

Making a working trip into a holiday Stuart Anderson invites helpers to his woods in Brittany

We have a hectare of Corsican pine in our woodland here in Brittany, for which the EU will kindly give us a subsidy for its first thinning. They even allow us two years to do the work but, with apparent surplus of time, it had slipped down the ever-present List-of-Things-To-Do. Until now, that is. The deadline is fast approaching and there's a lot still to do. We need what the French call a *coup de main*: we need help.

Re-assured by previous good experiences with volunteers, who'd found us through our blog and asked to come and work for their food and lodging, we placed a couple of adverts. Debbie and Stuart, an English couple living in Holland, came to stay for a week. Debbie is a social worker and needed a stress break. Stuart works as a welding foreman on oil rigs around the world and was on five weeks home leave. They share with many other people a simple dream of having a bit of land to grow vegetables and have a few chickens and would like to buy a place in France and did a bit of house hunting on their day off.

They were a fantastic help, clearing brambles, pole-sawing lower branches off the trees we're keeping and generally preparing for the felling. They seemed to have a great time, sharing in other aspects of our lives, such as helping us make nearly 300 sausages when our pigs came back from the abattoir. In fact, they asked us whether we felt we'd done alright out of the deal. I tell you, Roman slaves flogged by wicked overseers never worked harder than those two.

Volunteer ranger

Next up was Graham, who has a chainsaw qualification and is a South Downs volunteer ranger, also up for a French adventure. He arrived at the ferry port on a bike, particularly impressive as he was carrying a full set of protective clothing. Together, we've made a real dent in the pines marked with a red cross for felling.

Have you ever wondered why, if many hands make light work, then 'too many cooks spoil the broth'? It all comes down to management. We have been guided by a list of Dos and Don'ts from Rebecca Laughton's *Surviving and Thriving on the Land*, who suggests showing people around the place and explaining plans for the week rather than setting them to work as soon as they arrive. Amongst other



Graham arrived at the ferry terminal on his bike, but having a chainsaw qualification meant he could fell and sned trees with Stuart looking on

good advice, she advises having the days organised in advance and being decisive about jobs; allowing people the satisfaction of finishing a task and, most importantly, making sure that there is plenty of nice food!

We also placed an ad in *Living Woods*. Paul Johnson, a tree surgeon from Buxton, Derbyshire, his 13-year-old son, Chay and chainsaw-toting workmate Liam, asked if they could come and stay in January. Of course we said yes. With no disrespect to the others,

whose help we've been so grateful for, a double chainsaw combo with strapping lad on offer makes us feel like we've pulled the handle on a one-armed bandit and watched three lemons come up. Well, perhaps not three lemons but certainly tree fellers!

If you're in need of some tree care in the Peak District or the East Midlands, you can contact Paul at tree.services@ukonline.co.uk.

Learn more at permacultureinbrittany.blogspot.com.

How to volunteer

There are numerous ways to volunteer in the woods. For a start you can offer your services to the local Wildlife Trust (wildlifetrusts.org) to see if they have woodlands in your area. Then there's the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (btcv.org). You could talk to the woodland officer for your local authority, or to a Tree Warden (treecouncil.org.uk), or you could volunteer to become a Tree Warden for your area.



Then there'll be specific projects that are looking for volunteers. For instance you can become a Butterfly Detective in the Wyre Forest with the Forestry Commission and Butterfly Conservation (above), and you can even join a butterfly identification course at the Wyre Forest Discovery Centre (Mike Williams 01299 824860).



In the Blackdown Hills of Dorset there are the Neroche Conservation Volunteers (above), as part of the Neroche Scheme (nerochescheme.org). They always need people to help with butterfly conservation, to cut and maintain trails, to help with landscape plotting and with conservation work.

If you're feeling really generous you can pay to volunteer with Trees for Life (treesforlife.org.uk) helping them reforesting Scotland. For £70 you can join a Conservation Work Week in the Highlands.