

The chapel and pond in the grounds of WHW



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How Nature Improves Our Mental Health

Josie Hall visits Windsor Hill Wood and discovers how they are using the healing powers of nature and community

It's a cloudy summer's day as I drive down the bumpy track lined with hedgerows and turn a corner to see the little green shepherds' huts of Windsor Hill Wood. Outside a large brick house with solar panels on the roof people are working in the garden. Children are bouncing on a trampoline, and a few people of varied ages are drinking tea on a bench.

Windsor Hill Wood (WHW) is a woodland shelter in Somerset, set up to welcome people going through tough or uncertain times. Visitors can join Chris and Katharine Thompson (and their two young boys, Josh and Natty) in their daily tasks, such as caring for animals, growing and preparing food and chopping wood.

Based on the Christian concept of radical hospitality, WHW is open to people of any or no faith and has

welcomed all ages, from teenagers to pensioners. Since opening their doors in 2009 around 150 guests have come to stay, for anything from a few days to over a year, paying a £75 weekly contribution to food and bills if they can afford it.

What is often considered 'simple living' – such as at WHW – is not really that simple; everything takes time and there is a lot of physical work. But the outcome of that work is food, water, warmth, shelter and when the day is done, there is no need to squeeze in going to the gym.

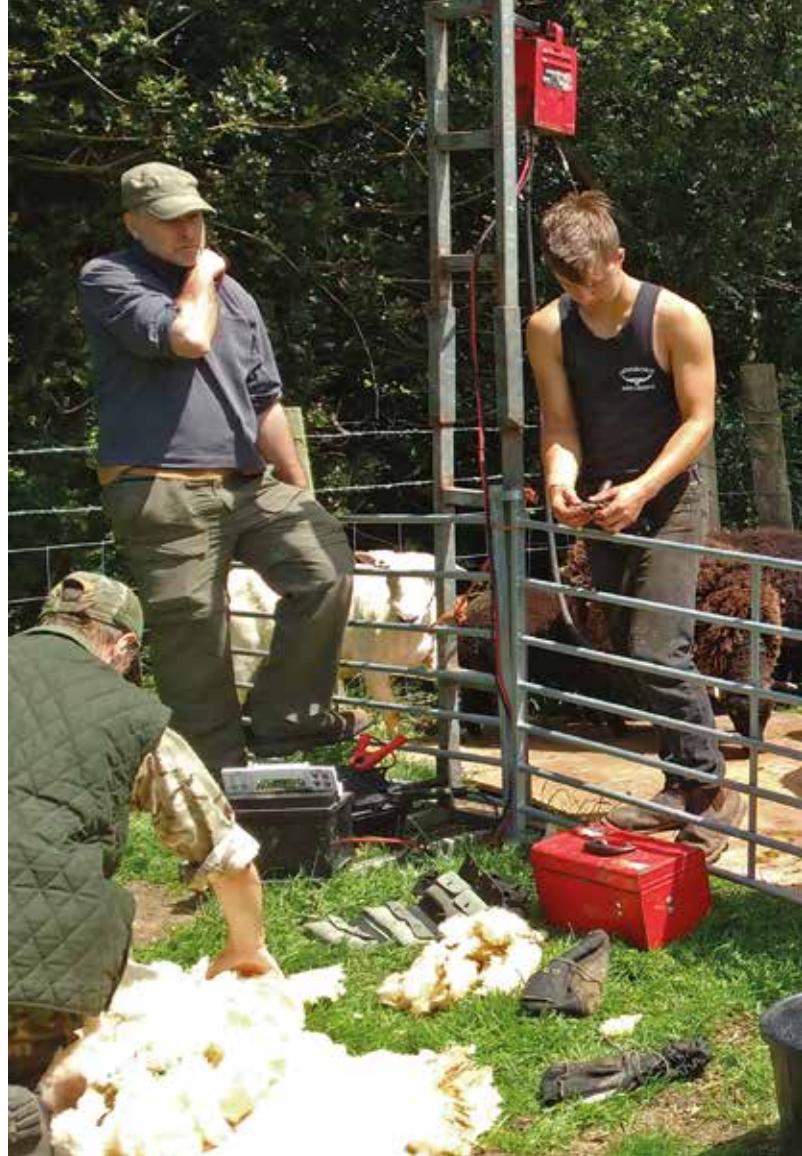
In 2013, the mental health charity Mind published a report (*Feel Better Outside, Feel Better Inside*) showing the many benefits of ecotherapy: treatment programmes which aim to improve health through outdoor activities in Nature and combine the ideas of ecopsychology and psychotherapy.



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Woodland Backstory

Windsor Hill Wood was founded by Tobias Jones, Francesca Lenzi and their three children, Leo, Emma and Benny. They moved there in 2009 but have handed over the management of the place to Chris and Katherine, ahead of relocating to Italy.

Chris explains that he was attracted to WHW by its inclusivity of people undergoing a range of problems and the ethos that everybody has a skill to bring. “It isn’t institutionalised, it’s a family home being extended and people being invited in. Which was in a sense what I thought we should all be doing, but this was a bit more organised,” he explains to me. “The fact that it’s woodland and there’s animals and gardening – it just sounded fantastic.”

Laura* is a 36-year-old social worker who has been staying at WHW for three weeks. A recovering alcoholic who has spent time in a mental health ward, she was in need of some time out. When Laura heard about WHW, she was hopeful about trying a different approach to manage her anxieties, and after two weeks there it was heartwarming to hear how beneficial it’s been so far, “Seeing something grow or stroking a sheep in the evening – they’re just such simple, basic things but they mean so

much. I didn’t think I’d get to this stage … of actual slight happiness.”

At one point Laura had been meeting a different mental health practitioner almost every day and found the lack of consistency difficult to engage with. For her, WHW’s extended family household approach has been hugely beneficial.

“There’s the inner child that comes out when you’re with nature,” says Laura. “The freedom … whether it’s climbing a tree or being creative, inspires and opens you up. That can only be beneficial because it’s a release.”

She says that the many unpredictable events at WHW – from chasing chickens, to meeting new people – force her to be in the present and not to over-analyse or hide away.

“In terms of mental health, trees are great role models,” says Tobias. “In any tree there’s real strength, and yet flexibility. You can cut them down and they come back to life, they provide shelter from wind and rain and sun, they keep you warm … They’re amazing.”

“If you are living in an ecosystem in which nothing is wasted, humans inevitably pick up on that … Chicken shit is useful and horse shit is useful and people who think they are human shit are actually very useful.”



Top left: Some guest accommodation at WHW

Bottom left: A guest strimming in the sunshine

Main photo: Katharine organising the sheep shearing with guests and volunteers

Explore the Local Options

In recent years more health care professionals have begun to support work to encourage people outside and connecting with the natural world – from care farms to community gardens.

It is not always possible to take some time out and fully immerse yourself in a place like Windsor Hill Wood, but it is worth exploring local options that might fit around other commitments (there's a helpful ecotherapy directory on the Mind website). For example, in Brighton there's an organisation called Grow which offers season-specific courses and a weekly meet-up in the local countryside where participants can learn new skills in a supportive environment.

Part of the weekly routine at WHW is a 'well-being meeting'. This is an opportunity for everyone there at the time (residents, guests and volunteers) to share as much or as little as they like about how they are feeling at that moment.

During my visit, I suddenly felt compelled to open up during this meeting and ended up sharing insecurities that I hadn't even spoken about with some of my closest friends. This was partly thanks to the welcoming, open-minded

atmosphere of WHW, its feeling of safety, non-judgement and understanding. For me this is one of the most beneficial parts of being in Nature when I'm struggling with my own mental health.

There is a lack of self worth that can be paralysing when someone is battling depression. Laura explains how being somewhere it felt safe to expose her vulnerabilities has slowly helped her to start to appreciate herself again.

"This place gives you a purpose. The other day I said I felt like I hadn't done anything and someone said 'of course you have, you've been making bread every day' and I was like 'oh yeah, okay, that's alright, I'm giving something'."

* Laura's name has been changed to protect her privacy.

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