

Neroche Woodlanders Annual Report 2023-24

Working with nature to fire spirits, kindle community and foster wellbeing



Neroche Woodlanders Limited is a Community Benefit Society registered in England with the Financial Conduct Authority, registration number 8719



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VISION

Our vision is for a reciprocal, healing relationship between land and people, where nature flourishes, and people are restored

OUR MISSION

Rooted in the Neroche Forest and reaching out to the wider Blackdown Hills, we work to enable people to become a beneficial part of a beautiful, healthy ecosystem. We offer a welcoming, non-judgmental, and transformative place for people of all ages and backgrounds to create community, by listening, learning, doing and sharing. We focus especially on those for whom reaching natural places is hardest, and who, because of isolation, trauma, or exclusion, have the most to gain. We tend the land to create a richer place for all creatures. We seek to be a place of hope in challenging times.

HEARTH

Create a robust, responsive organisation with a confident, skilled team

LAND

Manage our woodland for nature and people, as a focus for activity and a source of materials

PEOPLE

Consolidate and strengthen our wellbeing programmes

INSPIRATION

Reach out to others and share our experience

VALUES

Act with head, hand, and heart.
Respect, include, listen, empathise
Be diverse in knowledge and experience
Be practical, and recognise the intangible

WHO DO WE SERVE?

We seek to be a broad, inclusive melting pot of people, encouraging mixing – of ages, backgrounds, perspectives. We skew towards those with most to gain from what the land can offer.

Hearth

It's now some 14 years since the acorn idea for Neroche Woodlanders first put down a root at Young Wood. We've come a long way since then, and have become a tree of many branches, interlacing human experiences with a wild woodland.

In this report we climb through the branches of our story during 2023/24, from the 'hearth' of our operation as a social enterprise, through our interaction with the land, the account of the people we have worked with, the inspiration we have sought to share, and the relationships we have maintained with organisations beyond the woodland edge. In simple terms of numbers, some 238 people – adults and children – spent time at Young Wood during the year, during a total of 114 separate sessions.

During the year, we also refocused our collective direction and strategy as an organisation: from this grows the shape of this annual report and our plans for the next five years.



Board

The Board of Directors during the year comprised Maxine Anderton, Jenny Archard (Secretary), Sue Farrell, Becks Gould (stepped down during the year), Andreas Hofmeyr, Sarah Holdway, Gavin Saunders (Chair) and Barbara Wilcox (Treasurer).

Staff

The Executive management team were Jenny Archard, Sarah Holdway and Gavin Saunders. The Woodland Wellbeing team were Jenny Archard and Tiff Lovedale, supported by Sarah Holdway and Alan Bruford. Children, Families and Parent & Toddler sessions: Sarah Holdway, with Jo Hinds, supported by Lawrence Bole, Sara Churchill, Jane Embleton, Ellie Hayes, Tiff Lovedale, Gilly Notley, Clare Smith and Rowen Wilde. Woodland management and NCV: Gavin Saunders with support from Lawrence Bole.

Volunteers

The **Neroche Conservation Volunteers** team worked at Young Wood throughout the year, and on a range of other wildlife sites, notably Mount Fancy butterfly reserve, Otterhead Lakes, Keepers Field at Wych Lodge, Thurlbear Wood, Southey Moor, Blagdon Hill Green, Burnworthy, Underway Meade, Wrangcombe, and the Neroche Herepath. They work with endless positivity, good humour and tenacity.



NCV invested 255 volunteer days across the year, of which 78 were spent at Young Wood. The regular volunteers were Peter Maben, Mike Woodhead, Paul Jones, Mike Rostron, Peter Woodcock, Peter Joyce, Dave Downs, Nigel Perry, Tony Spiess, Chris Baker, Tim Slator and Phil Bisatt, with Claire Stenhouse, Lorri Bee, Charlie Craddock and David Bryant. NCV tasks were organised by Mike Woodhead, Peter Maben and Gavin Saunders.

Wellbeing and Families volunteers were integral to these sessions, providing support to participants and help with the practicalities of making things run smoothly. Their commitment and hard work make a big impact, and we're grateful for the opportunity to work alongside such passionate individuals.

For the Woodland Wellbeing programme we had two core volunteers, Sue Farrell and Richard Threlfall, with four others who joined us for part of the period – Mike Watkins, Holly Kirkby, Sonia Hulejczuk and Donna Harris. For our families sessions the volunteer team included Lucy Montgomery, Barbara Wilcox, Becks Gould, Debbie James, Karen Turvey, Sarah Gould, Sue Farrell, Charles Hill, Sue White, Penny Rostron, Cath Graham, Sonia Hulejczuk, Bobby Crabb, Christine Langston, Thomas Hamilton-Shaw, Tank Adams, Hannah Montag and Maxine Anderton.

During the 2023/24 financial year Neroche Woodlanders Limited had a turnover of £103,328, with an operating surplus of £3883. Income comprised grants (£44,638) and invoiced services (£54,099). Full accounts are available separately to this report.

Finance

Land

The Woods

Across the seasons, the NCV volunteers maintained the rides and glades through Young Wood, and created new paths. We coppiced a further stand of tangled hazel and willow in Cold Croft Coppice, to rejuvenate an area which has a rich ancient woodland ground flora. This and other thinning and coppicing yielded the firewood which supplied the campfire upon which endless kettles boiled and meals were prepared.

With funding from the Blackdown Hills AONB we built a new compost loo near the Pole Barn, providing hard-surfaced all-ability access for those with limited mobility or families at the car park. We also created a new level path and bench circle overlooking the slopes, providing a quiet space to look into the depth of the woods, which anyone can access.



Nature

Enabling people to experience and co-exist alongside the other creatures of the woods, is central to our purpose, and we aim to create a reciprocal relationship where people can make the woods better for wildlife, in return for the joy of witnessing that wildlife and gaining wellbeing for themselves.

UK-wide, 2023 saw climatic records broken, damaging storms, and an unusually mild winter. At Young Wood, the green shade of the forest helped temper the extremes of the weather, but the effects of climate change and other environmental change continued to show. Meanwhile ash dieback continued to spread in Young Wood, necessitating the removal of some trees in areas most frequented by people, though a good number remain healthy for the moment.

We shared our camp kitchen with wrens' nests, and across the wood we witnessed spotted flycatchers, silver-washed fritillary butterflies and green woodpeckers, while the meadows in the valley below Young Wood were awash with pyramidal and bee orchids. There was much to be thankful for.

People

Woodland Wellbeing

This is our core programme for adults with moderate mental health challenges, providing a 'safe base' to experience nature as part of their recovery process, and offering a sense of community and connection, both with other people and with the land. We ran 31 sessions on Tuesdays across the year, and hosted 22 participants over this period, with a regular group size of 10 to 12. Some people attend long-term, and others come for just a few weeks before moving on.

We ask people about their progress, and gather end-of-day reflections, and comments show us how much people gain from these sessions:

"I have gained a lot more confidence and independence as well as improving the social aspect of my life"; "...To value myself..."; "...Ability to get on with a broad range of people..."; "A place I can hold in my head and recall when I need peace from troublesome thoughts."



Working collaboratively with Somerset Wildlife Trust, Somerset College and Charis, the refugee charity, we ran a series of afternoon nature-connection sessions for young refugees learning English as a second language. A complex project because of the number of organisations

involved, it worked very well for the young people who came, who were a joy to be with and enthusiastic to be in the woods and share their stories. Food became central and a kind of shared language. Thanks to Jane Embleton (staff) and Sarah Gould (volunteer) for making this happen.



"I received support that I couldn't have imagined prior to attending sessions. I found my voice again and began to believe in my own worth and potential to rebuild my life. I felt a lot of support in my mothering journey and was given a lot of reassurance. Patience was abundant, allowing me to discuss anything that was causing anxiety. My child went through some beautiful transformations! His confidence and creativity just soared. His trust for other safe adults and his ability to form attachments came through at long last."

"My family and I are incredibly grateful for the opportunities you have given us. You have given us all a huge love of nature, exploring and even learning! You are an incredible team and you don't fully understand how much of an impact you have made to our lives."



Young Saplings

Our Parent and Toddler group continued to thrive on Friday mornings during term times, led by Sarah Holdway and latterly by Jo Hinds.

Parent & Toddler

This group, led by Sarah Holdway and Gilly Notley and a team of volunteers, continued to work with low-income, isolated parents with limited access to other forms of support. It enabled families to connect with others in similar situations, in the peaceful setting of the woods, creating a sense of community.

Through the year we ran 20 sessions of the group, and supported 24 parents and 24 children, across 19 different families. Families were provided with free transport, a hot meal, warm outdoor clothing when needed for both parents and children, and extra food when families were financially strained. Families can exchange outgrown waterproofs for the next size up, and we even have a welly library!

When asked, "How has coming to the group benefitted you and/or your child/family?", responses included:

Short Breaks

Short Breaks is a program designed for families with a child with a disability who are unable to find support from other sources due to their children's needs. We ran seven Short Break sessions during the year, during every school holiday, catering for 21 families, comprising of 35 adults and 45 children. Sessions were led by Sarah Holdway, Tiff Lovedale, Jo Hind and Lawrence Bole, with a small team of volunteers. Funding was reduced this year by the CIA Team, and we were grateful for an anonymous donation which allowed sessions to continue. We additionally ran SEND sessions, working with nine families, 14 of whose children had high SEND needs.

Feedback included:

*"Neroche Woodlanders is a wonderful place. The staff and volunteers are all so kind. I have a very difficult child, and it's a wonderful, peaceful place for myself to come with O** and his sister, who misses out on a lot because of her brother."*



"We have gained so much from being in the woods. A and H* absolutely love the outdoors. The staff are amazing and supportive and help us as a family whilst we are there. Can't imagine not having this opportunity."*

HAF

The Department for Education funds 'Holidays, Activities and Food' sessions for children in receipt of free school meals. We bid for and run HAF three times a year during the longer holidays: Easter, Summer, and the Christmas break.

During the year we worked closely with four primary schools: Bishops Henderson, Minerva, North Town, and Priorswood. Each school selects the children in their school who need this provision most.

HAF has become a very significant part of our work. During the year we ran 13 days, with 16 spaces per day, and these were consistently fully booked. We provide free transport, accompanied by staff, ensuring safe pick-up and drop-off for the children. Once the children arrive at Young Wood we cook breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack on an open fire.

We have a larger staff and volunteer team for HAF/HHH, with over 300 volunteer hours being donated across the year for this part of our work.

Inspiration

Training

It has long been an aspiration of the Woodlanders staff team to take the experience we have amassed over the last 12 years and begin to offer it to others, through structured training courses.

Supported with generous funding from The Halpin Trust, we piloted our own four-day course in summer 2023. We designed the course to include practical, experiential and theoretical elements, and divided it into four parts: Becoming a practitioner; Practices for nature-wellbeing; Working with groups in nature; and Connecting with place.

The funding enabled us to spend time designing a programme, looking at what others are doing and creating a training workbook. We then advertised the course and recruited a group of twelve students, from a variety of therapeutic, health and youth support backgrounds. We also gained extensive feedback from the learners, to help us refine our learning and assessment processes for the future.

The course was hugely successful, and our team gained invaluable experience in delivering a programme over time. Final feedback was very encouraging:

"I just wanted to offer my heartfelt thanks for such a wonderfully inspiring course. It was so well-planned and considered, and I have come away with so much more knowledge and experience of connecting with nature. I'm excited to start my next venture but I have a lot to consider in the planning stage". – Voluntary sector worker.



Research

Over the years we have been involved with different pieces of research about nature, wellbeing, and forest school, as we tried to increase knowledge and

understanding about bringing humans into relationship with nature. In 2023 Jenny completed a Master of Research Degree at Marjon University in Plymouth. Her dissertation focused on "Practitioners' Relationship with Place", and drew on her work with colleagues and participants at Young Wood. She is working with her professor to get this work published in 2024/2025.



Relationships

During the year Neroche Woodlanders benefitted from funding from the following organisations:

- Open Mental Health
- The Halpin Trust
- Department for Education through Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership
- Blackdown Hills National Landscape (Access for All fund)
- Farming in Protected Landscapes (Blackdown Hills National Landscape)
- Natural England
- The Norman Family Trust
- Somerset West and Taunton Council
- Somerset Wildlife Trust
- Taunton Town Council
- The Youth Hostels Association
- and Fenton Eggs for their supply of fresh eggs for the children's breakfasts!

We continued to occupy Young Wood on a tenancy from Forestry England, subject to a modest rent. We maintained a good working relationship with the Area Forester David Lloyd, and Community Ranger during the period, Rob Greenhalgh, and remain grateful for their support in helping us bring the Public Forest to a wider public.

Funders

Forestry England