

Wood you credit it! How an army of dog walkers and nature lovers raised £900k to save their beloved forest from the axe



At the end of his guided tour of the enchanted wood that he bought 'on a whim' in 2001, Christopher Lambton announces it is time for him and his dog Lily to return to his car. Momentarily forgetting himself, he tells me: 'If you want to carry on walking around, please do.' Then he remembers: 'It's not for me to invite you.'

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Momentarily forgetting himself, he tells me: ‘If you want to carry on walking around, please do.’ Then he remembers: ‘It’s not for me to invite you.’

It is an understandable slip. For almost a quarter of a century the 64-year-old has been at pains to make everyone welcome in his 135-acre idyll in the Scottish Borders.

There are discreet signs dotted throughout the place assuring walkers the owner is happy for them to be on his land, to enjoy the spectacular views and commune with its burgeoning array of wildlife.

But Mr Lambton is not the owner any more – or, at least, not in the way he once was. Rather he is the public-spirited facilitator of one of the most uplifting community buy-outs Scotland has seen.

He is the landowner who came to realise that the only buyers he felt truly comfortable selling up to were the people he lives among.

Others would likely have paid more. They would certainly have completed the deal far more quickly – and, when he first put it on the market, there was a glut of them.

A few days ago, after a two-year campaign to raise the £875,000 asking price, a tiny community of outdoor lovers finally took ownership of Broughtonknowe Wood. It is now their own little paradise – a place where nobody lives but everyone is free to visit in perpetuity.

Many here are well aware of the chequered history of community buy-outs in Scotland – that they rarely leave everyone happy. From landlords resentful at being forced to give their tenants first refusal to communities split into warring factions over the running of their new acquisition, few such transactions have proved pain free.

But in Broughtonknowe Wood, which sits on the A701 within easy striking distance of dozens of Borders and South Lanarkshire villages, might this community have alighted on the exception?

Certainly, the place was an oasis of harmony this week – brimming both with positivity for the future and gratitude for the thoughtful stewardship of its past owners.

It was the onset of Parkinson’s disease that convinced Mr Lambton to sell up a decade earlier than he had originally planned.

The former journalist, who later became development manager at Garvald Home Farm near West Linton, bought the land for £80,000 from the previous owner David Balfour-Scott who used to live next to it. The late army major had ‘a vision’ for the land and set about turning a bare hillside into a mixed forest of native hardwoods – including oak and ash – and commercial softwoods such as Sitka spruce. As the trees grew, wildlife flooded in.

After initially attempting to persuade a friend to make an offer on the land, Mr Lambton decided to snap it up himself, 'more or less on a whim'.

'I started making my own little playground, I suppose, and sold a few Christmas trees.

'Then my friends started to come here. They said "could we come and walk?" and I said "yes, any time".

'By then we had open access in Scotland so I couldn't have prevented anyone from walking, but I could make it easier by putting in a little car park at the end of the wood.

'For me it was a good feeling. Some people don't like having other people on their land, which I just don't understand. They are very welcome. I can't see any problem at all.'

Wasn't he besieged by day trippers bringing beer, disposable barbecues and beat music? 'Never,' he says.

'It used to be that I knew everybody coming here but, as it grew more and more popular, I knew a smaller proportion of them.'

There was already one pond on the land, but Mr Lambton made arrangements to put in another. That meant putting in a little road, which also increased public access.

He employed a tree specialist to embark on a process he calls aesthetic thinning –

creating more elbow room in the forest while leaving the healthiest trees to flourish – and sold timber on a small scale to help pay for further improvements.

But it was the Covid lockdown five years ago that truly opened Mr Lambton's eyes to the importance of his landholding for his community. One visitor, former biology teacher John Hart, was coming to walk there every day. In a world reeling from the upheaval wrought by the pandemic, here was a safe space teeming with wildlife.

'I got to recognise him and realised he was a friend of a friend,' said Mr Lambton. 'I eventually bullied him into starting a Friends of Broughtonknowe group.'

That was part of a plan to attract public grants for pathways – something a single landowner could not do. But a properly formulated group could apply for a share of community funds made available by windfarms operating in the area.

A £16,000 grant followed and Broughtonknowe Wood opened up still further. Another pond was dug, pathways were completed and picnic tables and benches installed. There was even a new wooden hide for birdwatchers.

Mr Hart was instrumental in compiling an exhaustive ‘census’ of the flora and fauna to be found in the wood.

Breeding birds there include blue tits, buzzards, goldcrests, jays, moorhens, pheasants and tawny owls, to name just a few. There are badgers, shrews, foxes, moles, stoats and roe deer among the mammals and the ponds throng with frogs and toads in the early spring. Meanwhile some 14 species of butterfly – including a scarce species, the Small Pearl-bordered fritillary – have thus far been identified.

Cub and scouts groups started making visits to the woodland.

Mr Lambton struck up a friendship with a chair maker called Peter Young, allowing him to set up a workshop on his land to make furniture from the plentiful supply of ash wood.

Mr Young set up a yurt in a former quarry on the land, which came to be used for woodwork and yoga classes. Almost organically, a private playground morphed into a cherished community space in which hundreds of people were invested.

Then Mr Lambton dropped his bombshell. Facing an uncertain future after his Parkinson’s diagnosis, he announced he was selling.

‘Everyone threw up their hands in horror and said “no, no, no, don’t sell it”,’ he recalls. ‘I said “no, it’s all right, there will be somebody like me out there who will buy it.”’

The brutal financial reality, he soon realised, suggested otherwise.

‘I bought it, as I said, on a whim because I had £80,000, but not many people have £900,000, and if somebody bought it, they would have to get some money back out of it.’

The first few interested parties confirmed the community’s worst fears.

They were commercial outfits. At least one of them wanted to clear fell the entire hillside, promising only to leave a few trees next to the ponds.

‘I felt a sort of mysterious obligation,’ says Mr Lambton of his decision to discourage early offers and instead give his community time to see whether it could raise the funds.

‘In my earlier life I spent a lot of time walking in the Scottish hills and was profoundly grateful for the fact that you can go to wonderful places and just walk up the Torridon mountains or Glen Affric. There was an element of philanthropy, but it was also that I enjoyed doing it.’

He says of his illness: ‘It interferes with your brain a bit and some people say they make bad decisions with Parkinson’s. I don’t think this was a bad decision, but it was certainly prompted not only by looking at the facts but also looking at my emotions.



Mr Brooke and Mr Lambton discuss plans for the woods

Listening to all this is Ian Brooke, who started walking his dog here in 2017 and soon became heavily involved in the effort to turn the woods into a multi-dimensional community space.

He says: ‘We were all absolutely mortified after all the community effort and the number of people that enjoyed the space that some private buyer could come along and clear fell it. There’s three quarter of a million pounds of timber here, so it was always a threat. Who wants to walk around dead tree stumps?’

‘It would have been brutal,’ admits Mr Lambton with a shudder.

As chairman of the Broughtonknowe Community Woodland charity Mr Brooke was at the sharp end of the drive to raise funds. A slew of private donations came in – some of them four figure ones – while others gave their time sprucing up the woodland to give any grant assessors as favourable an impression as possible.

The yurt became a meeting place for the community buy-out while Mr Lambton, as the seller, kept a respectful distance while offering every encouragement.

Learning of his intentions, commercial bidders faded into the background and Mr Lambton wondered if he may be forced to go back to them, tail between his legs, at a later date after courting a buyer with no hope of raising the funds.

Then, in January, the Scottish Land Fund announced it would award 75 per cent of the cost of the woodland. More funding came in from South of Scotland Enterprise and SSE Renewables. An online crowdfunder was launched to help bridge the remaining gap and, weeks ago, the target was hit.

‘It’s almost unbelievable that we have raised the money and are now the owners,’ says Mr Hart. His efforts to attract backers to the cause included writing an online children’s story about the loss of habitat faced by wildlife if developers took on the land.

‘Everyone you meet in the woods is smiling,’ said a jubilant Mr Brooke after the sale went through.

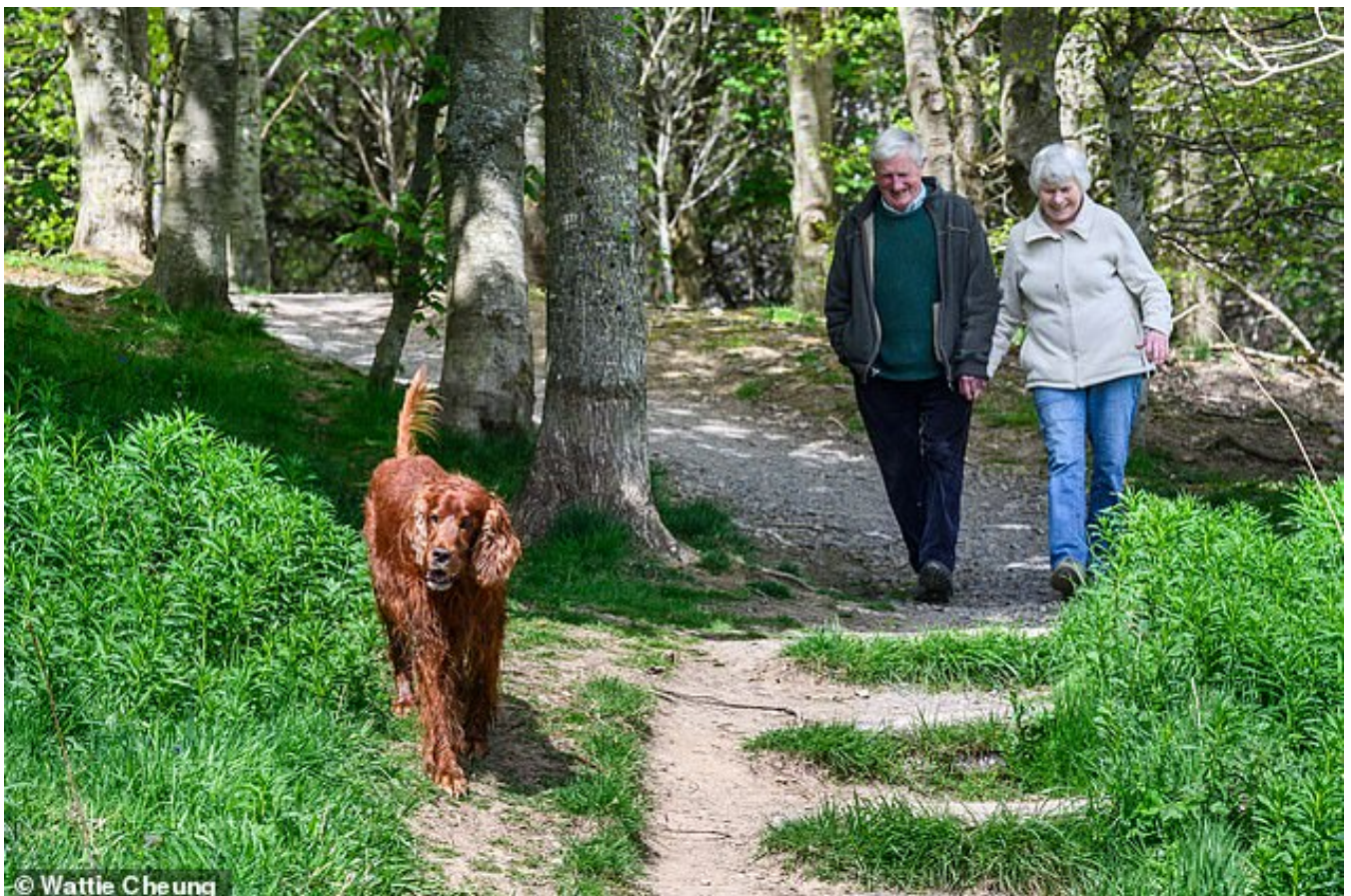
That was certainly the case when the Scottish Daily Mail visited.

There was Ellen and John McCann, 71, who live near Biggar, having a picnic by the pond while their grandchildren Torran, nine, and Briden, five, fished for tadpoles.

‘They’ll remember days out like this all their lives,’ says their grandfather.

‘We’ve been coming here for about five years now.’

He says of the buy-out: ‘The owner had a very strong sense of community. By all accounts he facilitated the whole process.’



Dog walkers enjoy the woods near Biggar, Lanarkshire

Maureen and Peter Bates (and their red setter Angus) were all smiles too. ‘We’ve been coming here to walk dogs for 20 years at least,’ says Mrs Bates. ‘We always thought of it as our wood. We’re so pleased it’s all happened.’

Pensioners Rosemary and Peter, who live near West Linton, have a spring in their step too. They travel 10 miles here four or five times a week. Why? ‘Because it’s so beautiful. It’s so safe,’ says Rosemary. ‘I mean, we just enjoy seeing Scotland. We really appreciate what Christopher has done. The easiest thing for him and probably how he would have got more money would have been to sell it to a commercial developer. I’m a Highlander who has seen many community buy-outs come and go, normally I approach these things with a deal of reservation but so much hard work has gone into it – and so much work was done before Christopher put it up for sale – that it’s up and running and it will continue to run. ‘There will be a next generation that will come on and run it. It is just wonderful.’

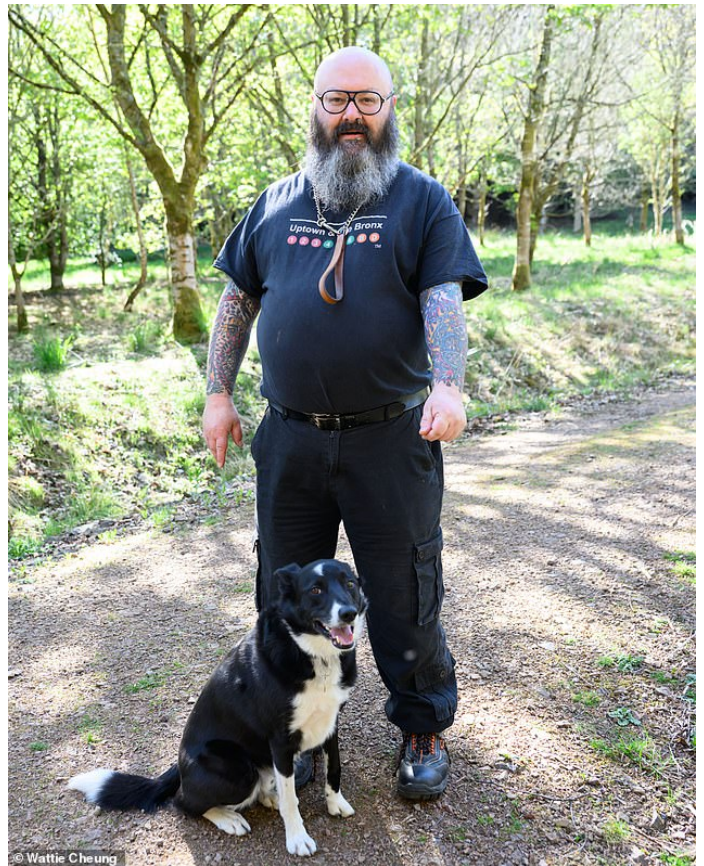
As for Mr Lambton, he is smiling too. Sure, his profit on an £80,000 purchase is not inconsiderable, but standing shoulder to shoulder with his neighbours, you suspect, is worth no less.

‘For my part, the community purchase is the best possible outcome,’ he says. ‘I feel very invested in it, and I still have a lot of information to impart. But the end of the bureaucratic process is a great relief.’

And the cherry on the cake? ‘I suppose I’m a co-owner now,’ he says. ‘Along with the rest of the community.’



Christopher Lambton sold Broughtonknowe to the community rather than developers.



Ian Brooke was heavily involved in the effort to turn the woods into a community space.