

The hand that wields the pen

Readers may wonder where I have been for the last few months. The answer is, busy... and culpably lazy for not getting a newsletter out. The *Wood Age* manuscript has now gone off to my editor, Richard. He's the first person who will read it through; and he'll make structural suggestions if need be. He'll spot some of the tropes that I repeat but don't notice (he's very diplomatic), offer a few changes and – because he's an editor at heart – correct a few howlers as he goes along.

The current issue we have to deal with – and it happens with almost any book – is the title. You might think, and I would like to think, that I get the title I want because it's a key part of the creative packaging. What was once *The Wood Age* (nice and short and descriptive of what the book is about) has had to change because Roland Ennos brought out a book called *The Age of Wood* while I was writing. They are rather different books, to be sure; but they cover the same story. So, after a lot of late night chewing (it's quiet: good thinking time) over variants, I came up with *The Hand that Wields the Axe*. I like it. Richard is not so sure. So, there's a certain amount of jockeying. On the one hand it's my title and my book; on the other, they have to make money out of it too. One thing I have learned is knowing which battles to fight and which to withdraw from. So far, no-one has a better title. So far...

Anyway, the book is written. I'm occasionally asked, in the days and weeks after submission when I literally don't have to think about it for a bit, how I feel about completion; and how I feel about what I've written. The answer is, I don't feel anything much: I'm starting the next project – assembling source materials, reorganising my book shelves, upgrading bibliographies and adding new entries to my long-running Early Medieval Timeline – a chronography of sources and dates that spans 200 AD to about 950 – and at nearly 90 pages runs to more than 30,000 words.

The hand that wields the drill

The other thing that has kept me busy over the last few months, in particular, is a long running attempt to establish a new woodland on some land I bought last year. In many ways I'm the wrong person to go about planting new woodlands – I'm far too impatient. On the other hand, someone has to do it, and I get satisfaction from watching a new ecology take shape in front of my eyes. Plenty of other people enjoy the benefits too – the volunteers and friends who come and help; passers by and walkers; lovers of wildlife.



While I wait for the interminable processes – permissions and grant applications; depressing meetings with philistine planners; opposition from niche wildlife campaigners – to grind to a conclusion, I have been building a barn. This is what it looked like after last weekend, when my son Jack and a few

friends and helpers came for a mammoth session of raising stud walls on a stone foundation. It was the foundation that took so long; I had never built in rough stone with lime mortar before.

The barn lies in a very exposed spot on the edge of the Pennines. While we can't plant trees yet, the wind is cranking up for winter and there's no shelter from the gales; so we are in a race against time to get a roof on. In time it'll store equipment, stakes, trees, shelters and provide volunteers and visitors with a place to brew up.

Other news and events

The paperback of *The First Kingdom* will be released on 11th November. I'm doing a launch event at Café Shrub in Winlaton, Gateshead, on Tuesday 16th - <http://landofoakandiron.org.uk/whats-on/> to book a place. With many local societies now coming out of self-imposed hibernation, I'm also giving talks at Darlington History Society (Weds 20th Oct), the Pen & Palette Club in Newcastle, and on Sat 13th November at St Aidan's church in Bamburgh. I'm also teaching an online course for the Explore programme in Newcastle (I wish it was live!) from Friday 12th November, weekly for five weeks.

I'm also presenting a paper to the Cambridge Zero conference on Sunday 17th October, about Social Ecologies. You can find a link on the Woods for the Trees page: <https://woodsforthetrees.org/>

Looks like I'm still busy...