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Living Woods

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Bartering for Wood

With volunteering big in the news after the Olympics, **Stuart Anderson** reports on bartering, and how to enlist help



Stuart has exchanged a living willow course for help on his smallholding. Each of the participants traded a day's work in the woods for this free course

We've been bartering for six years and find it a convivial, tax-efficient way of exchanging excess for needs. It can cover commodities, access to machinery and swapping of labour. Be imaginative, we've even swapped fine art for firewood. We own 11 acres (4.5ha) of mixed plantation woodland, never maintained by the previous owner since he started planting, some 35 years ago. As we knock it into shape, the thinnings are providing plenty of firewood: sycamore, ash and wild cherry, some hornbeam in the original field boundaries, self-seeded willow and occasionally some oak and a bit of Corsican pine.

If you prepare your own firewood, you'll know that the old adage, 'wood heats you three times', vastly underestimates the effort expended in turning a living tree into dried and split logs ready to fuel a stove. As forestry goes, it's a low-value product so the limit on how much one can ask doesn't necessarily reflect the work involved, and a few crumpled notes in the hand sometimes doesn't seem quite enough.

What could you swap for a cord of wood? What would be a fair reward for all that effort? We were lucky enough to find ourselves an artist long on talent but short on heating fuel: can you see the beginnings of a cunning plan here?

Our friend Alastair Price paints for a living. Along with high quality portraiture, one of his many talents is to illustrate shop windows, especially around Christmas time. This is painting on a big scale, from the inside out, back to front if you like, not being able to see what the finished effect is while adding layers of paint that conceal what he's already done: clever stuff. He and partner Caroline Johnson (also an artist) have a wood stove in the living room of their stone cottage and a wood-fired Rosières stove



The logpile ready for winter (left), expertly stacked by volunteer Darrell. Stuart (far right, on right) during a tea break with (from left to right) volunteer Chris, brother-in-law Bruin and grateful farmer, Hubert

in their kitchen, which heats their water and cooks their food.

We live in an agricultural barn, converted into a dwelling by the previous owner. It seems that, having got round three sides of the building, he ran out of money for weatherboarding, and the fourth side is sheeted out in OSB. This wall lives under cover, so is the least obvious, but could do with prettying up. We suggested to Al that we make his house warmer, in exchange for him making ours prettier. What barter – a system of exchange that predates money – allows you to do is to negotiate the value of what you want in relation to what you have to offer. Sounds easy enough but it was a bit of a head-scratcher: how many cubic metres of wood equal how many square metres of mural?

What we decided to do was to find an equivalence through the cash value of what we both produce: the local going rate for logs split, seasoned and delivered, against the price Al charges local shops for painting Christmas windows. Another advantage of the barter was that it avoided mixing money with friendship.

We wanted a tableau that reflected the previous history of the building and our current lives as smallholders and came up with the idea of a farmer sharpening his scythe. We were fascinated how Al built the image up over the course of a couple of days. Seemingly never completely happy with what





Artist Alastair at work (above left), and the mural (above) after three years of bartering

he's done – artist's angst – he felt he needed something else to animate the painting before it was finished. He came to find me to ask how big a goose was (we've raised them in the past). Once he knew how high it would be in relation to our scytheman's knee, he set to sketching the outline in pencil first and, in less than an hour, we had ourselves a fine bird.

Alastair and Caroline kept themselves toasty warm that winter burning their barter profits and the following year, it seemed natural to agree to the same sort of deal. So, the scythe-sharpening farmer got himself a wife and last summer Al finished off the wall, with the last section of OSB turned into a wall of 'cob' complete with an 'oak' lintel over the window, a nest of swallows and a barn owl perched in a 'hole'.

Bartering experiences

This is just one example of how we use barter to help our smallholding and woodland-owning lives. We own neither horse nor tractor and towards the end of each cutting season have amassed a large pile of logs that need to be gathered together and then transported the 3km back to our house. Retired neighbour Paul has a venerable Massey Ferguson tractor, the sort that never dies.

The old Massey is slim enough to allow me to wend my way through the access routes I've

opened up to collect all the cut wood and create one big pile in a place that is accessible to the trailer. Paul then joins us to help us load up and bring the woody harvest home. This is but one of many ways Paul helps us and, in exchange, I manage all the English-speaking guests in the holiday cottage he rents out, bringing him and his wife a healthy revenue for a few minutes typing emails and contracts and translating on guests' arrival.

Our Brittany village is patch-worked with small farms. Hubert, with a herd of 40 dairy cows, is typical. During the winter he delivers winter hay for our sheep and cow manure for our vegetable production and loans me a circular saw mounted on a tractor, which we use to chomp through the thinner branches of our firewood harvest.

Similar to other farmers in our village, he works on his own, sharing a labourer with another farm, his wife Bridget working off farm. Time is what he's short of. My side of the exchange is to give Hubert a couple of half days of labour – fitting in with his farming tasks – to help him prepare his own firewood. He was happily surprised when I turned up 'mob-handed' one time, with brother-in-law Bruin and volunteer Chris in tow. It pleased me to repay my 'debt' with bells and whistles and we introduced him to the great British tradition of the tea break, with my wife Gabrielle turning up at 4pm precisely, bringing with her cake, Kelly kettle and teapot; Hubert supplied the milk!

With a healthy imagination, there seems to be no limit to what one can barter. We taught a live willow-weaving course to a group of young French friends in exchange for a day's help each in our woodland. Many hands made a lot of work very light that day. The list goes on, but one exchange that is worth a special mention is volunteering. Each winter, we put out a call for volunteers to help us in our woodland and processing wood back at home. We barter free accommodation in our cosy cob gîte and hot tasty meals on workdays in exchange for enthusiastic help. Do get in touch if that interests you.

Details Stuart and Gabrielle live on their three-acre permaculture smallholding in Brittany and own 11 acres of mixed woodland nearby. They grow fruit, vegetables and firewood, raise sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks, rabbits and bees and rent out their holiday cottage (permacultureinbrittany.com). Alastair Price is planning to relocate to Lancashire and will be happy to take commissions around the NW of England (artistsmock.com). All photos by Stuart Anderson.

Barter tips



Bartering is beneficial to all parties, but to make it work well you have to take some care, says Stuart Anderson. "Be really clear with the value you ascribe to what you're offering and with what you expect in return. It's about careful and honest negotiation, especially if one partner is a little less assertive. Try to be really sure that both parties are happy before the barter commences and agree a time frame for the exchange to take place, so that, having given, you're not frustrated by a tardy response. Don't allow too much 'credit' to build up on one side."

It's important to realise that what you consider a benefit or a perk, and enjoyable, might be seen by somebody else as a chore. And just because they seem to enjoy what they do doesn't mean they don't deserve payment.

