

# Simonsbath Sawmill

**Historic water-powered sawmill, managed by a group of volunteers**

**Interview with:** Tim Marriott, Sawmill volunteer

**Name of project:** Simonsbath Sawmill

**Location:** Simonsbath

**By who:** Simonsbath Sawmill volunteer and Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA)



**How:** funded by the ENPA through volunteering funds and facilities management; the Heart of Exmoor Scheme which funded training, equipment and the log store. The volunteers have recently set up a “friends of Simonsbath Sawmill” to provide funding through donations and as a body to apply for external funding.

## **Aims:**

The sawmill is no longer in active use by the ENPA Field Services team and a small group of volunteers assist ENPA in meeting its obligations to maintain the sawmill as a heritage asset by carrying out basic maintenance tasks and by offering interpretative tours.

The original aims of the project were to provide basic maintenance of the sawmill including:

- Cleaning, painting and minor repairs of the building fabric
- Grounds and machinery maintenance
- Maintenance of the sawmill leats

When ENPA ceased offering tours, the volunteers then added the aims of:

- Offering basic interpretative tours – including basic operation of machinery but excluding sawing of timber)
- Researching and recording the history of the sawmill and its local context
- Proposing minor and major developments in the sawmill, e.g. re-installation of a second lineshaft.

At a later stage the volunteers were trained and authorised by ENPA to offer full interpretative tours including sawing of timber.

## **Main considerations:**

The project was originally set up by the ENPA Outreach Officer, presumably in recognition that as the sawmill was no longer in regular use there was a need for basic maintenance activity to prevent deterioration of the fabric and machinery.



### **Who is involved in the project:**

Originally a group of volunteers was formed through a general invitation issued by the ENPA Outreach Officer for volunteers interested in working in the western part of the National Park. Initially this was a large group of 5-10 volunteers at any one session, which was useful for the early heavy load of work needed to catch up with maintenance tasks (cleaning and tidying, cleaning windows, painting woodwork, clearing grounds, etc.).

Once this aspect of work had been brought under control, the emphasis turned to operation of the machinery and interpretative tours. It became necessary to limit the number of volunteers to enable ENPA to manage the risks associated with working in a potentially hazardous environment. The regular team of volunteers was therefore reduced to three, who were then trained and authorised to operate the machinery and to offer tours.

At the present time there is no requirement for additional regular volunteers, though the occasional involvement of a larger group of volunteers for some maintenance tasks would be useful.

### **Partnership and sources of advice:**

The volunteer team work closely with the ENPA's Facilities Management team to advise of any requirements for maintenance and repair, and to assist the Facilities Management team from time-to-time by providing access and assistance to on-site contractors.

The volunteers also depend on the ENPA Field Services team, tasked through Facilities Management, for major works and work with other ENPA teams to ensure the sawmill facilities are available when required for other activities.

The volunteers have worked with ENPA for the production of an interpretative leaflet.

The volunteers depend on advice on all the above, and also on the contractors who were involved in the restoration and refurbishment of the sawmill by ENPA.

### **How was it undertaken:**

The current pattern of volunteering work includes both onsite and offsite work -

#### **Onsite:**

##### **Maintenance and development:**

- one regular day per month for maintenance and development of the sawmill buildings, grounds and leat
- additional maintenance and development days as required
- additional attendance to provide access and assistance to contractors

##### **Interpretation:**

- one regular day per month for full interpretative tours
- additional open days for special local and national events (e.g. National Mills Weekend)
- tours for school groups and interest groups (e.g. U3A, engineering societies)

#### **Offsite:**

- provision of a sawmill website, including a diary of events
- provision of an event booking service
- research of sawmill history, including visits to records archives and personal interviews
- production of interpretative materials
- production of risk assessments and safe operating procedures
- production of specifications for potential developments
- support of Friends of Simonsbath Sawmill, including operation of a bank account

**Constraints and limitations:**

A major constraint on volunteering activity at the sawmill is that any sawmill is a potentially hazardous working environment. It is therefore necessary that ENPA exercises great caution in authorising operation of the sawmill by volunteers, ensuring proper training, equipment, risk assessment and the application of safe operating procedures.

An ongoing constraint has been uncertainty over the future of the sawmill: once ENPA had ceased using the sawmill as an operational facility, there was continuing discussion over the future use or disposal of the sawmill. Therefore for some time the volunteer project proceeded on the basis that the project could be curtailed in favour of an alternative pattern of use of the sawmill. The volunteers were kept informed as far as possible and so were aware that they were “temporary caretakers” and that the future might or might not involve volunteering effort.

**Key considerations when managing volunteers:**

When working on “higher-level” volunteer tasks in a potentially hazardous environment such as the sawmill, with a range of safe working procedures reflecting risk assessments, it is important to build good working relationships in the volunteer team. All members of the team must have confidence and trust in each other’s abilities and competence in correctly following procedures.

**Outcomes and recommendations:**

The volunteers suggest that the outcome of this project has been to demonstrate that a volunteer team can work effectively with permanent staff to build partnership working. The volunteer team has been given the opportunity to demonstrate a gradual building of knowledge and competence in the maintenance and operation of the sawmill, taking the initiative in minor matters and working with permanent staff to develop skills in other areas.

This pattern of partnership, whilst offering interesting engagement for the volunteers, does however raise a concern shared in many volunteering projects: At a time when public bodies such as ENPA are subject to continuing budget cuts and loss of staff, volunteers, many of whom are retired, are very concerned that they should be substituting to any significant degree for salaried staff. Volunteers do not want to be taking away the jobs of working age staff.

There is a difficult balance to be achieved between volunteers undertaking additional work that would not otherwise be done and volunteers taking over work formerly done by salaried staff.

**Example of something you’re pleased with:**

It’s good that, over the years, the ENPA has allowed us to take on more responsibility, and to operate with less and less direction and supervision and has provided the appropriate training and personal protective equipment to enable us to do so safely.

**When something didn’t go to plan:**

It is important to establish and maintain clear lines of communication with the user body to avoid the risk of the volunteers feeling “out of the loop” and confused – particularly when there is lots going on in the area and many people from the user body are involved.



### **Advice for someone setting up a project:**

In a project of this nature, involving technical elements and unsupervised onsite working, the volunteers must have a clear picture of how much time and effort they are prepared to devote to the project and how much responsibility they are prepared to accept. There is a significant difference between basic, labour-intensive, manual tasks, like clearing footpaths, under the direct supervision of a qualified professional and the skilled operation of a potentially hazardous sawmill without on-site professional supervision. A few examples:

- are the volunteers prepared to go on training courses, obtain and maintain qualifications and subsequently take a degree of personal responsibility for operating procedures;
- having offered interpretative tours, are the volunteers prepared to be flexible in their allocation of personal time to be able to accommodate groups;
- are the volunteers prepared to offer additional time to develop partnership working: the sawmill volunteers allocate significant time to sawmill related work in addition to the two regular days per month onsite

Volunteers can benefit from being given additional responsibility (underpinned by appropriate training, equipment and procedures) but it is important to recognise that it may take time for them to build up their experience and expertise so as to give the "employer" the confidence to allow them to carry out skilled tasks not normally considered appropriate for volunteers. For example, the tasks carried out by the volunteer team at Simonsbath have expanded significantly over the last four years or so and they now carry out virtually the full range of work associated with running an historic, working sawmill and interpreting it to the public, without direct on-site supervision.

Close working relationships between the volunteers and those who are using their services are also essential in ensuring that the "messages" being given out by the volunteers are accurate, up to date and consistent with the interpretation strategy being pursued by the user body.

### **Other comments:**

In summary, the conclusions of the volunteers at this stage in the ongoing project are that volunteers can do skilled, complex tasks (given appropriate levels of support) - but shouldn't be used to do work that paid staff should be doing - and that it takes time to build up the competence of the volunteers and the confidence of the "employer" - both need to be clear about the longer-term commitment that that entails.

**For more information on the Sawmill, please visit: [www.simonsbathsawmill.org.uk](http://www.simonsbathsawmill.org.uk)**

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