things, carving canes and stuff. You can work at your own pace here,” says Kevin Bagnell, a 43-year-volunteer, who’s been on the project nearly a year.

“I would like a full time job, but I don’t think I’m ready for it yet. So, this will help me get there. It gives me a sense of achievement. They’re a nice bunch,” Kevin says. He speaks gently and contemplatively.

The volunteers come several days a week to keep the land in good shape, as part of a wider initiative orchestrated by mental health charity Mind. There are 130 Ecominds projects around the country, all of which take on people who want to improve their mental health by getting involved in green volunteering like farming, gardening, or in this case, woodland management.
In 2009, nearly 40 million antidepressant prescriptions were written in England at a cost of £230 million to the NHS. The Ecominds projects, financially supported by the Big Lottery Fund, are exploring an alternative approach to dealing with mental health issues. They’re using a therapeutic and natural environment to improve mental and physical wellbeing.

“Everyone that comes reports that they feel better, some feel better for just getting out of the house and having some fresh air, for doing something productive, or for spending time with other people,” says Nikki Gibson, an occupational therapist who has been seconded from Lincolnshire Mental Health Trust to support the volunteers.

“The biggest theme seems to be around making positive social contacts and friendships. So we’ve got quite a lot of people here who will say: “I’ve got friends for the first time in my life. When you hear that from people in their thirties or forties, or even one of the 19 year olds, you know the value of the project,” she says.

The volunteers have a huge and wide range of backgrounds. They might have anxiety, depression, Asperger’s Syndrome, psychosis or no specific diagnosis and simply feel that being in a natural environment will be good for them.

Having worked in the NHS for 23 years and always in a ward or structured environment, Nikki says the initiative is very much a “throw the rule book out approach and is working incredibly well.”

“I think the real challenge for the NHS at the moment is how can they, we, do things differently... we need to be much braver in terms of NHS care now, and be able to step aside from the traditional model.

“Being here has given me a great opportunity to be able to go back to my job and say, I’ve done this, I know it works, I know that we can get there,” says Nikki.

It’s clear to see that Big Wood is a wonderful place to relax, get exercise and socialise. Witnessing the volunteers as they go about tree felling, coppicing, cooking and working on impressive art projects, it’s more than obvious that Big Wood is a genuine place of healing.
Claudia: Hi Sam, how long have you been coming to the wood?
Sam: About six months, roughly

Claudia: And, what have you been working on?
Sam: I’ve been working on all sorts, basic forestry, pruning the trees, getting rid of the rhododendron, that sort of thing.

Claudia: How often do you come here?
Sam: Three days a week. About 9am to 3.30pm.

Claudia: Tell me a bit about how your days pan out…
Sam: Every day we get picked up and we head to Hill Holt to get signed in, get the tools, then sign out and head to the Big Wood. Then I find out what I need to do for the day, like working on the roofs, pruning trees and that sort of thing.

Claudia: What were you doing before you came here?
Sam: I was a Future Learner at Hill Hood before I became a volunteer here. I was there from December 2010 to the end of August 2011. My Connexions advisor suggested it after I finished college.

Claudia: What did that involve?
Sam: Basic Hill Holt qualifications really, cookery, maths, ICT.

Claudia: What do you like about being here?
Sam: The space, the stress-free atmosphere… It’s quite relaxing. It gives you time to think, gives you time to get your head together and you also get to do some work.

Claudia: Do you plan to be here for a while?
Sam: Probably a few months. The Springboard Charity (for young, disadvantaged and unemployed people) is helping me look for apprenticeships and jobs, that sort of thing. They do mentoring. I’d like an apprenticeship or a full time job, hopefully something in mechanics or motors.
Susie Grainger has spent many years working with young people and has a keen interest in how alternative education can benefit this age group. She is aiming to quantify the impact of HHW’s work in greater depth through social impact report. It means the community, customers, funders, commissioners and supporters will now be able to see in much more detail how the organisation is genuinely changing lives.

Susie says:
“I have a background in youth work and I’m really passionate about, and interested in, alternative education schemes. So far, I’ve been spending time meeting a cross-section of people involved with, or working at, the wood. It’s a unique environment for all kinds of different reasons. Amazing things are happening here, but the focus is rarely on collecting what one would see as data and statistics. It’s more on making an impact on people’s lives directly.

Social enterprises often just get on with helping people at the sharp end and don’t stop to record what they’re doing. But, noting such detail can be useful in all sorts of ways, and Hill Holt Wood is now set on doing this.

My job is to give my view on how to record such detail, look at what is working well and producing the best outcomes, and to create a report at the end.

Lots of organisations and businesses produce annual reports that are very dull and boring, they don’t really bring the organisation to life. A social impact report seeks to get the stories underneath and talk about the impact the organisation has had on individual people, on the overall environment and community.

It’s not always possible to talk in numbers of people helped etc, but where possible, I think it’s very beneficial to do this. I want Hill Holt Wood to have more specific, useable and interesting data on the lifechanging work they do.”

Susie’s report will be independently verified