

# Manifestations

Spring 2025



Wow! You're reading the first newsletter of Manifest Woodland Guild. We've sent it to you either because you've said that you'd love to hear about what goes on with our wood once we've moved to be closer to it, or because even though you haven't said this, we think you just might be interested.

Many of you know that Hugh and I have dreamed for many years that we might one day own and manage a patch of woodland, using it to produce sustainable building materials, and to provide a setting for learning outside the traditional classroom. We've had many moments in the last year of looking at each other and saying "Wow, we're actually doing this!" It's very exciting, and we hope you'll be interested to read a bit about what we've been up to. Maybe you'd like to keep up with what we do next, and perhaps you'd even like to get involved.

## Setting up the Guild



We knew we wanted our new organisation to share the name Manifest, which has been part of the name of Hugh's architecture and timber framing business for over 11 years now. One car journey, we tried out various options: Manifest Woodland School, Manifest Woodland Academy, Manifest Woodland College ... none of them were quite right. "We need something about learning as a community," I said. "It mustn't sound too modern," we agreed. Community and Circle seemed too vague ... "Guild?" one of us said. "Manifest Woodland Guild?" We both knew it was exactly the word we had been searching for. We often refer to it as "the Guild" since we now have two Manifests to get confused about.

At the moment, Manifest Woodland Guild is a trading name for Gabrielle as a sole trader. In the future, there is a possibility that we will convert it into a Community Interest Company, as that will open doors for funding (if and when we have projects that could benefit from and be eligible for funding). For the moment, the lighter regulatory demands mean that sole tradership is a good option.

I am benefiting a lot from Hugh's experience of setting up a business, asking him all sorts of questions about managing time, bookkeeping, setting price points, finding clients, and more. Manifest Design Workshop is sharing various resources with Manifest Woodland Guild – including web services, file servers, postal address – so we are working out how to keep the two organisations appropriately separated while also making the most of the connection between the two.



### Dragon Wood

Dragon Wood is the location for most of the activities of the Guild. It is about 5.25 acres of ancient woodland, which we have owned since 2021. It is part of a larger wood called Birdwood Coppice, located just next to the A40 about halfway



between Gloucester and Ross-on-Wye. We're on the western edge of the larger wood, and it is a beautiful place, with mature oaks, rather straggly overgrown hazel, quite a bit of birch, some ash, a few conifers which were probably planted 50-70 years ago, and lots of spring flowers – not only bluebells, but also wild daffodils and wood anemones, among others.

We chose the name Dragon Wood as a reference to Geoffrey of Monmouth's legend of the white and red dragons of England and Wales: the wood is located about 18 miles from the Welsh border, and in fact, since it is between the Severn and the Wye, it was once part of Cantref Coch and thus part of Wales.

We moved to Gloucestershire in August 2024 and are now living in the village of Huntley, less than a mile away from the wood. It is wonderful to be so close – now that the summer term is here, I am trying to take our two boys to the wood at least once a week after school. We've also been able to welcome various friends, old and new, from Oxford and Gloucestershire, to see the wood for the first time. Please come again – or come for the first time, if you haven't yet!

As part of preparing the wood for welcoming more people, I created a canopy from hazel poles and a large canvas tarpaulin. Creating a tarpaulin shelter is harder than it looks – I believe there were many classic slapstick sequences which will never enter the annals of comic silent film, because no one was there to hold the camera! We have also extended our firepit, and explored the wood more thoroughly, discovering a large patch of wild garlic, a source of clay, and some new yew seedlings.



### Activities



As I write this newsletter, it's good to notice how many things we have already started doing. Since February, I've been running a weekly **toddler group** called Treecreepers. Each session involves a song, a planned activity, some time for free play, a snack, and a story. About 10 families have come along to at least one session. Most of them have said they really enjoyed it and would like to come back, but so far only one family have really become regulars! It would be great to get more of a core of regular attendees, but that will probably take time.

## Manifestations: Spring 2025



Another exciting event for us was our first **traditional craft course**: hewing. This is the craft of turning a felled tree into a squared beam, using hand axes. It's a dramatic process: people standing two feet off the ground on giant logs, wielding axes longer than a man's arm – the semi-regular clonk-clonk .. clonk .. clonk-clonk of the axes biting into the timber – the deep crimson and pinkish white of freshly cut oak cambium and sapwood.

We had 10 participants, in addition to Hugh (who has long wanted to learn the skill that shares his name), and two expert and enthusiastic tutors.



Since we moved from Oxford, we've hoped to get involved in a **Forest Church** of some sort. In the autumn, I met up with a woman who had been running a Forest Church in Gloucester until it stopped meeting during the pandemic. We decided to try to rejuvenate this Forest Church group, and have now held two Forest Church gatherings – one at Robinswood in Gloucester, for a winter solstice carol singing at the top of the hill - and one at Dragon Wood in March, where we spotted signs of spring and focused on new beginnings.



We have continued our **coppicing** work in Dragon Wood – we are trying to restore the traditional hazel coppice, which seems to have been abandoned for forty years or more. It has been going reasonably well, although we are beginning to think that we may need more protection against deer browsing the new hazel growth. Next year we will probably focus on consolidating the area that we have already coppiced, by erecting deer fencing, removing as much of the waste as we can, and trying to deal with the brambles. We hope to get more volunteers involved in this work – local businesses and maybe young people's organisations – in addition to friends and family.



## Next Steps

As mentioned above, the activities we have already embarked on will be continued and extended. Another major step will be for Gabrielle to gain her Level 3 qualification as a Forest School Leader. I am currently volunteering with a local school to gain experience in Forest School with primary age children, and hope to start training properly in the summer or autumn.



## Manifestations: Spring 2025



Another exciting venture is something that Hugh has had in mind for many years: the idea of mobilising volunteers to help build natural buildings. Many natural sustainable building materials, like cob and straw bales, do not need extensive training to use, and could be a fun and rewarding volunteer project for all sorts of people, along the lines of the WWOOFing movement (Willing Workers On Organic Farms). WWOOBing, perhaps? Hugh is organising an initial meeting of stakeholders and supporters in the summer.

Thank you for reading this! We'd love to keep you up to date with what we're doing in the wood. We can promise the newsletters won't be too frequent (it's always difficult to find time to write a newsletter!) We do plan to use Sender.net as an email subscription service, though, so if you want to receive similar newsletters about Manifest Woodland Guild, please click on this link:

<https://stats.sender.net/forms/dwp20z/view>

Meanwhile, we send you warmest wishes from the wood!

Gabrielle & Hugh Conway Morris

