



The heart of the woods

COMPANY PROFILE: New Life Wood
By SANDRA DICK

“THE sun is shining, the park is beautiful,” says Steve Rushmere. “And I’m building a wine rack. How ironic is that?”

He’s chipping away at waste wood which has been collected by New Life Wood and brought to its recycling project in the heart of Wat Tyler Country Park at Pitsea near Basildon in Essex.

There is birdsong, fresh air, the sound of hammers battering nails into place. And, quietly and less obviously, there is the gentle process of lives being changed.

Once gripped by what he calls a 24-hour a day addiction – “I drank all the time,” he says – Steve has not touched a drop since rehab and arriving as a volunteer at New Life Wood, tucked in the heart of the 125 acres parkland with its lakes, reedbed and meadows where emerald damselflies, reed warblers, cuckoos and redshanks thrive.

Instead, he finds satisfaction in teasing old wood into bird boxes, dog beds, bird tables and those wine racks. At the same time, he offers a helping hand and mentoring guidance to others as they embark on their own journey from addiction and crisis to a new start.

Set up just over three years ago, New Life Wood is more than a wood recycling yard. One of around 30 social enterprises dotted around Britain which are members of the Community Wood Recycling network, it is where people with broken and troubled lives go to be gently mended.

In woodsheds, with their hands on

someone else’s unwanted timber and given the opportunity to transform it into something useful, confidence grows, new skills emerge and, in many cases, they take their first steps towards a much improved life.

All the Community Wood Recycling member social enterprises (from Brighton where the idea first took root to Glasgow where used Chivas Regal whisky barrels are crafted into stunning furniture) have similar aims: to help steer people from tough times through collecting and sorting unwanted wood, encouraging its reuse and, in training people how to make things from it, raising self-esteem on the way.

In some cases, volunteers arrive having struggled with isolation and loneliness – for them, the recycling projects bring much needed company and a string of mental health benefits.

Others might be former prisoners seeking the chance to gain a skill and acceptance.

Often, it’s people like Steve. Shattered by addiction and anxious to stay clean and sober, the nurturing environment and the purpose it brings to daily life is enough to keep him on track.

Now a mentor, he enjoys the satisfaction of seeing the benefits the project brings to others. “I’m the first person that people come to if they have a problem,” he says. “I say, ‘I’ll never tell you that I know how you feel, because I don’t. But I know how I felt when I was in a similar situation.’

“It has been life changing - a Godsend,” he continues. “If it wasn’t for this, I’m not sure where I’d be.”

New Life Wood is one of several members of the Community Wood Recycling



■ Steve Rushmere

network to have charitable status due to the support it provides.

Volunteers, usually referred through local health, rehab and addiction services, can learn how to manage their money, there are job hunting and interview tips, and courses on first aid, safe tool handling and general life skills.

There is also the chance to receive a reference and show prospective employers that they have turned a corner.

“The wood recycling is important and we’re passionate about what we do,” says Peter Hall, New Life Wood’s manager. “But what matters even more to us is working with and helping to support vulnerable adults, including those living with a history of addiction, mental health challenges and ex-offenders. We also help build confidence for people living with anxiety and low self-esteem.”

“We are not here to wave a magic wand and fix people. But we can help them be the people they want to be.”

He adds: “The core of what we do is recycling and making things, but our responsibility does not begin and end with making a bird table. It’s about looking at them as people and seeing what things they want.

“We are breathing new life into the wood and into the lives of the people working with it.”

It all began in Brighton in 1998, when Richard Mehmed saw some wood dumped in a skip. Realising it was doomed to go to landfill, he launched a project to collect scrap wood and make it available to the local community as DIY timber.

“People came forward looking to be involved,” says Elizabeth Green, Development Manager at Community Wood Recycling. “He realised they each had a story. Some were lonely, some had drug or alcohol addiction, some were homeless or long term unemployed. This gave Richard the vision that what he was doing could provide opportunities for vulnerable people.”

Under his vision, jobs and training opportunities were created. Brighton & Hove Wood Recycling Project was launched, followed by the idea to create a network of similar social enterprises around the country supported by a national body.

All follow a similar model: Community Wood Recycling offers wide-ranging support to help establish the social

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enterprises and shares its links with major construction companies and housebuilders, so each project can collect unwanted timber from local sites on a regular basis. In return, businesses can champion their involvement and polish their green credentials.

According to Community Wood Recycling’s 2019-2020 annual report, 22,767 tonnes of wood was collected across the UK; 48% of it was recycled and the remainder reused. In human terms, 843 people were trained and 229 jobs created or sustained.

At New Life Wood, timber from housebuilders such as Redrow, Bellway and Countryside and other businesses is sorted and either sold to the public or used for volunteers’ small carpentry projects which are then sold. Profits go back into the project. Construction companies can also request bespoke items to be crafted for them.

The Community Wood Recycling network also stands apart by providing a commercial wood waste collection service to its clients, and will take all waste wood rather than just choice cuts of timber.

Anything that can’t be found a new life is chipped for biomass fuel or animal bedding.

Despite the pandemic, last year it diverted 230.9 tonnes of wood from the waste stream, creating 4.5 jobs and ensuring 29 volunteers were trained.

Indeed, the Essex project has been so successful that it is set to open a new 1200 sq ft woodshed with extra workshop and retail space and plans for a community hub - complete with coffee and cake for visitors to the park.

But it’s the changes that the project makes to real lives that mean most, adds Peter.

“There is no greater feeling than to see the people that come to us realise that they matter and that they can learn something and go on to achieve things - whether it’s making something or just getting up and coming in, which can be a massive step for some.

“I feel blessed to be a part of something that does that.”

Find out more about Community Wood Recycling at www.communitywoodrecycling.org.uk

and New Life Wood at www.newlifewood.org.uk

