

COPPICING MAKES A COMEBACK IN KIRKNEWTON

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An early form of woodland management has been given a new lease of life, thanks to a successful partnership between The Sill project at Northumberland National Park and Bedale based Heritage Craft Alliance Ltd.

A recent two-day coppicing course run by the organisations, was held in ancient woodland in the village of Kirknewton near Wooler in the Cheviot Hills area of the National Park, and was oversubscribed – proving that there is still demand for this unique Neolithic pastime over 6,000 years since it first began.

As a form of forestry which is based on the harvesting of woodland, this Defra supported practical coppicing course has helped to preserve an important rural habitat in Northumberland National Park, opening up the dense canopy to support many species of wildlife. At the same time, it offered a unique training opportunity to enable people from all walks of life, develop knowledge and understanding of some of the oldest rural skills, which still have a big role to play in modern conservation – a fundamental aim of both The Sill project and Heritage Craft Alliance.

Jonathan Pounder led the course on behalf of Heritage Craft Alliance; he commented: “Coppicing is a dying rural skill and it’s so important for the environment that we help to bring it back to life. Centuries ago, the woodland in Kirknewton that we were working on would have been coppiced in this way on a cyclical basis, offering the rural community sustainable timber as well as supporting the environment and woodland habitat. These benefits still apply today and we are hoping to bring coppicing back into mainstream use.

“I think that this course was such a success because it appealed to such a wide range of individuals, from landowners and apprentices to people looking to try out a new skill and spend some time outdoors in the fresh air of the Northumbrian countryside. At the end of a challenging couple of days, it was fantastic to see the difference all our hard work had made, opening up this overgrown canopy to let the light into the woodland floor. The hope is that we will be able to repeat this rotation and continue to build on what we have started through this course.”

The Sill project now hopes to build on the success of its first coppicing course. An innovative £11.2 million initiative steered by Northumberland National Park Authority and YHA (England and Wales), The Sill is aiming to create a new Landscape Discovery Centre and YHA Youth Hostel to enhance the visitor experience and provide rural training opportunities across the whole of Northumberland National Park. As part of its vision, the project will host and promote a wide range of vocational courses in traditional skills, opening up endless opportunities to learn about, discover and conserve Northumberland’s ancient landscapes. Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) throughout the development phase of the project, The Sill now needs to raise an additional £3.7 million in funds to help turn its vision into a reality and the team is appealing to anyone passionate about preserving the rural landscape, to help them reach this goal.

Georgia Villalobos, Learning and Participation Coordinator for The Sill project, said: “Equipping people with traditional skills is so important. The Northumberland countryside is made up of a rich tapestry of history and heritage and it’s vital for the preservation of our infrastructure that these aspects are conserved and brought into the modern age – this is a big part of The Sill’s aim. Working in partnership with organisations like the Heritage Craft Alliance will help to facilitate our activity programme offer and we are delighted by the success of this trial coppicing course.

“As well as the essential funds we need to raise in order to make The Sill project a reality, we are also hoping to work with other businesses and accommodation providers from across Northumberland National Park and beyond to help support the development of our activity programme. The Sill’s remit is very much to support the whole of the National Park, from the Cumbrian borders to the Cheviots. It was great to see the local Glendale Gateway youth hostel providing accommodation for participants of the recent coppicing event and there are many exciting opportunities for people to get involved with moving forwards; we’d like to invite as many people as possible to come and talk to us about these possibilities.”

Caroline White, Chief Executive of YHA (England and Wales) said: “Already we are seeing the unique and varied experiences and skills available at The Sill. It’s tremendously exciting that YHA is playing an active part in delivering The Sill project. The outdoor learning opportunities that will be made available once the Youth Hostel and Landscape Discovery Centre are created will be world class and benefit so many young people and their families in the region and beyond.”

Jude Newell is coordinating The Sill events on behalf of Bedale based Heritage Craft Alliance. She added: “We’re delighted to be working with the team behind the exciting Sill project on this programme of heritage events. We are in a really great position to be able to offer these courses at a significantly reduced rate for people*, thanks to substantial RDPE funding, managed by Defra under the traditional building and rural skills package – a fantastic opportunity for the rural Northumberland community and people from even further afield.”

Other courses being offered under this package can be found at www.heritagecraftalliance.co.uk *(subject to eligibility).

Keep an eye on The Sill’s events page for other events from The Sill project team. Anyone interested in supporting The Sill can do so by volunteering, attending one of the project’s consultation events, making a donation towards the £3.7million target or contributing toward the development of The Sill’s activity programme. For more information about The Sill, upcoming events and ways you can get involved in the project, visit www.thesill.org.uk , find The Sill on Facebook or follow The Sill on Twitter @thesillproject