

VIKKI FORBES

# A self financing nature reserve: challenges and opportunities



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*“Hatfield is of supreme interest in that all the elements of a medieval Forest survive: deer, cattle, coppice woods, pollards, scrub, timber trees, grassland and fen, plus a seventeenth-century lodge and rabbit warren.*

*As such it is almost certainly unique in England and possibly in the world ...The Forest owes very little to the last 250 years ...Hatfield is the only place where one can step back into the Middle Ages to see, with only a small effort of the imagination, what a Forest looked like in use.”*  
Rackham, 1976.

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Hatfield Forest was declared a Forest, in the early 12th Century, when Fallow Deer were introduced, it was part of the great Forest of Essex. Its function was the supply of deer for the King’s table, for the parks of gentry near and far, and for the occasional ceremonial hunt. It is the continuity of use, by commoners and owners, which has ensured the long-term survival of the Forest in its present traditional form. It is a truly remarkable place, as an example of a land-use system and vegetation pattern dating from early medieval times, which is still intact and functioning today and has a particularly well-documented and researched history. It is a superb and unique case study in historical ecology and landscape history.

Due to the lack of ploughing there are many hundreds of earthworks, which indicate man’s activities over the centuries from well before it was declared a Forest right through to modern relics from the Second World War. In the eighteenth century there was an introduction of a designed landscape adapted by Capability Brown. The National Trust was given the site in 1924 and the land is held in perpetuity.

## ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Forest extends over 424 hectares and has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a National Nature Reserve, although not a Natura 2000 site. It is located in Northwest Essex, and is an oasis in a landscape dominated by agriculture, roads and

Stansted Airport. The ecology is in notably pristine condition, only little affected by recent and destructive land use practices. The ancient coppices and wood pasture are likely to be managed relics of the original wildwood and now extremely rare. The ancient pollarded trees provide a last refuge for much rare and specialised wildlife, including dead-wood beetles and fungi, hole-nesting birds and bats, which also feed on the unimproved pasture. These habitats provide a direct link and continuity with the primeval vegetation cover of Britain.

## SIGNIFICANCE AS A PLACE FOR PEOPLE

For the estimated 250,000 annual visitors, Hatfield Forest is an areas of unspoilt countryside, where one can enjoy peace, quiet and tranquillity away from the



*Children taking part in a ‘bug hunt’ as part of the Hatfield Forest Education programme. (Photograph: The National Trust).*

crowds, traffic and bustle, a welcome respite from the pace of 21st Century working life. It has no organised leisure, thus enabling people to walk and reflect on the wonders of nature without the pressure to “do” something. It provides a safe haven for children to learn, play games and explore the wide, open spaces and natural adventure playground. It attracts a huge range of people doing a wide variety of activities all through the year including walking, fishing, horse riding and cycling. It also provides a superb outdoor classroom where children and adults can research and learn about the countryside, management, wildlife, art and history.

### **FINANCING**

The Forest is a self-financing property, which means that all the costs for managing the Forest have to be generated at the Forest and it receives no financial support from the rest of the charity. It costs in the region of £180,000 to manage Hatfield Forest annually, the majority of which is used to cover wage costs. The permanent staffing structure comprises a Property Manager, a Head Warden, two Wardens, an Education Officer, a part-time Administrative Assistant, a Catering Manager and a part-time Assistant Catering Manager. In addition, during the summer the staffing levels increase with the employment of seasonal staff to work in the café and at the car-park kiosk.

Being self-financing when managing a site of international importance for nature conservation creates both challenges and opportunities. It means that there is a great deal of freedom when making decisions about how to spend your budgets. It also focuses the mind of all of the staff at the property and makes everyone much more conscious of income and expenditure. The ethos is one of “if you can generate income to cover the cost of a project, then it is much more likely to happen”. Conservation however, is clearly the priority for management above and beyond income generation.

### **PRODUCE**

Although the Forest is now managed for conservation and recreation it has always been a productive working landscape. The coppice management creates a number of products which would have been used by the commoners in the past and which can now be sold to local markets. Firewood and timber are the main products, which make up the majority of the income from produce. It is critical that the principle of added value is adopted wherever possible. An example of this is the purchase of a kiln to dry the boards and planks sawn from the timber trees removed from the coppice. Kiln dried timber can be sold for double the price of part seasoned timber. We are able to recruit volunteers willing to help us process much of our timber and firewood, which also helps to keep the costs down. The firewood is sold at a premium when compared with other local firewood merchants.

This is because it has all been seasoned for two years in the woods, it is from a sustainable source and peo-

ple feel that they are contributing towards a good cause. Every year, all of the firewood is sold and it would be possible to sell perhaps three times over the quantity available. The quantity of firewood however, is directly related to the amount of management for conservation and not demand for firewood.

Other products sold include hazel poles, which are used for thatching spars, for beanpoles and to make hurdles. The recent fashion for traditional garden furniture has greatly improved sales of hazel poles. The advantage of selling these traditional products goes beyond the direct income; it also contributes towards keeping alive local markets and helps maintain the historical integrity of the traditional management techniques. In addition to the woodland products, there is also income from venison. The deer have to be managed in order to ensure the herd remains healthy and the damage from deer browsing is kept within acceptable limits. If the deer were unmanaged, the coppicing would become unsustainable due to the lack of natural predators and the resultant browsing.

### **VISITOR INCOME**

The majority of our income is from visitor related activities. A charge is made from Easter to the end of October for car parking, which makes up the largest portion of visitor income. Charging for some of the recreational activities such as horse riding and fishing also generates income, which have management implications.

There is a small café/kiosk, which is extremely popular and generates a good level of income for the property. Annually events are organised; some of which are designed solely as income generating activities such as outdoor theatre. Other events, such as family fun days and guided walks, where the emphasis is on education, are extremely important and the aim is to still try to at least break even with costs. An annual Wood Fair provides an excellent way to sell our produce at one time and also highlights to the public the importance of traditional, sustainable woodland management.

### **GRANTS**

At the present time it would be very difficult for the Forest to break even without the annual management grants. The Forest is in Countryside Stewardship, a ten-year management agreement funded by Ministry of Agriculture Food and Fisheries, mainly related to grazing, and this provides £5500 annually. English Nature contributes an annual management grant along with the Forestry Commission via the Woodland Grant Scheme. Smaller grants may be available on an annual basis for specific projects such as for capital purchases and those are always sought wherever possible.

If the Forest generated a surplus at year-end, that money is invested and provides some interest annually, but is available to use for bigger projects or unforeseen repairs. Hatfield Forest does have a small

endowment, which also provides an annual interest payment (under “other” in Table 1). It is the long-term aim to find alternative sources of income to ensure the sustainability of the property without the reliance on grants.

**EDUCATION**

Education is a vital part of the work of The National Trust and Hatfield Forest. It was considered very important when the education department was first set up that the same principles be applied, that of being self-financing. The largest expenditure is the Education Officer wage cost. After some research it became clear that it was possible for education to be offered at a high standard, a competitive price and to be self-financing. The department could not function without the help of a number of education volunteers.

The main portion of the income from education is from the primary school five to eleven age range. In the last two years links have really developed with secondary school groups, who can use the Forest for Geography and Biology fieldwork. They are especially keen on investigating potential conflicts between conservation and recreation.

Recently the adult education provision has been developed and a team training day has been offered to local companies with the help of a local experienced management consultant. This can and has provided the extra income to cover any shortfall in the school groups income. The day is focused on the outdoors and really fulfilled one of the key objectives of The National Trust by encouraging people out in to the countryside who might not otherwise have come.

**CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES**

There is a great deal of freedom associated with being master of your own budget in the way that Hatfield Forest is. If it is felt that for example fishing is no longer appropriate, then there is no reason why it cannot be stopped, providing there is an alternative opportunity for income. Long term planning however, can be difficult due to the fact that a large proportion of our income is dependant upon having visitors and if the weather is poor over the summer, then there will be a big reduction in income. Equally if a problem occurs, such as the roof on one of the houses at the property fails, then the cost has to be met at the property unless grant funding is available. Inevitably there are also occasions where there has to be a compromise and on a site of international significance for nature conservation it can be a difficult decision to make.

**TABLE I. AVERAGE YEAR HIGHLIGHTING INCOME & EXPENDITURE**

INCOME £		EXPENDITURE £	
Produce	12,900	Wages/training	92,000
Fishing/riding	7,000	Maintenance	
Annual grants	25,000	machinery running costs	7,300
Café	14,000	Building/Repairs Bills	6,500
Education	17,500	Contract labour	3,500
Car parking/visitor related income		Education	17,500
events	59,200	Materials & equipment	7,550
Donations	10,000	Telephone/Stationary/Expenses	
Rents	24,051	advertising etc	7,550
Other	17,500	Other	40,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>187,151</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>179,700</b>
<b>NET RESULT</b>	<b>7,451</b>		

*1 English pound = 1.57 Euros*



*The Annual Wood Fair at Hatfield Forest, where Forest produce is sold including hazel poles, timber, firewood and woodchips. (Photograph: The National Trust).*

**TABLE 2. EDUCATION INCOME AND EXPENDITURE**

INCOME £		EXPENDITURE £	
Primary schools	9500	Wages	15600
Secondary schools	600	Stationary/equipment	
Events	800	telephone	700
Adult events	3000	Expenses	550
Income from NT for members	1200	Marketing/advertising	250
Birthday parties	650		
Grants/donations	1500		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17250</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17100</b>
<b>NAT RESULT</b>	<b>150</b>		

expense of good conservation practice in 99 cases out of 100 and it means in the present political climate the property has a relatively sustainable future, unlike those sites totally reliant on grant funding. In an ideal world however, the top nature conservation sites should not have to rely on generating their own income to survive ●

**REFERENCE**

**Rackham, O.** (1976). *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*. J M Dent, London.

The overarching message would be that it is vitally important to be clear about the objectives for the site and stick to those objectives and not be steered purely by income generation. Hatfield Forest is an example where income generation is not at the

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*A view of the grazed wood pasture with hornbeam pollards. (Photograph: The National Trust).*

