

THE soft plop of a felled log and the clacking of hooves accompanied by a backdrop of birdsong is all that can be heard drifting from the depths of an ancient woodland on the east edge of Dartmoor. A teaming horse is pulling a log into a clearing, yet in four months' time, there will be no trace that the horse was ever there. These logging traditions and local skill dating back thousands of years is currently enjoying a resurgence of interest and is now recognized as the ultimate low-impact woodland tool.

John Williamson has fished and worked the woods of the Tregu Valley all his life. First as a child, when he accompanied his father and uncle on their forestry contracts, and now as the owner of Dartmoor Wood. He and his wife, Jane, purchased the 10-acre semi-natural wood in 2016.

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There is a totally horse-powered wood land. John tells me as we follow Jens, their 11-year-old Belgian heavy-draft horse, over the Dulor Brook into a glade that's carpeted with bluebells and wild garlic. 'What we're trying to do here is to tackle small, half-acre patches in a pin-beech over a 10-year cycle, gradually removing the non-native beech and coppicing the hazel. We're using old methods of woodland management to preserve traditional crafts, such as charcoal-making, which benefits the overall biodiversity.'

There's been no widening of tracks or removal of gates, he adds, so it's completely suited to the horses, which can pick their way through obstacles, scurrying and foraging as they go.

The equine team, which also includes a seven-year-old cob named Leon, is capable of doing an eight-hour day and John often takes the horses to work at the local Fingle Woods, which is jointly owned by the Woodland Trust and National Trust, where the remains of an Iron Age hill fort required the sensitive extraction of Douglas fir.

'Every woodland is different and every load size is different,' he explains. 'It's about trust, putting the horse first at every situation and knowing when to say no.'

Photography: Joseph Ruse Batchelor with his free-range Longhorns on the Blackdown Hills. Right: John Williamson and Jens at work in horse-powered Burncombe Wood

