

A WAY INTO THE WOODS



Beyond pleasure, woodlands provide the resources for countless low-impact livelihoods, benefitting nature and humans. Here we look at the life of the man who pioneered the revival in small woodland livings, and question the wisdom of undermining the rural economy with fuel imports from worse-off countries. We spotlight a charity whose vast woodlands could arguably be put to better use, some C of E loos, and Government promises to plant millions of trees, while Network Rail and Sheffield City Council do their best to get rid of them.

A MANY-HATTED MAN

Walter Lloyd, who died in south Cumbria in January, aged 93, was best known as the kick-starter of the coppicing and charcoal-making revival which has swept the country since the mid-1980s. Yet when he moved into the abandoned woods of Rusland, between Coniston Water and Windermere in 1986, he was already past retirement age. The immense lease of life that followed, and which brought so much new vigour to the derelict woodland landscapes of Britain, was truly extraordinary.

But then Walter could never have been 'ordinary'. Growing up in a musical family with landed connections in the proto-hippy Cornwall of the 1930s, his early education consisted of rambling about the countryside with the donkey his mother had bought him, hanging out with farmers, gypsies, woodsmen, famous potters and other such marginal types, until his despairing parents packed him off to Gordonstoun for a taste of Spartan cold-water therapy. But then war broke out, and the school was evacuated to deepest Wales where Walter discovered a charcoal-burner's camp and thereafter did no more lessons. His handwriting remained unreadable to the end of his days.

The war came. He joined the Navy and served on Arctic convoys (for which Putin recently awarded him a medal); off the Normandy beaches on D-day and on minesweepers in the South China Seas. Then to Cambridge for an agriculture degree, after which he married his cousin Vi and moved to one of their joint family's many derelict farms (acquired from Lord Byron's estate in the late 18th. century) on the East Lancashire moors. With an old vanner horse, Maggie, he made hay and attempted a milk round; but soon turned to breeding hardy herds of Fell ponies and Welsh Black cattle which roamed the vast commonlands, (not to mention the school playing-fields) for miles around the Whitworth Valley. Selling his ponies to the North Country travellers made him part of that horsemen's society, and in 1967 he helped Gypsy chief Sylvester Gordon Boswell to see off official attempts to shut down the centuries-old Appleby Horse Fair. Walter then

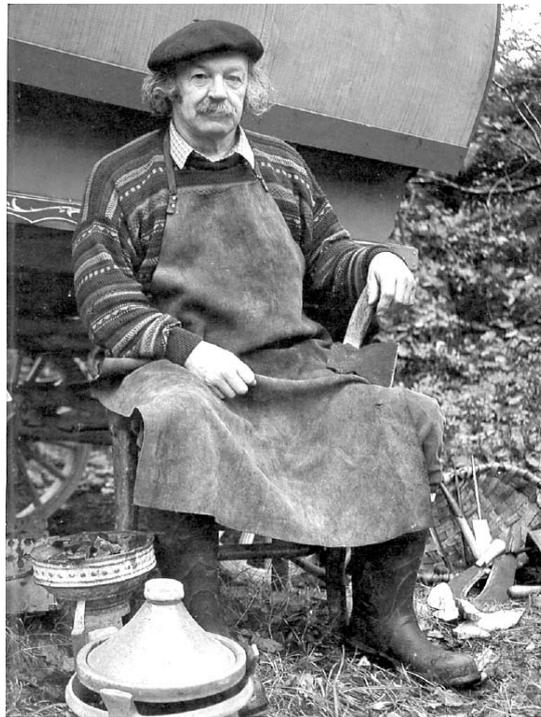
formed a joint committee between travellers and Appleby Town Council, of which he was the secretary, even though no-one could read his writing. At times this proved a handy way of glossing over inconvenient bureaucratic decisions. The Fair continues to flourish to this day.

Travelling up to Appleby in the great horse-drawn migration over the Howgills every summer with a string of half-wild ponies tied to the back of the waggon, reins in one hand and harmonica in the other, playing the fiddle in the pubs and never short of an apt, if cryptic story for every occasion (shades of the Mulla Nasruddin) Walter was an admirable hybrid: half-farmer, half-Nomad, and wholly original.

Meanwhile, with Vi, he had produced three (later four) children and so found himself obliged to get a paying job to supplement the scanty farm income. Being Rochdale's Road Safety Officer got him involved with the post-war Civil Defence organisation, and when the Government abolished that, he founded Civil Aid, which trained all manner of people to help out in all sorts of emergencies.

This being the early Seventies, most of the emergencies took place at pop festivals, beginning with the first Glastonbury, where with Sid

Rawle and a young Simon Fairlie he fed the 5,000 on tomato soup and salvaged skip fare. Soon after that he acquired an ex-army Green Goddess fire-engine, fully equipped with antiquated cooking apparatus (Soyer boilers originally made for the Crimean War), miles of field telephone cable, rusty stretchers and donkey blankets. At catastrophically rained-off festivals where hypothermia threatened, lives were indeed saved; and the meddling authorities were made redundant by this anarchic self-help presence. At the Isle of Wight festival in 1970, attended by around 600,000 people, Walter stood beside the Chief Constable of Hampshire, surveying the police helicopters whizzing overhead. "Oh," said the CC, "that's funny — I thought we only had seven?" "Don't worry", said Walter, "the eighth is one of ours".



As Free Festivals became an increasingly visible embarrassment, with tipis popping up at Stonehenge and in Windsor Great Park and worse, the Government formed a committee to abolish them, chaired by Lord (Peter) Melchett. Walter was asked to join it, and somehow persuaded the Powers That Be that festivals provided a vital education in self-reliance and rural living for deprived urban youth. Civil Aid morphed into Festival Welfare Services and free festivals continued, the backbone of the British counter-culture, even as the commercial variety descended into a grotesque spectacle of consumerist hedonism.

The traditional form of people's gathering, the Charter Fair, was another passion. Alongside keeping Appleby going, Walter also revived a number of historic North Country fairs, at which by law anyone is free to trade their wares, be that horses, cheeses, busking, hiring oneself out for haytime or hawking old tat. Charter Fairs reflected his belief in people being able to run their own affairs free of Higher Interference; which also fitted in with a dedication to preserving common land as commons. After the introduction of the Commons Registration Act of 1964, as the Secretary (minutes illegible) of the East Lancashire Commons Association he oversaw the survival of thousands of acres of rough grazing all over the Pennines, not least by grazing them himself with ever-increasing herds of semi-feral cattle and ponies, in defiance of the creeping tide of golf-courses.

By now Vi was desperate for some veneer of normality, and she persuaded Walter to stand for Parliament as Conservative candidate for Rochdale, the revolting Cyril Smith's fiefdom. He didn't win the seat, but instead the accolade of "England's Leading Tory Anarchist". Although he had inherited a lot of land, most of it was blighted by acid rain and Victorian quarrying; and the crumbling farmhouses were rented on repairing leases at £25 a year. As a 'Tory' landowner, he was hopeless. As a land-user, with his nomadic and mostly uncatchable herds, he was magnificent. The Hades Hill Herd of Fell ponies, carried on by his son Tom Lloyd, is now one of the few surviving stocks of an endangered native breed.

Proper Job

In a parallel career, Walter was by now the Emergency Planning Officer for Greater Manchester, with a Piccadilly office festooned with washing-lines for drying wet clothes from the farm. This job sent him to Belfast at the height of the troubles, and to Trinidad, where, sharing the name Lloyd with Clive the celebrated cricketer, he was fêted all over the island. In fact the only almost-emergency he had to deal with in this job was when the GMC sewage department threatened to strike, and some two million Elsan portable toilets had to be found in a hurry. Digging trenches in the Arndale Centre was his preferred option, however: his festival experiences had made him an expert on disaster sanitation. But, like the "Protect and Survive" nuclear war threat of 1980, the strike didn't happen. At the height of this Cold War crisis, Walter appeared on the TV news in a muck-splattered overcoat to give advice on What To Do When the Bomb Drops. He pulled a bottle of whisky, tangled in baler-band, out of his pocket and said: "Drink *all* of it. You've got four minutes. Die happy!"



Deeply Vale Festival 1977: Walter, Gill, Sid's friend, Sid Rawle; (see "Another Dead Anarchist" in *The Land* 9, 2010)

Home in the Hills

After his three elder children had grown up and his wife Vi had left him for a more salubrious life as a schoolteacher, Walter spent ten years living alone in the thirteen-roomed farmhouse, which gradually filled up with an eclectic assortment of stuff. After an old chapel harmonica fell to bits with woodworm, a door was discovered behind it which led to two more rooms crammed to the rafters with a composted mixture of Persian rugs and 18th century maps, newspapers from the Coronation and the Moon Landings, and sackfuls of mouse-chewed paperwork. "Ah yes", said Walter, when confronted with this sheer cliff of detritus, "that's my open-cast filing system".

In the mid-1970s he and I met on the road to Appleby and eventually with my two young sons I moved in to Duckworth Farm. Apart from the bulging contents, little had changed in the house since he and Vi had moved there in 1948, although the livestock no longer lived downstairs and there were now some lightbulbs. Mud still squelched up between the sitting-room flagstones and snow would blow in under the stone slates and settle on the ends of the beds. The bleakness of the treeless Pennine uplands, with large, distant herds of animals to fodder in winter, and to round up from irate villagers' gardens in summer, made for a harsh life. After ten years of incessant chilblains, and defeated in the War against Tat, I left, which turned out to be an excellent move for all concerned.

The Woodsman

So at the age of sixty-two Walter suddenly found himself alone again, living in a place that was uninhabitable by lesser mortals' standards, and with a Local Government pension. It was a wide-open opportunity to re-invent his life as what, it turned out, he'd always wanted to be: a charcoal-burner. Those days in the Welsh woods as an evacuee schoolboy had left an indelible desire for that way of life, the perfect licence to live wild among trees and get extremely grubby. Unfortunately by the mid-1980s the trade had died out, all but one survivor: Bill Hogarth, coppice-merchant, of Black Beck Woods near Bouth, in Cumbria.

At the time the coast-to-coast hazel coppice woods of South Lakeland, relics of the old gunpowder and iron-smelting industries which had relied on local charcoal, were fast dying of neglect. The New Woodmanship Trust, co-founded by



Walter's son Bill Lloyd, (who was at the time extracting timber with horses in Cumbrian woodland) commissioned Walter to run a pilot project to demonstrate the commercial potential of charcoal burning. This was a resounding success, followed up by commissioning Mike Gardner to write a report on the potential coppice industry, investigating what products could still provide a viable income for independent woodsmen in the 20th century. Items such as peasticks and bean-poles, hazel hurdles, besom brooms, washing-line props, oak-bark for tanning and roundwood for rustic furniture were still in demand; plus a new market for charcoal, for barbeques. With Bill Hogarth as mentor, Walter, Mike, and another Mike, Walter's stepson (Loggy and Twiggy) set to, and soon had a number of woodlands back in production. Many other green woodworkers-to-be were attracted to this evolving hub of rediscovered crafts, and soon there were hundreds of coracle-makers, swill basket weavers, chair bodgers and the like, countrywide, making their goods and teaching their crafts to others, as the white smoke of charcoal burns rose up from woodlands all over Britain.

Sticks and String

Although charcoal and coppiced firewood could provide the bread-and-butter income of a woodland livelihood, there was still no single high-value coppice-wood product that could bring in occasional large wodge of cash. Meanwhile many woodsmen and women were either living in cramped caravans, mouldy benders, or having to rent housing. The single answer to all of these problems was yurts. With felt-maker Steph Bunn, Walter set off to Kyrgyztan to investigate; and returned with a collection of doodles on scraps of paper, which soon translated into plans for adapting the overly elaborate structure of the Mongolian *ger* for coppice-wood construction and the British climate. So the English Woodland Yurt was born. The rest is history.

Yet another near-dead rural industry re-invented by Walter was willow-growing, not only for basket-making but also biomass, wetland restoration, reedbed sewage systems, living sculptures, biodegradable coffins and so on. In the early 1990s he was called in by

Liverpool University to revive their derelict botanical gardens on the Ness peninsula, which harboured the jungly remains of the national willow species collection. With landscape artist Ian Hunter, he organised an international basket-makers' festival, and rescued some seventy varieties of willow including every imaginable colour, and the invincible Campbell's 109, the basis of various subsequent biomass plantings around post-coal-fired power stations such as Drax.

By now Walter had acquired some boggy fields at the foot of Lake Windermere, where he continued to live, sleeping in his old Appleby waggon, till the end of his life. This wet land was ideal for willow-growing, so he started a plantation which supplied cuttings to other growers. He also made rope, from Herdwick wool gathered from barbed-wire fences, and was part of the annual WoolFest at Cockermouth, Cumbria, which succeeded in finding many novel uses for what is now usually treated as a waste-product. He continued to travel, horsedrawn to Appleby Fair every June with sons Bill and Tom, in a waggon he'd built himself, pulled by ponies he'd bred; to music festivals with the Lakeland Fiddlers, and to Morocco and the Canaries in winter, with his beloved long-time companion Sue Walker, in search of material for a book on pack-horse saddles. Other writings included a book on how to build bow-top Gypsy caravans, and *Travels with a Pony*, reviewed in *The Land* 18.

Perhaps a lifetime of chasing after ponies who didn't want to be caught helped Walter stay remarkably fit for nine decades; plus doing a bit of scything on his rushy meadows most days, and jogging, which he took up at the age of 92. Nobody doubted that Walter would go on for ever: rather like his mother who only died (at 96) after absent-mindedly falling out of an apple-tree, he seemed indestructible. But a bang on the head in August slowed him down, and he died in his sleep in January, surrounded by his extended family and friends. His funeral, with a willow coffin aboard a splendid cart pulled by two fine Fell mares, led by Lakeland fiddlers and bagpipers, and followed by a motley throng on foot to the tiny village church, was an almost mediaevally colourful send-off for a man whose many lives, all rolled into one, have enriched so many others. What is perhaps most extraordinary is that it was the *last* third of his life which generated all the woodland happenings — "I was a late developer", he would say. "I never really got going till after I'd retired".

The family firm of Lakeland Charcoal still thrives, over thirty years later, nowadays run by Walter's other stepson, Tom Barron. As do a great number of other modest enterprises in the woods all over Britain, providing independent and ethically sound outdoor livelihoods for many who might otherwise be trapped in the mainstream economy. And there's still plenty of room for more to come. The woods are alive, with the sound of bodging.



Making rope at Haverthwaite Sports, sometime this century. Walter would never divulge where he found his hats.

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