

# International Coppicing



Debbie Bartlett reports on a meeting of world coppice experts



Harvesting site on the Downs (above left) and Gary Potters of CPW Fencing demonstrating machinery (above). Delegates from Italy with a pollard cant marker (left)



EuroCoppice delegates saw firewood being seasoned

In November the University of Greenwich was honoured to have the opportunity to show delegates from 32 countries the coppice industry in South East England by hosting the 2nd EuroCoppice conference. This was part of 'COST Action FP1301 Innovative management and multifunctional utilization of traditional coppice forests - an answer to future ecological, economic and social challenges in the European forestry sector'. This will run until May 2017 and involves countries across Europe and beyond; we had several delegates from South Africa. The aim is to share knowledge and experience of traditional coppice woodland management systems, to explore what is currently going on in the coppice sector and explore future potential for multi-functional coppice systems, ultimately to inform European policy for the industry.

As with any EU project there are a few difficulties, not least the definitions of words such as 'coppice'. There are working groups within the Action on topics such as silviculture, biodiversity, products, protection (in many countries coppice is used to prevent avalanche damage to villages, for example), governance and – not surprisingly – one on terminology. In an attempt to solve this issue an online glossary is being set up which will, when completed, provide a database of coppice related terms in many different languages. This includes detailed consideration of harvesting and processing equipment, products and tree species as well as general forestry terms. I lead the working group on governance, itself a term not necessarily having the same connotations in different contexts, so it has the sub-title 'People and Forests' (the Europeans have a tendency to talk about 'coppice forests', an unfamiliar term to us).

## Italian coppice

The first conference, held in Florence, Italy in February 2014 introduced the participants to each other and to the aims of the Action, with a sizable contingent from England attending. The background to the Action was presented by the chair, Professor Gero Becker, who had been involved in several previous large-scale initiatives promoting coppice woodland management. This was followed by each of the working group leaders giving an overview of what they are expected to achieve over the life of the project, as set out in the Memorandum



Pale production at Torry Hill Fencing (top) and Justin Hayman of CPW Fencing milling coppice product (above)

of Understanding with the funders in Brussels. The field trips into the mountains were highly enjoyable although we (the Brits) were amazed and astounded to find that the Italians did not split their chestnut! They produce poles, shaving and pointing just as we do but then make fences nailing round rails to round poles.

The second conference was hosted at the University of Greenwich, Medway Campus, last November. We decided to use the opportunity to give the international visitors (particularly the Italians) an overview of the chestnut industry in the South East, which remains the stronghold of coppice woodland management. Working group meetings, organised by their leaders, took place on the day of arrival and the second day, 4th November, was devoted to field visits. We went into the North Downs to see growing chestnut in various stages of rotation, and watched felling and extraction before getting back in the buses and visiting processing yards. Both were large-scale operations involving many workers and producing quantities of paling and post and rail fencing, much of it going for export.

Between these we fitted in lunch at Godington House, a minor stately home with its own woods and biomass boiler and a visit to a

Forestry Commission site, King's Wood at Challock, previously managed as commercial coppice but now focusing on public access and nature conservation. The use of art as a public engagement and interpretation medium was surprising to some of our guests. The field trip was followed by a dinner in the Ward Room of the University, kindly sponsored by Stihl UK.

The main conference was held on Wednesday 5th November and consisted of various different stakeholders giving an account of their involvement with, and perception of, the coppice industry in South East England. These ranged from senior Forestry Commission and Natural England staff, a land agent, woodland owners to individual coppice workers running their own businesses. The day began with considering the resource. How much coppice is there? Exactly where is it? Why is it important? These are difficult questions to answer as there is such a variety of rotation lengths and coppice is 'valued' for many different things. This was followed by considering how cutters access coppice to cut and how woodland owners find cutters. The afternoon focused on the woodland workers' perspective, a topic not usually included in international conferences.

## Continental consistency

The point of the COST Action is to share experiences. At the start of the conference all the delegates were given a pack that included 'green sheets' among the usual paraphernalia of agenda, paper, pen and various promotional leaflets. These sheets listed all the presentations but left space for each delegate to write comments. The question, to be completed after each presentation, basically asked if the situation was the same in their home country. Perhaps surprisingly most delegates obliged by completing and returning these at the end of the day with some very interesting results. Virtually all could happily comment on the resource, access to it and woodland owners but – significantly – almost none appeared to know anything about the coppice workforce.

This confirms my suspicions. I have long been aware that the 'authorities' here only communicate with one part of the coppice industry, specifically the 'lifestyle choice' and green woodworkers who are good at organising themselves and are vocal. While not



wishing to criticise these, in comparison to the more traditional workforce they are found working in both mixed species and chestnut coppice, but make very little impression in terms of area cut. Traditional cutters see coppicing as a job rather than a vocation, and quietly get on with cutting large areas feeding the export market. Despite being responsible for delivering the additional benefits (or 'ecosystem services') such as biodiversity and landscape so appreciated by the wider public this group are largely ignored and excluded from the decision-making process.

The conference highlighted this aspect, with a number of those attending commenting on how refreshing it was to hear the view from the woodland floor. It gave food for thought to delegates from other parts of Europe and will hopefully lead to a more inclusive approach to policy and decision-making in the future.

**Details** The next EuroCoppice conference will be held in Romania in the autumn. For more information on the activities of COST Action FP1301 EuroCoppice please visit the website [eurocoppice.uni-freiburg.de/](http://eurocoppice.uni-freiburg.de/), or contact Dr Debbie Bartlett, UK Management Committee member, [d.bartlett@gre.ac.uk](mailto:d.bartlett@gre.ac.uk).

## Kent group

In April more than 50 coppice workers joined the launch event of the Kent Coppice Workers' Co-Operative, held at Stile Bridge, Staplehurst. Kent has long been acknowledged as the stronghold of the traditional coppice industry, although renewed interest in the environmental benefits of woodland management has led to a resurgence of the craft in other parts of the country.

Kent has the most sweet chestnut in Britain, and while originally produced for hop poles it is now the basis of a fencing industry, experiencing high and sustained demand across Europe as well as the UK.

"This [the launch of the group] has been a long time coming," says Dave Rossney of Esus Forestry and Training, "but we hope this will raise awareness of the importance of this industry for wildlife, the landscape and, perhaps most important, rural jobs."

For more information about the Co-Operative email Dr Debbie Bartlett at [d.bartlett@gre.ac.uk](mailto:d.bartlett@gre.ac.uk) or call on 07974 162045.