

COPPICING COURSE – MARK PROBERT

On Saturday 14 Jan 12 I attended a Coppicing Course at the Commonwork Centre at Bore Place near Sevenoaks in Kent.

I was hoping to learn the best way to cut sticks to ensure we would have a sustainable supply of the highest quality.

There were 14 people on the course. Two were there to learn whether it was feasible to make money from their own woodland. A young boy and his dad were there to learn how to cut so that they could build a Round House and others were interested in hurdle making or conservation.



Coppicing of woodland has been carried out for thousands of years. The word Coppice probably comes from the French “Couper”; to cut, and its use dates from the Norman Conquest. Coppiced woodland provides us with a “crop” of sticks for various crafts including stickmaking, hurdle making and making thatching spars (used like a large hairpin to secure the thatch). Coppiced wood is also used for building materials for houses and fences, tool handles, and for firewood.

Coppiced woodland is more diverse in its structure than uncultivated woodland. As a result it has a richer mix of plants and animals. Birds such as the Nightingale and Warbler appear to favour habitats in coppiced woodland. Some species of butterflies such as the Fritillary have declined with the reduction

of coppiced woodland and the Dormouse can only survive in coppice. Woods are coppiced naturally when deer and rabbits nibble at the tops of shoots causing new shoots from the remaining stems. Overgrazing can kill the tree so it's handy when there are some brambles around to protect the new shoots.

The area of coppiced woodland is generally known as Underwood while the tall trees are known as Standards. Coppiced woodland will often contain some Coppice and some Standards and in this case the Standards will be spaced at about 30 metre intervals. This prevents too much shading but still provides some protection and mulch from fallen leaves. The Coppice is grown in cycles which vary in length depending on the use and the species of tree. In good conditions Hazel for stick making will be ready in 2 to 3 years and for Hurdle making in 5 to 7 years. Fence Posts and building wood will be ready between 15 and 20 years while Oak timber Standards, by contrast, will take around 150 years. The Underwoodsman or Woodland Manager will usually section his woodland so that he can cut a crop each year and the number of sections will be based on the length of time it takes to grow for his purpose. So if his primary reason for growing is for hurdle making he will have about seven sections, each at a different stage of growth.

The Underwoodsman teaching this course was John Waller who has been managing the woodland at Bore Place for over 20 years. In this picture he is showing Lisa how to trim the side branches off the cut rod using a Bill Hook.

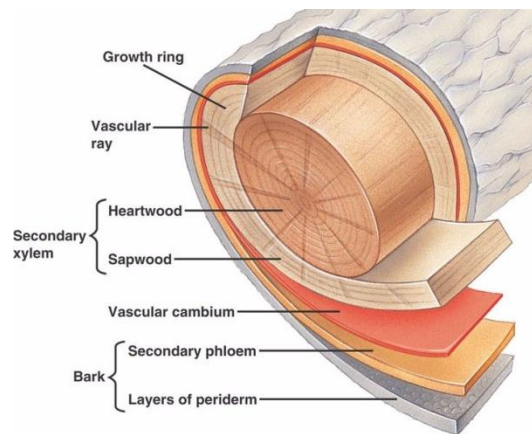


The one day course was split into 2 parts; theory and practical. The theory took place before lunch in the yard outside the house. Despite bright sunshine the day was bitterly cold so we were pleased when we were able to take a warming walk to the woods where we ate our packed lunches and had a hot drink. After lunch we started the practical elements. First John showed us how he had laid out his wood as a mix of Hazel coppice and Ash or Oak Standards. Each Hazel "Stool" is currently spaced at around six feet apart but he is constantly working towards a more dense growth, ideally each stool should be around 18" to 2 feet apart. He explained that this was achieved, not by planting saplings as you might imagine, but by a method known as "layering". Apparently saplings planted in established woodland are always at a disadvantage and never survive to maturity. Layering is achieved by taking one remaining strong stem from a newly coppiced stool, slicing part way through at the very base and bending it over until it can be laid flat on the

ground. Before it is pinned down the underside has the bark stripped away so that rooting shoots can sprout when in contact with the soil. The top side is covered lightly in leaf mould so that the growing

shoots can sprout. The layered branch remains connected to the parent stool so that the sap can continue to flow and keep the branch alive. Eventually the connection will be broken naturally when the parent tree recognises that the newly formed shoots are becoming competition. By this time, though, the new shoots will be sufficiently mature to survive through their own established root system. Throughout this process the Underwoodsman will be monitoring to ensure the correct buds at the appropriate spacing are allowed to continue to develop. In this way he may be able to nurture 3 or 4 new coppice stools from one branch. Over the years John has discovered that the most successful layering is achieved from branches laid uphill. This is because sap naturally wants to flow upwards rather than downwards. Layering can also occur naturally and I am sure you will have seen examples of fallen branches that have re-sprouted new growth. There is an example of natural layering at Westonbirt Arboretum near Tetbury.

Next we discussed the effect that coppicing has on the tree in terms of its lifecycle. Left to its own devices the tree would grow through a series of stages, subdividing and shedding seeds throughout its lifetime. Eventually the Bark would grow thick, the cambium and sapwood would lose their ability to transmit sap and repair damaged tissue and the tree would become susceptible to disease and damage and would then die. Cutting down to its base, before the tree becomes too old, is one of the ways of stimulating new growth rejuvenating the tree and ultimately prolonging its age.



The coppice is cut during the winter months when the tree is dormant and without leaves. It is often stated that they are cut when “the sap is down” but this, apparently, is not really the case as the sap needs to supply the tree at all times. The true advantage is that the tree has the lowest moisture content in winter and therefore takes less time to dry out.

The recommended manual method to cut is using a pruning saw but with thicker stems it may be necessary to use a small bow saw. Commercial growers, for whom time is money, will simply slice through all the tree stems together using a chain saw. The cut should be made as low as possible. This is to prevent new shoots growing sideways out from a remaining stump. In this way new shoots are forced to grow vertically from the coppiced stool giving a straighter stick. Ideally all stems should be removed at the same time which will ensure that no single stem grows to maturity. This is at odds with the way a stickmaker may wish to cut which is to select a single attractive stick from a group of stems and cut it out leaving the rest of the tree to grow. Without further management from an Underwoodsman to cut the whole stool the coppice would eventually grow to maturity leaving very few useable sticks. Fully cut the coppiced stool will produce better quality, straighter sticks within 3 years.

This recommended approach leaves stickmakers with a number of issues:

- If we fully coppice each stool we cut a stick from (if we are allowed to by the landowner), what do we do with the remaining wood?
- Do we really have the time to coppice each tree that we take a single stick from?
- Should we remove the waste wood when we have only been given permission to cut sticks for our craft?

These are a few of the questions that perhaps we, as a group, should be considering. We could, for example, team up with local conservationists or other groups who may have an interest in the remaining wood for other crafts. Equally we know that leaving some of the cut wood behind provides the required habitat for insect species such as our own local stag beetle.



I really enjoyed the course and found that it gave me an insight into how we, as stickdressers, fit into the group of other woodland crafts. It also gave me the ideas of how we can promote better quality sticks in a more sustainable way. I have only touched on a fraction of the information John gave us on that day but I hope you have found it entertaining and thought provoking.

John and his friends offer other courses at Bore place on various other Woodland associated topics including Pole Lathe Making, Furniture Making and Hedgelaying. I thought this course at £60 was good value and intend to take other course when I have the time. Visit John's website at:

www.underwoodsman.co.uk

Mark Probert

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www.oysterpictures.co.uk