



Gates, entrances and access – or getting in and out of your wood!

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By Julian Evans

Last winter I sold standing 360 tons of beech thinnings for just over £3 per ton; not a lot for 46-year-old trees, but they were destined for pulping, it was a thinning, and we all know how deeply depressed the wood market is. Since the last thinning in 1997 not only had the trees grown a bit bigger, but the harvesting equipment seemed to have as well! The entrance to our wood which opens onto a narrow lane was not really adequate for the large artic with hoist that hauled the pulpwood to Sudbrook. It was necessary to widen the bell-mouth. This, and the fact that the gates dated back to the Forestry Commission's ownership in the early 1980s and needed replacing, has raised my awareness of gates, entrances and access in general.

It is a maxim of woodland ownership that good access is the first prerequisite. Like the estate agent's mantra 'location, location, location' the woodland owners' is, or at least should be, 'access, access, access.' Get this right and you can manage and care for your wood in all the ways you want to: get it wrong with muddy fields to cross, long winding tracks to negotiate, or inadequate legal rights and you can't get to and from your wood when you want to or use the equipment you would wish. The whole experience becomes depressing and the wood even a disappointment.

As an aside, there are no public rights of way, nor is my wood subject to the new access legislation. That said, all owners of land can expect uninvited access – I don't like the word 'trespass' – and must cover all eventualities of accident and injury by ensuring that hazards are minimised and that one has public liability insurance.

Internal access is only marginally less critical. However, you can at least invest in new tracks and rides and, at the same time, promote wildlife by scalloping loading bays which double up as glades and add edge-effect too.

Returning to access to a wood, it is essential to have a right of way for all times and for all purposes from the public highway to the main entrance. And the entrance itself must be fit-for-purpose. This means wide enough for the largest vehicles you expect and for the formation of the road or track to be sufficiently loading bearing to support the heaviest vehicles you expect in the wettest weather and for it to go sufficiently far into the wood to allow for turning (say 40 m with a short spur). I know this is the counsel of perfection, but it is worth striving for. So, in re-configuring our woodland's entrance the bell-mouth was widened to over 30 m at the lane side and the oak posts for the gates, set back into the wood about 7.5 m from the lane, spaced nearly 6 m apart. Hopefully this will now cope with all eventualities; the only shortcoming is the new ground where the widening of the bell-mouth has occurred, which has no solid formation.

The downside of this enlarged entrance is the increased attraction for fly-tipping or, worse, abandoned cars. So far in the nine months since the new entrance was completed this has not occurred, but I have fixed a notice to the new gates that may be having the desired affect. It reads:

## PLEASE KEEP CLEAR

Regular use by: Network Rail, Southern Electric, Forestry operations, Access for emergency services.

Such a notice is, of course, specific to our wood and the rights of access others have to get the railway line at the bottom, but the notice does seem to be reducing problems. It is also possible that the new entrance gates and fencing convey a sense of more frequent usage rather than one of neglect. Only time will tell as we all tackle rubbish dumping, stopping travellers setting up camp, and other 21<sup>st</sup> Century trials.

Building the new entrance used local materials except for the pair of gates themselves, one 3 m and one 2.1 m which came from Barlows of Newbury. The post and rails were fashioned from suppressed or subdominant Douglas fir which, being 47 years old, had reasonable heartwood which is moderately durable and hopefully will last well beyond the next thinning in 7 or 8 years time. The oak posts for the gates came from two inferior 70-year-old trees felled in the wood but which gave butt lengths with well-developed heartwood. The real fun began when I switched the chainsaw from its usual cross-cutting action to cutting with the grain to square the posts. It took 45 minutes to cut off all four sides of 2.4 m long slabs and so remove the sapwood and present a squared face for attachment of hinges. That was tiring work, and so was carrying each post from stump to entrance. Margaret and I required many rests and much puffing, but we succeeded and finally upended them into the prepared 75 cm deep holes we had crow-barred and excavated into the chalk subsoil. Hopefully the new gates will stand solid, erect and vertical for 25 years.

A final remark must go to the old oak posts that were replaced. One was rotten and fell over just by pushing, the other was as sound as the day it was cut with no hint of decay after well over 20 years in ground contact – remarkable. If I ever get round to writing a third book about my wood, the story of the entrance renewal will be there.

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Julian, who was formerly the Forestry Commission's Chief Research Officer (S), has written two delightful books about owning and caring for his wood, and all that that means! They have both proved popular. (1) '*A Wood of Our Own*' in 1995, 158pp (Oxford University Press) and now published in paperback by Permanent Publications in 2003 price £14.95. (2) '*What Happened to Our Wood*' in 2002, hardback, 192pp Patula Books, Box 155, Alton GU34 4WE. Price £19.95 post-free in UK. Both books are richly illustrated with pen-and-ink sketches by artist and forester, John White.