

# An Opening in the Woods

(Or something weird is happening – people are having visions)

## The difference between quality and quantity

Conventional forestry work is carried out by a small profession of people who do not live in the forests where they work but travel, like most of us, to their place of work. In the history of forests and how we work with them, this is a new development. For most of our history, we have lived where we work or worked where we live. This recent separation has led, quite arguably, to a loss of connection with the materials that we work with. Today's forest industry could be said to be failing to see the real richness of woods for its overall orientation to producing a low-grade mass product. It has become something of a mechanical-like operation; in and out, cut it down – driven perhaps more by the capabilities of the machines rather than by the capabilities of the trees or the worker working with them. It is capital intensive – mechanical operations generally are – yet it leads to an end product that can never support a high level of land-based employment. Its returns are simply too low. Its ambition is simply too small.

The post-war years have seen the industrialisation of the rural economy. Agriculture and agro-forestry have become subsumed into the industrial process and large-scale market economies. The under-laying drive of this process has been something of a technological-reductionist view of the natural world. It's a perspective that sees the natural world as the raw bits needed for economic industry. In it, trees become reduced to economic commodities. This perspective is a product of our own values – money, technology; cash machines.

For most intents and purposes, the world that we function in, is the economic one. It is the world, most of us in the west, tries to succeed in. The trouble happens when this focus on material economics becomes all consuming, it raises then the question of our wider connection to the real means of production – the living earth and its fruits, and of course people. The economic world is essentially secondary in nature. It is not the prime world, and never will be. By acting as if it is the economy that's of prime significance, and we do often act in this way – choosing the pragmatic over the poetic, the cheapest over the best, we are working to forward a world of work that's limited in its connection to what its working with – a world that is essentially lazy in its scope. It's a perspective that propagates a limited sense, sometimes mistaken for common sense, that sees the natural world as being the raw material that feeds the economic world. We are in danger of consuming our very home because of this filtering of the world through the prism of obsessive materialism; because of this failure to understand a wider context – the wider reality of where we live.

It comes down to this: Where does the modern market economy exist? At its worst, it has little loyalty to any particular place – its loyalty is to making a profit - out of place.

When it comes to economics - and a lot of what we do comes down to this bottom line, we tend, as a rule, to act as if the natural world is a resource mine whose sole purpose is to supply in response to needs elsewhere. Sometimes these needs can be half way across the world - as in case of apples being imported into Britain from China or New Zealand. We don't tend to act as if the natural world is something that we are apart of integrally – the soil out of which our lives prosper – a more substantial bottom line. We don't tend to act, when it comes to the crunch, as if the natural world is something in its own right – as

something that gives us an underlying autonomy. In a very real way we almost deny, through our actions and choices, its living reality. We deny almost our own value – as people who live in a world that is more substantial than the economic bottom line suggests is the case. Ours is a world where we can, with courage, stand up for values beyond an exclusive kind of materialism – it supports us whatever our actions.

In the world of work, we sometimes, especially in business, act as if economic interest is something beyond us; to do with the likes of the interests of the company we work for. In this way, natural resources become tied to economic interests that are, in some ways, beyond our personal control. Even governments defer to economic interests. But as a consumer we do have a choice. We can support the risk-taker – we can buy fairly-traded organic produce; more we can become that ground-breaker. More importantly perhaps than ethical consuming, is the raise and creating the conditions for, holistic creative enterprise.

Many of us opt to work for established sectors of the economy because of the perceived security of doing so, and the need to finance a high-cost, external-energy-dependent lifestyle. It is both a pragmatic decision and a decision based on fear. The pressures to conform with the established approach to paying our way through life – getting a job, that we might not really like, so we can buy the things we need - works against taking a chance of something more progressive – like looking within ourselves for the things we need; the permission to succeed. We fear being marginalised, both economically and socially. We fear been seen as weird. Yet, it is at the margins where we are at our most free – free indeed to be weird, and too more amazing.

At the heart of this high cost / low adventure paradigm of our time, are the houses that we live in. They sum up our conservatism and dependency on things beyond ourselves – namely energy. There is a lack of affordable and workable living alternatives – there are plenty on paper but still too few on the ground. There is a real need for housing that doesn't take us almost half a life-time to pay for; that doesn't cost us so dearly; for housing with a light footprint. More than anything, it is the high-cost of shelter that ties us in to the established ways of the economy. It could be said that we waste an incredible amount of energy and potential to achieve something relatively mundane – a run of the mill house over-dependent on the consumer grid.

How does this connect with forestry? The modern primary resource economy produces a product that is a bulk one. In the case of forestry, the product is pulp and is essentially throw-away like a un-fulfilling connivance meal or a flash-flood disappearing down the storm drain. The point is it adds little of worth to our lives; in fact it washes away some of the goodness. You can only hope to make money from a bulk product like pulp if your overheads in terms of labour are small (the overheads in terms of machinery are conversely high), and if you are producing tons of it. It is a numbers game. Bulk products are the bare minimum, as a rule, that we can get out of the land in terms of quality. Yet inversely, it takes a lot out of the land. Maybe because of the speed and sheer scale of its cycle and the incompleteness of it. The cycle is rarely completed - for the essential process is a production line: a line going away from its beginnings. It takes value away from place; the end product – waste, ends up somewhere else in a flash and it's all over. It has very little life just a lot of movement. All show and no substance: like the packaging the pulp industry makes for the likes of ready meals.

In many ways, the primary resource economy is constrictive and negative, right at the point of real substance, rather than progressive and self-sustaining in its use of primary materials. It doesn't add to the world, it takes from it. By focusing on quantity rather than on quality and substance, it works to produce a world of pop-trash, the true cost of which is extremely

high – when it could be contributing to solving some of the real problems we face – if it just operated at a slower and more fulfilling pace. The alternative being suggested here is a low cost, in real earth terms, high-value living world where the onus is on creativity and possibility rather than on speed and scale of productivity. A world where we use what we have got instead of abusing what we have – the natural fertility / our garden creativity; a world with more small scale creative enterprises making quality things that the local environment needs – be it food or shelter, or inspiring things.

In recent years, recreation and tourism have come to supplant the likes of agriculture and forestry as the countryside's main economic activity. This new relationship with the land – of visiting and enjoying it as a thing of beauty (preferably whilst avoiding the intensive chicken rearing farm and spending a good deal of money at the nearest visitor attraction), is either the advent of a new kind of shallow relationship with the environment – the environment as a theme park (with a conservation section), or the manifestation of a deeper nature yearning and the beginnings even, of something more substantial – the opening up of the countryside, of the world even, to alternatives – born perhaps from a more playful and daring atmosphere than the likes of a NFU policy statement.

At the periphery of mainstream rural economic activity such experiments have already begun – experiments in the wonder of the small; the wonder being how much it contains when you look at through a new frame. From backyard farming to owner-occupied, creatively managed forest gardens, there is something of an unreported resurgence occurring, that is turning conventional agro-theory and agro-business on its head. These pioneers are not the victims of trends. They haven't planted up their fields with oil seed rape just because there is a good subsidy going or planted a featureless conifer plantation just to claim a tax break. What they do perhaps, is select the best of time – the best of the old, the best of the new. They, to blow their trumpets for them, often work minor miracles – a kind of real world alchemy – often turning apparently unproductive land into something of a self-sustaining gold mine. Whether it be a small market garden on the west coast of Ireland, producing organic vegetables in a region where farmers are otherwise grazing sheep and cattle and struggling to make a return on farms 10x, 100x as big, or a small woodland in Lincolnshire turning the prospects of troubled young people round with programmes like the alternative curriculum, these are people who have thought outside the box, who have chosen not to follow the current line of agricultural advice – with its swings and roundabouts. By not following, but by doing things on their own patch in their own way, in response to their own values, they have often established innovative (and tested) best practice.

Perhaps one of the keys to the success of small-scale sustainable rural enterprise, has been that it hasn't tried to replicate what is done on a larger scale. It hasn't been about trying to produce ten of what the large scale (industrial scale) produces 100 of. They are succeeding (when they do work) because they are situating themselves almost in all together different environment. An environment that is as different as the flat-earth society is from the perspective of the earth as a globe.

We all know that the idea that the earth is flat has been clearly shown to be but figment of an earlier imagination, yet mainstream economics has, too often, acted as if we are indeed living on a linear and flat world – things come in / things go out. What exists beyond this over-simplified factory model of raw resource in and finished product out, has often seen as being beyond the remit of economics and therefore irrelevant.

This failure to live with the observable reality of the earth as something living, as something round; as something with mountains and oceans and great continents; as a globe that is essentially inter-connected; as a place where science tells us that a butterfly flapping its

wings can be the beginning of a hurricane; as particular planet – our planet - existing as a green and blue jewel in the infinite realms of space – an image most of us are familiar with, has, not unsurprisingly, led to social and environmental tensions.

The classic example of flat earth economics is the case of the Aral Sea in the Ukraine. Here, the feed waters of this former inland sea, were diverted to supply an irrigation scheme. The scheme, so the planning went, would give the region an economic boost by enabling more cotton, a classic cash crop, to be grown. What the planners perhaps never even considered was the consequences beyond the models remit. Within years, the sea had shrunk into a brackish lake. The local fishing industry which had depended on the sea was devastated. Coastal villages and ports found themselves twenty miles from the new and still shrinking coastline. The increased irrigation had also resulted in increased salinity. None of these consequences had been considered (or were they just seen as side effects?), by the flat earth economy planners-programmers who had dreamt up the scheme. In their dangerously narrow and over-simplified model, they had focused too exclusively on their desired outcome – more water in; more cotton out. The same failure to see the full range of consequences beyond the desired outcome, was also evident in the outbreak of BSE in Britain. Feeding cows the bits of dead cows that nothing else could be done with, obviously seemed to someone, on paper, like a brilliant economic idea.

BSE exposed a deeper malaise. The rural, land-based economy is facing an inherent crisis. Cities are ill-prepared for what lies ahead, over-dependent on cheap energy, clogged up with cars, blinded by too many lights; pursuing high-cost life-styles that can't be sustained. The countryside is in danger of becoming a mere satellite of urban development. We are facing a crisis. You only have to watch the news; famine, wars, peak oil, floods, terrorism. Old structures and certainties are no longer what they once were.

But they never where the whole story – their omissions – as in the case of current economic development theory, are often as large as the reality of the earth itself. We face to then, an opportunity - for what is in crisis, and too denial, is perhaps but a stage along the way to something more substantial and far-reaching.

A crisis is both the place where things come to an end and things begin. It can be a time of renewal or a time of tiredness – as bad debts seem to multiply our burden and weariness kicks in – it can lead to a sense of things being finished without letting go of what is finished but choosing instead to dwell in it like a cynic at home with visions of wastelands and with no plans for a better day. Or it can be the point that that brings things to their moment, that inspires new energies, new adventures. It can shakes us free, makes us see more clearly, that most mysterious of things, under-laying reality. It can makes us see that we don't not have to follow but are able to instigate; the freedom to create.

We are living, I would argue, in a period that dares us to dream again – that dares us to undo what needs to be undone; that dares us to do this against a back drop of moral bankruptcy, wars, starvation and environmental degradation, against a backdrop to – it must be said – of a beautiful earth, of some amazing people, of some progressive trends.

For all the good things the materialistic, technological and unsustainable age has given us - and us in this context is a limited kind of us which isn't really us at all, it hasn't really addressed some of the age-old illnesses of humanity, that have festered and erupted throughout our history; whether it be tribal mentality, hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness, selfishness, short-sightedness or a lack of holistic thinking. It has been more about the pursuit of material comforts for some, than about the evolution of humanity as a whole. When we see it as but an age, a stage along the way of progress something expansive

happens - a whole new frame of reference opens up – the possibility of a new era before us. The possibility of new medicine to make us live again.

We face now the prospect of an era ahead where problems and solutions are bought back down from institutions and world powers and back into lives of everyday people. If that sounds a little too grandiose – what I'm getting at is that maybe we can create a world with a little bit more civic participation and a little less apathy and alienation. Or in the words of the Labour government:

*"Local people and communities driving improvements in their neighbourhoods in partnership with local government"*. Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity (2005), p 18.

So can we conjure up a new resurgence in land-based activity – a new dynamic in the rural economy? It's happening already, maybe not at the NFU but it's happening. What we can do is work to extend it, to take it further – to take it into new areas; as the new time explorers.

Sustainable development is not about some isolated self-sufficiency (an inward looking community), nor is as economically peripheral as collecting the odd bit of firewood – it is a renewed world of opportunity that starts with personal empowerment, and embraces community-building, democratic participation and creative down-to earth economics. It's about doing things at the scale of people. It's a focus that frees the finer details of reality – the wider picture – where our food comes from, the philosophy of our shelter, the kinds of jobs that we do, the kind of satisfaction we get; the kinds of people we are. It's about the quality of life we live / want to live.

The small scale approach is like an opening in the woods – it's seeing the possibility – the opportunity to create a place to live more fully. It is too about flexibility and adaptability – about the relative ease at which the small can respond to change – to chance and circumstance – to the rhythms of a living world. It's about seeing in a timber off-cut the possibility of a table leg.

Small scale rural enterprise – be it garden farming or forest gardening is not some economic non-starter but in fact represents a return to original inspiration of economics – not to waste energy; to make things more wisely.

Perhaps the difference between the two approaches – the hardcore industrial and the small sustainable – is most clearly illustrated by the difference between pulp and a self-built timber house. Both derive from the same resource – what is different is the vision of what can be done with it.

The Cooks That Dance, The Shed, Buxus, Oakerthorpe, Derbyshire. 2005