

# BLACKBARK

Who: Nora Kasanicka, Keith Wilson, Hywel Lewis, Jacques Crowther and Claire Godden

Location: Hebden Bridge and surroundings, West Yorkshire

Operative since: 2010

Practice organised as a: workers' co-operative as a partnership of self-employed professionals

<http://www.blackbark.co.uk>

Blackbark is a workers' co-operative set up by three friends in 2010. Drystone waller Hywel Lewis, carpenter Nora Kasanicka and greenwood worker and traditional woodland skills and crafts connoisseur Keith Wilson formed the co-op as a partnership of self-employed professionals to pool skills, knowledge, resources and clients. Later it expanded to include architect and tree surgeon Jacques Crowther and environmental educator Claire Godden. As a co-operative, Blackbark offers a considerable amount of services (including woodland management for city councils and private owners, carpentry/joinery, teaching, drystone walling, hedge-laying, fencing, tree planting, tree surgery and land restoration) and sells various products obtained from managing woodlands (including coppiced wood like poles and hedging stakes, sawn timber, furniture and other craft items, fire wood, charcoal, biochar, fascines and greenwood products).

As a workers' co-op, Blackbark aims to:

- create local employment
- spread, maintain and develop skills
- encourage the use of natural local materials in construction and crafts
- educate people about the advantages of using natural local materials
- ensure that 'economically viable' woodlands are also ecologically viable
- do all this within the context of the local community - if woodlands, local natural materials and the skills that go with them are valued in our community, then they will have longevity and will help the community to be more robust in the face of future change and challenges.

Why did you decide to collaborate as a co-op? How does being a co-op make it easier for you to achieve your goals?

Hywel: A co-operative structure is desirable when everybody involved wants to participate as an equal in decision-making and responsibility-taking within the business. This is definitely an important part of our ethics - structuring our working lives in ways that minimise unhealthy power relationships. In theory a co-op creates a flat power structure, in practice it allows you to get much closer to one than conventional hierarchical business models do. In this way being a co-op allows us to achieve our ethical goals and how we want to live our lives and exist in the world. In a practical sense, being a co-op is beneficial because we are an organisation with a lot of goals, and different members can take the lead on the various branches of the project, rather than one manager trying to juggle everything. It allows efficient use of skill sets and targeted division of responsibility. It is also worth mentioning the downsides of being in a co-op and using consensus decision making: effective communication takes a lot of time and energy! When done well it increases everyone's well-being and can be very efficient, but when it stutters, which it always will, people can get burnt out and the lack of efficiency can be frustrating and harm the business.

Another interesting aspect of Blackbark is that we are actually a partnership of self-employed people. This is important in that each of the members is an independent actor as well as a co-op member: it gives a huge amount of flexibility in how we conduct our business and allows a certain degree of autonomy that is sometimes lacking in pure co-ops.

What role do permaculture ethics and principles and non-market-driven values play in what you do as Blackbark?

While we don't overtly describe or think about what we do in terms of permaculture, there is naturally a huge crossover between our decision making processes and permaculture principles. We use woodland management techniques which are forms of permanent silviculture - coppice rotations and continuous cover forestry. They mimic natural systems of focused periodic disturbance so that as well as us humans taking a resource, there is also soil building going on and increasing surface area and edge effects for life to thrive. People-care is at the core of how our business operates. Non-market-driven values are everything! Because we live in a capitalist society we constantly have to make difficult compromises in order to pay the rent and do what we want to do, but it is more

of a continuous process of trying to minimise market-driven values rather than trying to squeeze a little bit of integrity into our lives where we can. There is also the difficult question for forestry businesses of fossil-fuel-demanding equipment - access to it allows us to achieve some things we wouldn't otherwise be able to, but it is easy to get sucked into a spiral of ever more hungry and expensive machinery, and subsequently debt to pay for it. One answer is to use unsustainable machinery as a spring-board for de-industrialisation. For example, we have a basic mobile petrol-fuelled band-saw we use to plank up timber, adding a lot of value. My desire is to take advantage of this luxury to build up a timber business and gain all the necessary skills to run that business before converting to a water-powered mill: jumping in at the deep end would be too much of a risk. Taking control of how the business evolves rather than following standard paths is essential to its longevity.

As creative workers who possibly never have to consider an element of seasonality in their work, we're fascinated by the variety of tasks that working with nature brings to your work. How do you think that these elements of seasonality, time and collaborating with the non-human influence your work environment and your relation to work?

That is a huge question! Personally I wouldn't have it any other way, I think I would feel less human if my activities weren't connected to and controlled by my place and landscape and weather. The work to do is different week to week but there are rhythms and patterns to it, so there is structure. It means you never get in a rut, or bored. When I think about spending the rest of my life repeating these patterns, it is exciting not terrifying: every turn of the wheel you get to know your place a little better.

What kinds of value do you think Blackbark is creating and what strategies do you have in place to maximise them?

I guess there are two different interpretations of this question.

The first is in the nuts and bolts of what we do - manage woodlands and add value to the wood that comes out of those activities. This is what gives us an income in order to engage in the money economy. There are many, many ways to add value to a piece of wood - the most basic is sorting and cutting it, e.g. a load of oak logs for someone to grow mushrooms on. Some products are low value but there's lots of them, such as firewood, others have a lot of added value but we sell less of them, for example furniture and other craft items. A general business strategy is to add more value to less wood as our project develops. The next level to this is that our woodland management activities will, over time, change the woodlands so that they produce wood which is easier to add value to: hazel coppiced on an eight year rotation is of far more value to us than eight year old sycamore. Another level is that we believe that we are adding more 'value' to the woodland ecosystems we work, in that they are becoming more full of life, more resilient habitats.

The other interpretation is to do with creation of community and culture - Blackbark, as a pioneer project in our area, is in a position set the standards for what it means to a woodland worker in the Pennines in the 21st century: how people are expected to work and not work, the balance between mutual support and competition and so on. The value of creating community cannot be over exaggerated. We don't have specific strategies in this regard, other than acting how we would want others to act.