

Robin Mills met Jill Butler in Colyton, East Devon



Jill Butler © Photograph by Robin Mills

I was very lucky because I grew up on the edge of one of the big commons in Surrey—Horsell Common, part of Chobham Common. My parents' house was about 300 meters from the edge of the common, and I used to be out there an awful lot. I think people often say that those who experience such things early in life carry them with them forever, and it certainly stayed with me.

My father was a draftsman designing rubber seals for machinery, and my mother was a stay-at-home mum. At the time they didn't have any interest in the countryside, so I was very fortunate to have this heathland on my doorstep. I just knew it was somewhere special.

When I went to university, I studied a biology degree. I was interested in biology at school, and I think another very influential factor was a good friend of mine who encouraged me to spend a week volunteering at an RSPB reserve with her. All of these experiences helped shape my desire to be involved in that world.

I think my biggest break was at the end of my degree when my friend Judy suggested I do an MSc in Landscape Ecology, Design, and Maintenance at Wye College, part of the University of London. She was right because it was something that set me

up in terms of my career in countryside management. Not only did I get a place on that course, but I also got one of the three government grants available at the time, making it an even greater stroke of luck, and it was a fabulous course.

After university, I went travelling to Latin America in the '70s with another student who was keen on travelling. That was a great experience too, travelling along the "gringo trail." It was a wonderful break before starting my first job in Kent working for the Rural Community Council. I buzzed all over the county, talking to village communities, helping them plant trees and manage volunteers.

Then I applied for a job in Wokingham District Council as their Countryside and Country Parks Manager. I managed two country parks: California Country Park, which was an old, heathy common, and Dinton Pastures Country Park, which was much larger and brand new, built on old gravel workings. It was a startup project and quite diverse; we aimed to engage the public with sailing, fishing, and wildlife areas.

Next, I worked at Merrist Wood College near Guildford as their Head of Countryside Department, training young people to become countryside rangers, but I found it quite a challenge. I wasn't really born to be that sort of teacher.

Then I saw a job working with the Woodland Trust and joined them as a site manager for the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Oxfordshire area. This was truly when I became focused on trees. Very soon, I felt that I was managing the woodlands based on a forestry recipe rather than an approach based in biodiversity. I started to think, "What is the very best way to manage woodlands from the biodiversity point of view?"

I had another huge bit of luck when a good friend, Ted Green, was developing and pushing the Ancient Tree Forum (ATF). I was deeply involved in all of that, even though I didn't manage many ancient trees as a site manager because they don't generally occur in closed canopy woodlands—in these settings the old trees will be killed by lack of light from surrounding competition.

Ted happened to bump into two Dutch boys who talked about Frans Vera. Vera's research, later published in his book *Grazing Ecology and Forest History*, was a game-changer. He suggested that Biłowieża (in Poland), a non-intervention site, was not the template for forest management. He put forward the Vera hypothesis: you need large grazing animals to keep big, mega plants in check and provide the balance. This is crucial because many of our most important biodiversity plants, like flowering shrubs, need light to survive, flower, and be available for insects. Ancient trees are evidence in support of this idea.

I was very lucky because the visionary Chief Executive of the Woodland Trust, Mike Townsend, appointed me as an Ancient Tree Specialist. I moved from being a site manager to being their Conservation Advisor for Wood Pasture, Parkland, and Ancient and Veteran Trees, which I did for over 20 years before retiring.

I ended up in Colyton, East Devon, because my parents bought a house here overlooking Woodend Park, one of the top wood pasture ancient tree sites, host to the King John's Oak. I'm still carrying on with the work, giving advice to people about their trees and policy work for the ATF.

My current philosophy is rooted in the recognition of old growth in the UK—the special wildlife community associated with old trees. This includes plants, invertebrates, lichens, and fungi, a whole suite of specialist species that only exist because of the old trees. This is wood pasture and parkland, a landscape we have been slow to properly recognise compared to most ancient woodland, which is special for its plants and soils but typically has younger trees. Spain and Transylvania have more extensive areas of old trees, but the UK has absolutely astounding areas like the New Forest, Sherwood Forest, and Windsor Great Park—the top site in the world for ancient oaks.

The vision of the Ancient Tree Forum is that all of these trees should be valued in so many ways, not just for biodiversity. They give a great sense of place and have their own identity, living for centuries beyond a forestry felling age. We need to protect them and look after them properly, especially their root systems, which are often shallow and easily damaged. We also must ensure that the values we recognise in these trees are taken forward into the future by safeguarding the next generation.

I've also been involved in the wilding movement. Ted Green and I organised a visit for Charlie Burrell (of Knepp Estate) to see the great wilding projects in the Netherlands, which he called one of the most life-changing experiences he'd had. That was destiny—we were looking for someone to do a Dutch-style wilding project in Britain.

I'm now involved in projects like the Forest of Selwood. My focus is on highlighting that the trees we plant should be open-grown. Planting trees close together for straight trunks (like a plantation) creates a closed canopy and loses the 360-degree hemisphere of habitat that an open-grown, mature tree provides. Open-grown trees are biodiversity hubs—20 times the leaves, 20 times the flowers, nectar, and pollen compared to plantation trees. We need a lot more open-grown trees.

I believe that the Ancient Tree Forum has punched very much above its weight. We have really made people aware of ancient and veteran trees. Ancient trees are old for their species (beyond maturity) and have old, decaying wood characteristics; veteran trees are mature trees that have those same characteristics. To be involved in this work, at the cutting edge of something so rewarding and very exciting.

I consider myself extremely lucky because I've had a life and a career in countryside management, enjoying wildlife and at the same time, trying to do something to benefit how we look after the countryside and benefit the wildlife that I enjoy. 