

North Wales - Bron Haul

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By James Walmsley

Nestled in the green and rolling hills of the Elwy Valley, 25 members and guests, plus 11 students, gathered to meet with David Brown and Ruth Pybus, our hosts for the day. Since my first visit to Bron Haul in 2014, I was very keen to return, curious to see how David and Ruth (and their trees) had changed since, and particularly as I knew they'd since won a whole range of awards for their incredible achievements growing high-quality broadleaves.

Bron Haul comprises 20ha of woodland as well as 8ha of grassland, grazed by cattle and managed according to the 'Glastir advanced' agrienvironment scheme. Bron Haul is an example of a young woodland – the oldest planting took place in 1994 and the most recent took place in 2014. Species include wild cherry, sweet chestnut, oak, ash, birch, larch and alder planted at 2m spacing in a range of intimate mixtures. Management objectives are (i) timber production (ii) resilient and diverse ecosystems.

The areas of Bron Haul that are now woodland were previously pasture, representing a myriad of challenges in terms of new planting, and making the achievements of Ruth and David all the more impressive. Planting sites were established manually, removing turf to reveal a grass-free area of ~1m² for each tree. One of the early (and unexpected) challenges was the tree guards providing a focus for ants to build their ant hills, which could quickly killed the saplings if left unchecked. This prompted removal of most tree guards in this area after two years. Fortunately, detailed ground preparation and post-planting control of competing vegetation had resulted in rapid tree growth, so they were no longer vulnerable to rabbit browsing. The tree guards went straight onto another excellent tree planting scheme, and after ten years are now on their third site!

Tremendous care is taken to ensure that trees are not only planted carefully, but that they are cared for in their vulnerable first few years. Once trees are healthy and established, formative pruning starts at a very early stage (from year 3 onwards). We observed some 12-year-old oak that had already been pruned four times. Pruning has been undertaken by a range of people, from Forestry Roots trainees to RFS Junior Foresters. Ruth made the valuable point that pruning trees when they are young and branches are small makes the task much easier: far less effort with the pruning saw is required than on larger, older trees with much thicker branches. Also, the resulting timber will be so much better. Respacing and thinning also takes place earlier than might be expected or advised by textbooks. Such a contrast to so many of our woodlands where thinning takes place 'too late' – or not at all!

Efforts are in place to control the deer population, which has been growing steadily in this part of Wales over the last few decades. Grey squirrel control is a priority and is carefully and humanely carried out between late April and late July. The results of this are clear to see: during our visit to Bron Haul we observed very little squirrel damage indeed. This is clearly one woodland where the chances of young oak reaching high into the canopy as majestic, single stemmed titans is assured.

A felling licence enables the harvest of ~100 m³ per year, enabling the production of ~1,000 sweet chestnut fence posts, sawn boards of wild cherry and ash, and a significant quantity of firewood. Products demonstrate the beauty and functionality which can be achieved within just 25 years from a well-managed young woodland. As larger diameter timber is harvested in the near future, the timber side of their business will expand further, to add to their consultancy and education activities which are conducted under the banner of 'Broadleaf Wales'.

In many respects, Bron Haul represents a productive and diverse woodland and David and Ruth that many (most?) small woodland owners can only dream of. Recognising this, they run courses twice a year where participants learn to think like a forester and get to practice tools and techniques to turn that thinking into action. David and Ruth combine their collective expertise, passion and enjoyment to great effect at Bron Haul and RFS members and guests were privileged to witness this. Keep up the great work and thank you once again!