

# Making small work

## Community treeCycle

*Idyllically set in peaceful woods three miles north of Alyth, is a not-for-profit woodland business which has slowly been building up its presence on the woodland skills scene. Director Clive Bowman charts the success of Community treeCycle.*

From its humble beginnings of just a man, a chainsaw, an axe and an old army tent, Community treeCycle is now a growing social enterprise with two directors (Clive Bowman and Dick Craig), three employees, a collection of large wood drying sheds and a large workshop/training venue. Today its income comes from three main activities: 1) providing a local tree and woodland service, including thinning and felling contracts, garden tree and pruning work, management plans and disease survey work; 2) processing and selling seasoned firewood (all sourced from the woodland contracts), kindling and barbecue charcoal (made on site in a five-foot steel ring kiln); and 3) offering vocational woodland skills courses and activities.

For most of 2010, Clive Bowman, who has a background as a Landscape Architect and sustainable community project manager, toyed with the idea of setting up a social enterprise. He was kicked into making it happen by winning a Dragons' Den-style competition in November 2010, dressed in chainsaw gear, and carrying a piece of firewood as his 'product'. Community treeCycle was established as a Community Interest Company in April 2011 with invaluable advice and financial support from FirstPort<sup>[1]</sup>. Dick Craig joined the business a few months later. Dick is a traditional craftsman, initially trained to work in metal, but can turn his hand to almost anything. He now mostly works with wood.

As a social enterprise, providing social and environmental benefits through, and alongside, business activities, is very important. As well as providing

free regular activities for local groups, in particular the local cubs and scouts, Community treeCycle works closely with the Job Centre Plus and Perth and Kinross Community Care Services to offer work experience opportunities,



and employment contracts through Capability Scotland and SCVO. It also works closely with Perth and Kinross Council Rangers to help manage local woodland areas, in particular clearing wind blow from footpaths. Community treeCycle has had several commissions, providing a number of sculptural chainsaw-carved natural play pieces for Alyth Community Woodland, producing the 2013 World Jampionship trophies, carved signs and seats and even a chainsaw-carved four-foot-high Bertie Basset.

### Waste nothing

Recycling and utilising all resources is a key theme for Community treeCycle. All wood brought onto site from tree management work is used. Firstly, is it suitable for craft work or construction? If not, how about firewood? Hard wood is split for logs, soft wood cut and chopped for kindling. Any knotty bits too tough to chop are used in the ring kiln to make charcoal (about 600kg per year). Chainsaw chips are used for

smoking fish or road-kill, or spread on paths, and will be used in the compost toilet currently under construction. Charcoal dust is sold as biochar to improve soils.

Over the winter of 2012/13, a new training hut was purpose built as a venue for Scottish Woodland Skills Centre courses and activities, to replace the 1954 army tent that had been used for nearly two years (and had been rescued from being thrown away and mended). The new hut is also a rebirth, this time of the old timber-clad Alyth Guides' Hut, which was demolished in late 2012. As much timber building material was reclaimed as possible, and together with windows and roofing materials donated and scrounged from elsewhere, a fantastic new facility has been built by employees and volunteers, incorporating a small wind turbine (running LED lights) and a log stove.

Community treeCycle launched the Scottish Woodland Skills Centre<sup>[2]</sup> in early 2013, as the training and fun woodland activities side of the business. Volunteer tasks and vocational courses are provided for corporate groups, community groups, special needs groups and youth groups, as well as a wide range of courses for the general public, and Forest School activities for kids during the holidays. Talented local craftsmen and women provide tutored courses on greenwood working and carving and tool maintenance (Dick Craig), willow basketry (Jane Wilkinson), dry stane dyking (Ron McGill), pottery and kiln making (Nancy Fuller) and Forest Schools (Alice Warren). Courses run over half a day, a full day or a weekend. Other courses on offer include basic chainsaw use, bushcraft, using wood to heat your home, bow and arrow making, and much more. The Centre is located at the Community treeCycle wood yard,

Above: Opening a new training hut, by the oldest and youngest guides at Alyth

which has a large grass area for camping and activities, a compost toilet (soon!) and is close to an active population of beavers (a popular excursion).

Community treeCycle also hosts the local volunteer Tools For Self Reliance group<sup>[3]</sup>. Old, unwanted hand-tools are collected at the Council Recycling Centres or on request, volunteers renovate them and send the best to the charity's headquarters in England where they are sorted into specialist tool kits for a range of trades, and shipped to Africa, where they are given to establishing businesses, along with training.

2013 was the busiest year yet. Work continues to increase and with it, much needed income. In September, Community treeCycle opened its doors to the Perthshire Open Studios scheme for 11 days. On display were hand-made wood crafts and furniture, as well as paintings by a local artist. It was very successful and Community treeCycle will be participating again this year. There has been apple pressing and a Christmas fair, making decorations and selling simple wooden products. 2013 also saw the Postcode Lottery Trust award Community treeCycle funding to run a free programme of activities and courses for local community and special needs groups. Of course the highlight was hosting a visit from Reforesting Scotland in October!

Community treeCycle is now three years in the making. It has been a hard struggle, but great fun, to get it off the ground and make it earn a living for Clive and Dick, and it still has a way to go! Where next? More links with other communities? More vocational courses and becoming accredited to deliver qualification courses? Purchase of a woodmizer or small forwarder to expand the business? Watch this space!

### References

- <sup>1</sup>. [www.firstport.org.uk](http://www.firstport.org.uk)
- <sup>2</sup>. [www.scottishwoodlandsskillscentre.co.uk](http://www.scottishwoodlandsskillscentre.co.uk)
- <sup>3</sup>. [www.tfsr.org](http://www.tfsr.org)

[www.communitytreecycle.co.uk](http://www.communitytreecycle.co.uk)

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# Making small work

## Small, local and ill-advised - maybe you should just do it anyway

*Eighteen years ago, Jim and Maggie Birley took their one-year-old daughter and ran away to live in a caravan in a 55-acre 'wood' they had just bought in Fife. Maggie Birley describes how sometimes things just fall into place.*

When our adventure began, the wood we had purchased was part wood, and part rehabilitated opencast coal mine. Most people thought we were mad, but now, I am sitting at my desk in our eco-office overlooking our wood yard, which is a hive of activity. Scottish Wood was no long-term vision; it just happened. We were building a house and had to cut down a few dying oaks. No one wanted them; most Scottish hardwoods were considered pretty much worthless. So we made them into floorboards for our house. To this day, I still have chipboard floors in most of the house because Jim kept selling the floorboards. Maybe, we thought, we could do something here - use local timber to sell to local markets. This time, we were told not to be stupid - if it was that easy everyone would be doing it.

### New way forward

We wanted to set our business up as a social enterprise. Eighteen years ago, few knew what this meant, but we had just come back from El Salvador where social enterprises were common. They were part of the new way forward; after the civil war, newly formed local communities were setting up businesses to provide employment and profit for the locality. If they could do it, so could we. Scottish Enterprise told us not to be daft, and that they could not support us unless we were privately owned and kept the profits for ourselves.

However, we were young and foolhardy, and so went ahead anyway. We recruited directors from the local community, neighbours, forest consultants, woodworkers and community activists. We set up a local charity and the local charity set up the business. We failed to get funding, so we started very small - we were a

sawmill without a saw (we rented a mobile saw when we needed it). We cut and processed local timber and we sold it. We took on a New Deal trainee, who stayed with us. When we got some funding, we bought a saw, and took on another New Deal trainee, who also stayed with us. My parents then lent us enough money to buy a whole lorry-load of timber. We started to carry stock, we made a profit, we got bigger - way bigger than we ever envisaged.

As profits rose, we started giving grants to local community groups. We funded Active Schools to develop a Forest School programme in West Fife. We supported teachers to undertake Forest School training. We are part of the Forest Policy Group, working to promote a more sustainable and holistic future for Scotland's woodlands, delivering benefits to local communities, the environment and the economy.

Jim and I did not have a passion for wood and trees when we started. In fact, Jim is from Orkney and he thought trees just got in the way of a good view (he's changed his view point now). Newly returned from El Salvador, we did have a passion for justice. The people had taken on the oligarchy and had achieved so much. A new way forward, with new communities working for themselves and their neighbours. It was inspiring. We wanted to do something similar in our country and we just stumbled on the woodland and sawmill.

### Small is efficient

Many people will dismiss small micro-businesses like ours as 'lifestyle choices'; not part of the 'real economy'. Yes, this is a lifestyle choice - because we were not content with the existing choices.

However, take it from a different perspective and you can easily argue that small local businesses like ours are the most efficient - we deliver the most jobs per log. We also deliver the best returns to our local communities, local money circulates and stays in the area, rather than being sucked out to faceless investors. And we do this without taking a major toll on the environment. This is the type of efficiency that Scotland needs - we have limited resources in our country, we have to maximise their potential in all sorts of ways.

Our turnover is now over a quarter of a million (from about 30 lorry-loads of timber a year), and most of that money stays in the local community. Then there is the 'local multiplier effect', where local craftsmen and builders buy their materials from us and their income also remains in the local economy. There are many other yards around the country, all contributing in similar ways. Ideally there would be more, but our numbers are growing all the time. For example, the Association of Scottish Hardwood Sawmillers

(ASHS) <sup>[1]</sup> had six members when we started and now there are over 30. This type of 'lifestyle choice' business is actually a multi-million pound industry.

So our advice - if you have an idea, go for it. Talk to others, but sometimes it is right to ignore what they say and do it anyway. This particular type of enterprise is ideal for community groups, farm diversification or anyone who can find a bit of land. The knowledge to do it is freely available - most local sawmillers are happy to talk to you about any aspect of the business. ASHS runs training and best practice days and Woodland Heritage <sup>[2]</sup> runs a 'Woodland to Workshop' course in England. Jim and I are very happy to show you around and be at the end of the phone.

As for running away and freedom - well we have now bought an ancient boat. As for changing the world - we may have done that in a small way, in a tiny part of the world, but we are very strong believers of Think Global, Act Local. If we can't change our wee corner of the world, what can we change?



### References

<sup>1</sup> [www.ashs.co.uk](http://www.ashs.co.uk)

<sup>2</sup> [www.woodlandheritage.org/woodland-to-workshop-courses/item/346-may-2014-next-woodland-to-workshop-course.html](http://www.woodlandheritage.org/woodland-to-workshop-courses/item/346-may-2014-next-woodland-to-workshop-course.html)

<http://scottishwood.co.uk>

*Maggie Birley bought a small woodland in 1995 and has been living, working and learning in the community woodland and sawmill sector ever since.*  
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## Web products and services directories

One of the problems of being a small business or group is the lack of time or money for marketing, which means that potential sympathetic customers may buy goods and services from large suppliers, thanks to better advertising. This goes for woodland products and services as well. Fortunately, the internet offers a way for small businesses to advertise their wares. Many have websites but the most useful are directory websites, especially those run by organisations and people which are not trying to extract as much money from businesses as possible.

The websites that come up at the top of your searches spend a lot on making sure they stay up there, and are thus mostly based on the advertisers doing everything - finding the website, filling in the details and usually paying a fee. Because of this, a lot of small businesses do not bother with them; and the information is often wrong.

There is another set of websites run by trade organisations, and voluntary groups which are much more useful. Reforesting Scotland runs or is associated with several of these, including:



- [www.forestharvest.org.uk](http://www.forestharvest.org.uk) - wild harvested and woodland products
- [www.woodfuelscotland.org.uk](http://www.woodfuelscotland.org.uk) - firewood suppliers
- [www.treenurseriescotland.org.uk](http://www.treenurseriescotland.org.uk) - local native tree nurseries
- [www.willowscotland.co.uk](http://www.willowscotland.co.uk) - willow growers

Other useful directory websites include:

- [www.ashs.co.uk](http://www.ashs.co.uk) - home-grown hardwood timber and timber products
- [www.scottishfurnituremakers.org.uk](http://www.scottishfurnituremakers.org.uk) - promotes craftsmanship and design
- [www.scottishbasketmakerscircle.org](http://www.scottishbasketmakerscircle.org) - basketmakers and willow sculptors
- [www.usewoodfuel.co.uk](http://www.usewoodfuel.co.uk) - biomass suppliers
- [www.highlandenvironment.org.uk](http://www.highlandenvironment.org.uk) - environmental and/or sustainable services in the Highlands
- [www.seda.uk.net](http://www.seda.uk.net) - ecological designers (mainly architects)
- [www.smallwoodscotland.org.uk](http://www.smallwoodscotland.org.uk) - harvesting and small-scale contractors and sawmills
- [www.aecb.net](http://www.aecb.net) - builders, architects, renewables installers

There are many more, forming a growing network of directories and resources for community groups, woodland owners, woodland-related businesses and green-minded customers across Scotland. This article is one of those featured on the Journal page of the Reforesting Scotland website ([www.reforestingscotland.org](http://www.reforestingscotland.org))