

# A-B-Tree

Project Report

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14 January 2012

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## ***Introduction***

### **A-B-Tree in a nutshell**

The project idea was to celebrate the International Year of Forests, in 2011, with a series of creative writing events based around the Gaelic Tree Alphabet, which associates a particular native tree species with each letter. Each event focused on one of the trees and used it as inspiration for creative writing, tapping into our ancient cultural heritage while at the same time creating something completely new. The events were led by Mandy Haggith, poet and author with a passion for trees. The folklore and ecological knowledge gathered in preparation of the events were shared in a 'forest of tweets' on Twitter, one tree per day, during December 2011 and each tree now has a dedicated web page.

### **Objectives**

- To spread appreciation of the ancient cultural connection in Scotland between written language and trees.
- To encourage creativity and stimulate new writing.
- To give people experiences that strengthen their connection with nature, particularly trees, and give them an enjoyable time outdoors in the woods.
- To provide a lasting support for community woodland organisations and teachers to run creative writing events linked to forests.

### **Programme of events**

There were 18 events, ranging from 90 minutes to a full day between September and November 2011, one for each letter/tree in the alphabet: birch, rowan, alder, willow, ash, hawthorn, oak, holly, hazel, bramble, ivy, blackthorn, elder, pine, gorse, heather, aspen and yew. The events took place in a variety of lovely woodland and garden locations (with two indoors) and they explored how getting

close to trees could help to develop the writing and creative process.

The 18 creative writing events were as follows (\*some were not open to the public).

<b>Species</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Host</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Alder	Tanera Mor	5 September	Summer Isles Enterprises	5 adults
Pine	Ledmore and Migdale	17 September	Woodland Trust	5 adults
* Heather	Culag Woods	19 September	Culag Community Woodland Trust	20 pupils from Lochinver Primary School, 8 pupils from Stoer Primary School plus 5 teachers and parents
Rowan	Little Assynt	21 September	Culag Community Woodland Trust	2 adults and 2 children
* Elder	Glendarroch	26 September	Abriachan Forest Trust	20 Glendarroch Primary School pupils and 3 adults
Blackthorn	Abriachan	26 September	Abriachan Forest Trust	3 adults
* Holly	Abriachan	27 September	Abriachan Forest Trust	11 mental health patients and 2 support workers
* Hazel	Sabhal Mor Ostaig	4 October	Crofting Connections	25 children aged 9 – 17 from around the crofting counties and 4 teachers
Gorse	Croy	5 October	Reforestation Scotland	One wet, lonely poet
Bramble	Comrie	11 October	Comrie Croft	One even lonelier poet
Yew*	Falkland	12 October	Centre for Stewardship	12 boisterous children, 2 rangers (morning session), 6 adults (afternoon session)
Aspen	Dundregan	13 October	Trees for Life	8 adults
Ivy	Forres	26 October	Moray Greens	32 adults
Ash*	Alyth	27 October	Alyth Community Woods	30 Alyth Primary School pupils, 2 teachers, 2 rangers and 2 parents
Oak	Dawyck Botanic Garden	28 October	Royal Botanic Gardens	6 adults
Birch	Benmore Botanic Garden	29 October	Royal Botanic Gardens	1 adult
Hawthorn	Edinburgh Botanic Garden	20 November	Royal Botanic Gardens	5 adults
Willow	Helmsdale	27 November	Timespan Museum	4 adults

Sharing knowledge of the tree was central. In most of the events tidbits of folklore, ecology and practical uses of trees were shared out on paper 'leaves' among the group, giving everyone a chance to participate, use their own voice and learn a little about the tree. At least one poem about the tree of the day was read out at each event, and these were hugely popular and a key part of the inspirational power of the events. All but the indoor events included a walk through the woods or garden, with all five senses being stimulated along the way and used to explore the tree of the day.

In all the events, the sensory input, the poetry and the shared knowledge were used as seeds for creativity, becoming the starting point for participants to write a poem, a short story, monologue or dialogue. Notes and jottings were made and sharing of writing was encouraged but not demanded.

The events encouraged people who are interested in words to get to know more about trees, and people who love the woods to try their hand at writing about their experiences. Although not requiring any prior experience of creative writing, the events were also stimulating for keen writers. Mandy is a Gaelic learner, and took every chance to incorporate some Gaelic into the project. At the very least, participants learned the Gaelic name for the tree of the day, and whenever possible Gaelic sayings or phrases were introduced. The weather varied from tolerable to atrocious.

Some highlights include: secondary children from Shetland, North Uist and Orkney, after writing in the woods in driving rain and wind on Skye, vying for how much worse the weather gets back home; a mental health service user at Abriachan woods, thinking about what it would feel like to be a holly tree, saying 'I feel calm, I feel safe'; Lochinver and Stoer primary school children, after eating heather honey to make them so small that heather seemed like a tree, not wanting to be made big again.

## **Participants**

A total of 216 people took part in the events. Of these, 73 people came to the 12 public events and the rest attended the closed events. Participants ranged from 4 year-olds to people in their 70s.

Mandy has enhanced disclosure and experience of working with children, so several events were held with school groups. These ranged from primary school age (e.g. the whole of Stoer Primary school came to one event, ranging from P1 to P7) up to mature secondary school pupils (some splendid writing about hazel was produced by some senior pupils from Shetland, in driving October rain, on the Sleat peninsula).

The most popular public event was held by Moray Greens, who have a strong membership and also reached out to a wide range of other interested people. It was an indoor evening event, quite different from the walks, and there was very strong participation, both creative and political.

Two of the public events attracted no participants at all. One of these was a session at the Reforesting Scotland gathering, where a likely audience was expected, but on the day it was pouring with rain, and who would spend a Saturday morning in late October communing with a gorse bush in the rain, in Croy, when there were several very interesting indoor parallel sessions to go to? The event in Comrie was not advertised by the host at all due to paternity leave.

Lots of other people engaged online. During the December 'forest of tweets', Mandy's Twitter following increased from 325 to 473 and at least 160 people responded to tweets with replies, retweets or messages. The Facebook page is liked by 40 people.

In total, therefore, approximately 416 people have participated in A-B-Tree in some way, not counting visitors to the website (click statistics show 1256 hits but this is hard to interpret in terms of individual people).

## Financial summary

Income Source	Value	Expenses	Cost
Hi-Arts	£2,000.00	18 events @ £150	£2,700.00
Forestry Commission Scotland	£2,000.00	18 days tweeting, creating web pages and writing up @ £150	£2,700.00
Event hosts fees	£1,200.00	9 days management and administration	£1,350.00
Event hosts travel expenses	£393.00	Travel expenses	£943.80
Ticket sales	£5.00	Accommodation and subsistence	£600.00
Profit from Last Bear book sales	£52.00	Publicity	£255.10
In kind (accommodation, food, camping, publicity)	£610.00		
<b>Total income</b>	<b>£6,260.00</b>	<b>Total costs</b>	<b>£8,548.90</b>

**Loss: £2288.90 (written off as 15+ days of unpaid work)**

## Acknowledgements

The project would not have been possible without financial support from Hi-Arts and the encouragement of its director Robert Livingston. James MacDougall at Forestry Commission Scotland welcomed the project into the International Year of Forests celebration, funding from which enabled the project to happen. Thanks also to the Woodland Trust, Trees for Life, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Culag Community Woodland Trust, Abriachan Forest Trust, Summer Isles Enterprises, the Soil Association, the Scottish Crofting Federation, Falkland Centre for Stewardship, Alyth Community Woodland, Comrie Croft, Reforesting Scotland and the Timespan Museum for hosting events.

Many heartfelt thanks to all the people who braved rain and wind to take part in A-B-Tree events in woods around Scotland, especially the school children from Stoer, Lochinver, Glendarroch, Alyth and those involved in Crofting Connections. Thanks to the many people who interacted with the project on the website, on Facebook and particularly on Twitter during the #ABTree 'forest of tweets' in December 2011. Particular gratitude is due to Bill Ritchie, who has perfected the art of poet's roadie.

## *A-B-Tree*

### **The Gaelic tree alphabet**

There have been associations between written language and trees in Gaelic-speaking areas since before the Latin alphabet was introduced by the Christian Church. The old Celtic system of writing used an alphabet called the ogham. Its letters consist of vertical 'trunks' with horizontal and angled crossbars or 'branches'. It was designed to be carved, either into stone or, more easily, into wood. Hence the idea that wood can convey words through time is probably as old as writing itself.

It is easy to make correspondences between trees and script. Trees record each year's weather in short-hand, writing it down in the rings of their trunks. Their twigs scribble on the sky in response to the wind. We still write with wooden pencils and more than ever, on paper surfaces made from trees. Most pertinently, wooded landscapes are filled with the runic shapes of trees.

It is unclear when particular letters became associated with particular woodland species. Perhaps some of the links came about as a result of physical characteristics – the television-aerial appearance of the ogham symbol for yew is temptingly similar to its needly twigs. Could the single branch for hawthorn represent the thorn?

Whatever their origin, the links known as the 'Gaelic Tree Alphabet' or 'Tree Ogham' appear to be very ancient. So too are the folklore connotations and stories arising around each species, which provide much of the fascination of the ogham. It is interesting to note, for example, that the first letter of the alphabet is birch, which is linked in Gaelic culture (and in most other indigenous cultures around the northern hemisphere) with birth, conception and beginnings, whilst the last letter is yew, widely associated with death.

Some aspects of the ogham have varied from place to place and over time, not least because the letters in the alphabet have altered as the Gaelic language has evolved. Some of the letter-tree correspondences are therefore matters of dispute.

The first of these is which letter comes third. One version of the alphabet is sometimes referred to as 'the Beithe-Luis-Nion', referring to the old names for its first three letters (birch, rowan and ash). Other versions have alder as the third letter, with ash either fourth or fifth. I chose alder as the third letter, not least because it has such strong folklore connections with the idea of the magic number three.

The species for M is often taken to be vine. This is peculiar, as grape vines are not native to Scotland or Ireland. Mary Beith inserts honeysuckle for M, but this is also odd, because the folklore connotations of honeysuckle are closer to ivy than to vine (its berries are poisonous, ruling out the most common application of this plant!). It seems much more likely that what was referred to by the old Gaelic Muin was bramble, which I have chosen to use because it produces black, juicy fruit, suitable for wine, because it clambbers about in the woods and not least, because one of its Gaelic names is still Muin.

The most problematic letter is P. The early ogham had twenty letters: 15 consonants and five vowels. Modern Gaelic has lost Q (apple), nG (broom) and St (blackthorn) and gained P, so it now has 18 letters. What species to include for P is a tricky question. Some modern interpreters (including Mary Beith) use birch twice, for B and P, which seems a shame. Others assign P to pine, an inappropriate anglicisation, particularly when combined with replacing it with elm for A (ailm). I thought it important to use a species that was traditionally part of the ogham, and chose blackthorn.

Its latin name is prunus, which is a spurious but fun excuse. My main justification for choosing blackthorn is because it is so dense with folkloric associations, and in this it was a toss-up with apple. Broom is close enough to gorse (O) in folklore terms not to be missed particularly.

Some trees have retained their names unchanged for more than 2000 years, notably birch, which is beithe in both old and modern Gaelic. But many tree names have changed since early Gaelic, so these days several of the tree-letter links are unintuitive. For example, rowan stands for L because it was luis in Old Gaelic, although it is caorann in modern Gaelic.

It is intriguing to imagine how ogham letters, carved into twigs, may have been used over the centuries, as amulets, prayers, ritual instructions, secret messages and histories. Most fascinating of all is the body of folklore associated with each tree species – legends, medicinal recipes, magic spells, rhymes for predicting the weather, portents of death, tricks for making prophesies and all manner of connotations with witches, goblins, hags and fairies. The ogham alphabet is a set of abbreviations of this lore, and a fascinating place to start exploring it.

Other projects in recent years that have used the Ogham as a starting point include A'Craobh, the spiral walk in Borgie Woods in North Sutherland; a set of banners created by school children in Ross-shire; and Donald Urquhart's recent collection of tree photographs displayed in Edinburgh and at Sabhal Mor Ostaig in 2011.

A-B-Tree is the first project to make explicit the link between trees and literature, by using the alphabet as a trigger for creative writing.

### **Why writing about trees is good for well-being**

As a poet who spends a great deal of time in the woods I am convinced that writing about trees is good for my mental and physical health, giving me fresh air, exercise and inspiration, all wrapped up in one leafy holistic bundle. However, there is no need just to take my word for it, or trust to intuition.

There is evidence in support of the belief that creative writing is good for our intellectual and emotional health. Some of the neural benefits of poetry include stimulation of memory (<http://news.scotsman.com/scitech/Verse-broadens-the-mind-the.2615504.jp>). There are increasingly recognised health benefits of creative writing, with people who express themselves in writing having been shown to have reduced symptoms of illness ranging from asthma to rheumatism to cancer (<http://www.breakoutofthebox.com/poetryashealer.htm>).

The physical benefits of outdoor activities are widely recognised, and there are also psychological benefits of being in a natural environment, which have been studied and shown to have positive effects on stress, fatigue, self-esteem and child development (<http://www.johnvdavis.com/ep/benefits.htm>).

It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the A-B-Tree events are beneficial to the participants because they combine time outdoors with learning and creative wordplay.

## Notes from the events

### Birch

It is chucking it down in Argyll. It's Saturday 29 October, and at Benmore Botanic Gardens the rain is particularly intense. Bucketing sheets of it. I get thoroughly soaked scoping out my walk, becoming more and more despairing at the total lack of birch trees, which have clearly been 'weeded out' to make way for the exotic conifers.

One of the people who said they would come made a point of letting me know she had limited mobility, so I need to find at least one birch within an easy walk of the car park, but all those I find are up slopes or clinging to crags. I come to the conclusion that the plentiful birches in the car park itself are probably the best bet. And then, back on the flat, shortly before the gate, I find the perfect tree – a huge and splendid downy birch, an old granny of a tree – a wonderful Lady of the Woods.

At 2pm, the rain is if anything even heavier and I can't believe anyone would try to come on a walk, but one keen soul arrives, and together we go to commune with the old birch tree. We stroke some of the exotic birches on the way, and then share my pocketful of botanical, ecological and practical facts about birch trees.

Once the paper on which the facts are written begins to dissolve, we retire to Puck's Hut, a summer house in the walled garden, to explore the rich folklore tradition around this tree of beginnings. And then we write, and the writing of my companion is joyful and inspired. We wander back to the visitor centre, dripping but delighted by our delving into the magic of the birch.

### Rowan

At 5pm it is chucking it down. Pelting rain. Is that sleet? Hmm. Nobody else in the car park. Only me.

At 5.10 it's just steady drizzle. I'm going for it anyway. The plan's too good to miss. The rowan tree is my totem tree and today is 21 September, International Peace Day and also International Day of Struggle against Plantations, a day of protest set up by Ricardo Carrere of the World Rainforest Movement, who died just a month ago. Today, all over the world, people are gathering to remember Ricardo, an inspiring Uruguayan leader of a global movement of people given the courage by him to challenge the huge industrial super-powers who take vast tracts of land to use for monoculture tree crops without regard to the people affected by them.

I met Ricardo 14 years at a United Nations meeting on forests in New York, myself a newly fledged activist campaigning for the rights of forest peoples, and him a veteran of political negotiations and a man of resolute principle, untemptable by compromise and immune to flattery or coercion. I have learned much from his discourses on the failures to respect the basic human rights of poor people, indigenous tribes, forest-dwellers, peasants and anyone else who stood in the way of corporate resource exploitation.

So, never mind the rain, I go to talk to a rowan tree about Ricardo. It's an ancient giant, its trunk almost completely rotten, but where it has tumbled its branches have taken root, and new shoots are sprouting from its boll. It is a tree that refuses to die, or having died, lives on anyway - a fitting tribute to Ricardo.

And then, as the rain eases, a family come along to join me. We talk about red deer's predilection



for rowan, its amazing link to juniper through a rust fungus, and the fondness of redwings and fieldfares for its berries, which brings them here all the way from Scandinavia. They will be disappointed this year, as it's been a poor year for fruit.

No tree is richer in magical powers than rowan, if the old stories are to be believed. It grows outside most old houses in these parts, and is still planted close to new ones, because of the belief that it keeps away evil spirits. Every self-respecting white witch has a rowan wand, and although cutting or burning the wood is bad luck unless it is done with due ceremony, it has a host of uses, all supposed to result in protection, whether of cradles or carts, houses or barns, cows, sheep or people.

I am glad to have had some people to share some of the stories with, like the boy on Arran who untied the rowan twig from the cow's tail and the origin myth that has rowan made of eagle feathers and drops of blood. And I was delighted when the boys went off and adopted some trees and wrote about their magical powers. One, if you kiss it, will bring you good luck. One is going to produce a special tea that, when drunk by military leaders, will bring about world peace. Another, when it grows a bit bigger, will become a witch's broom.

I'm sure Ricardo would be pleased. Home, and dry, I raise a glass of rowan wine to his memory.

### **Alder**

Five of us set out one balmy morning on Tanera Mòr, by boat across the bay, to find some alder trees. We stroll up the path from the pier to where some vigorous young alders are thriving, just a few years after planting as part of the woodland regeneration that is being encouraged all across the island by its owners.

For the third letter of the alphabet (according to some, anyway), and because three is such a magical number, it becomes a morning of threes. Three poems about alder. Three practical uses of the tree, three ecological highlights and three strange tidbits of folklore. Three bursts of writing, first about the external appearance of an alder tree, second imagining what is underground, and third hiding under an alder seeing where a bit of secrecy takes our writing.

The most interesting discussion arose around a strange old practice in the highlands: when a person died leaving no offspring, their grave would be ringed with alder stakes. Was this a sign of compassion for them? Or was it a way of using the Shield Tree's power to protect the community from infection by their barrenness? We wondered, and wandered, and hid ourselves away, and wrote, before making our own, thoughtful ways back home.

### **Willow**

Snow on the road on the way to Helmsdale and a terrific gale blowing the sleet horizontally - definitely an event to be held in the bad-weather, indoor option, in this case the cafe at Timespan Museum. I have brought some cuttings, in case it is too foul to go outside in search of trees, so we look at how osier and sallows compare and differ. I've also brought some baskets, so we are surrounded by willow in its practical form.

We delve into the folklore around willow and before we know it, two hours have passed and it is time to go home. It's the tree of enchantment - well named indeed.

A small but appreciative group - not much writing, but a wide-ranging discussion about the old tree lore, the medicinal properties of willow and ancient healing techniques, the connections between healing and witchcraft, the way the Christian religion has adapted or been threatened by earlier

pagan beliefs, and much much more, as well as some really good laughs.

This is the eighteenth event, taking me right through the alphabet and completing phase 1 of the project. It's Sunday 27 November and it's dark by 4pm. On the way home, there's a sliver of new moon. No sooner has one phase ended than another begins.

### **Ash**

This event with Alyth Primary School was set up by Marian Bruce, the secretary of a new community woodland being established in partnership with the Forestry Commission close to the Den of Alyth, a lovely wooded glen in Perthshire.

We meet in the Den on a misty autumn morning and begin by ensuring that the children will always be able to identify ash trees, getting to know the leaves, the bark, the keys and the form of the trees. The ranger is with us and she takes us to meet one of her favourite trees in the wood, a big ash tree. The children take turns to wear blindfolds and ear muffs to really get to know the feel of the ash under their fingers and its smell. Some of their descriptions are delightful – it's the texture of lizard skin, one boy decides. Many of them seem to think that it smells of yoghurt.

Having looked and smelled and touched, we go through some ecology, history and practical uses of this hugely useful tree. Then we go to listen to some young ash trees, and this is the highlight. Shaking a young ash makes the upper twigs clash together and this sound travels down through the trunk creating some marvellous sounds. The children take turns to listen in, hearing water, drumming, animals, all sorts. Their teacher stands by, looking somewhat sceptical, until she too, on the urging of children and parents, puts her ear to the trunk. She beams with delight at the strange sounds.

Then we go through some of the folklore. Few trees are as exciting. With its Viking connection to Yggdrasil, the world tree, and many peculiar uses, the children are enthralled. I encourage them to imagine what might be inside the tree they have been listening to and their imaginations run riot.

The results of this session will be read and displayed at the official opening of the new community woodland, at which John Swinney will plant an ash tree, in spring 2012.

### **Hawthorn**

This event had to be postponed due to illness and having been re-advertised for a month later, in late November, maybe doesn't get quite the crowd the earlier event might have mustered. A group of 5 people gathers and we have a lovely time going to see the beautiful hawthorn tree close to the cafe up on the hill in the middle of the Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh, next to the Andy Goldsworthy stone cone. This is a cloutie tree, with ribbons tied to it, presumably containing wishes and hopes. There are very few haws, but enough!

We share slips of paper about nomenclature, ecology and the many aspects of hawthorn folklore and magic. We discuss how science (such as the analysis of the chemistry of its smell, the same as sex and corpses) can provide modern justification for ancient magical beliefs (such as its romantic power) and taboos. Keeping its blossom out of the house will keep flies as well as bad spirits away.

We read poems, of which there are many, and the participants, all interested in writing or published poets, make notes and word sketches. Eventually cold drives us into the cafe (too late for tea, unfortunately) and we carry on writing. Again, lovely results, but it leaves in their notebooks... I am frustrated by my inability to capture the dazzling writing produced in these events.

## **Oak**

People start arriving at lunchtime at the cafe at the Botanic Gardens in Dawyk. It's Friday 28 October and a gorgeous autumn day. A cold breeze but sunny, showing up all the autumn colours in the many splendid trees. It is dominated by native species, though in many places, if I were the gardener, I would push out some of the competitors to the native oaks.

There are several hunky oaks right next to the cafe so we gather there while people arrive and start talking about the trees. None of us are completely certain how to distinguish sessile from pedunculate oak, but I've been assured by a botanist that it's hard, and hybrids are widespread, so we content ourselves with appreciation rather than expertise and get rapidly down to sharing what we do know about the practical uses of this enormously important tree.

From timber to bark, from charcoal to oak apple, from acorns to forests, from ships to cathedrals, from ink to doors, oak has played a huge role in Scotland's landscape and cultural history. There's lots to share.

It's cold enough to want to keep moving, so we march on up to find more and bigger trees and places with wider outlooks. At the top of the garden we stop under a majestic tree, surveying the border land beyond, and we share titbits of folklore. Oak, symbol of courage, sacred tree of sun-gods and kings through the ages and in many nations, carries with it a forest of connections, tales, legends and myths, rituals and spells. There are so many traditions of burning oakwood to honour the sun – as if this tree is our nearest star's ambassador.

On the way back down the hill, we read poems. Tennyson, Jo Shapcott, Kit Wright. Voices of other celebrants of the King of the Woods.

## **Holly**

This is the third Abriachan event, and it takes place at the woodland classroom and in the woods nearby where young trees have been planted, including some holly. The group are mental health service users based in Inverness who have been coming to the woods weekly for several weeks.

We introduce ourselves, then go for a walk to get to know some holly trees. Around one lovely young tree we share ecological and folklore titbits. This is a lovely group of people, all listening carefully and sensitively to each other. There are insightful comments about the holly – this tree that looks after us through the dark times definitely has resonances for these people.

I ask them to think what it might be like to be a holly tree. 'I am very calm', says one. 'I feel safe.' The tree is prickly where it is accessible but smooth leaved out of reach. There is as much invisible underground as there is above. Aren't we all a bit like this?

The inevitable rain begins so we dash indoors. There I encourage those who want to, to write down any words that occur to them about the tree. One woman draws a green man, with his holly crown. With both artistic talent and a generous nature, she happily draws beautiful holly leaves for everyone to arrange their words around. We talk as we write. Some wander out for a smoke. One person is busy making a vegetable soup, which we all eat together for lunch. It is the most convivial and creative session of the alphabet.

## **Hazel**

This session is part of the Crofting Connections event at Sabhal Mor Ostaig in parallel with the Scottish Crofting Federation gathering in October. More than 100 children from schools around the

crofting counties have gathered on Skye, and about 25 of them choose to come out to the woods to learn and write about hazel. It is a wild, stormy day, and by the end of it their paper is ripping under their pencils, it is so wet, but they are game throughout.

We walk down the road to a woodland, using all the senses and writing observations of the woods on paper leaves (these are later gathered into a poe-tree for display to the conference and at later events as part of the Crofting Connections project).

Under a big hazel we go through identification, ecology and practical uses, and they write about what they are observing and make notes about what hazel can be used for. Then we read out slips of paper about folklore and they write again. Some of the older children (in particular two from Shetland) produce some superb writing. Unfortunately they take it away with them back to their disparate homes!

There's a lesson to be learned here about capturing the results of people's writing, somehow. Or is it OK for it simply to have happened and been enthused about at the time?

### **Bramble**

I have never heard of Comrie, and clearly nobody in Comrie has heard of me. I turn up at the venue, which is a kind of outdoor centre, to blank looks from staff. The person who was organising the event is away on paternity leave and has clearly abandoned the project without doing any publicity at all. Important lesson, don't trust to event organisers to pull in a crowd. Important lesson, don't do unpaid events.

Finding a bramble is almost as difficult as finding the participants, but eventually, by a pond, among some oaks, I find a patch to make a ritual, solo, writing workshop. I write a surprisingly cheerful little poem, given how despondent I am about the event.

### **Ivy**

I have had a long-standing invitation from Moray Greens to do an evening session in Forres. I had hoped that a night walk might be an option but it proved otherwise so I have brought along bunches of ivy, in flower, to hand around the group. More than 30 people are here. We sit in a big circle.

I hand out green triangles of paper to represent ivy leaves, and invite people to write down what trees mean to them. There is a huge range, from personal to practical to planetary. Then I introduce the A-B-Tree project and ivy in particular and hand around the usual ecological and practical slips of paper, which we read out to each other. Then we do a round of folklore.

I invite them all to write down on another triangle what ivy now means to them, what they have picked up on. There is significant debate over whether ivy is good for forests or a danger to other trees, and great interest in the craft and medicinal uses of the plant.

Then it is time to get political. I read out some party policies on woodlands and invite them all to write on their final triangle what they would like to see in government policy on woods. As ivy is a species that symbolises the interactions between all species, this leads onto some great discussion about woodland regeneration. There is a clear hunger for people to have more access to woodland.

### **Blackthorn**

The event is at 4.30, advertised as a 'twilight' walk, but only two people come along. Perhaps the timing was wrong, perhaps the advertising wasn't wide enough, who knows why? Still. I set the

mood by reading Vicki Feaver's acidic poem about sloes, then the three of us set off along the track away from the road, into Abriachan forest.

It isn't far to the first blackthorn thicket, and we scramble around looking for ripe sloes, nibbling on them, sniffing, touching, rustling and getting to know this spiny, unfriendly species. Again, ecological and practical facts on slips of paper, read out to each other as we stroll along, as the evening was cool. A definite atmosphere of chill begins to develop – there's something spooky about blackthorn.

At a fantastic viewpoint out over Loch Ness, getting the benefit of a late glimpse of sun, we sit on a bench and share folklore and more poems, and then we write. All three of us produce the makings of a poem, which we share, and enjoy, before parting company, one to take the short cut back to her house, me and the other to return to the trust's classroom in the forest.

### **Elder**

I arrive at Glendarroch Primary School early and meet Suzann Barr from Abriachan Forest Trust who has organised the visit. We walk a circuit around the school, down to the canal towpath and back across the fields, and find plenty of elder, still in berry.

The class is quite small, around 20 p5, 6 and 7s. They dress themselves for outdoors, with warm clothes and wellies, and we set off.

The first task is to identify elder, looking at its leaves and its fruit. I show them pictures of the flowers too and invite them all to get to know the tree with all senses – all of them have a nibble on some berries, and smell the leaves, touch the bark, listen and look, and start writing down some notes about what they are observing.

We talk about the ecology as we walk down towards the canal – how birds eat the berries and spread the seeds, how bees pollinate the flowers. On the towpath there are lots of elders, and Suzann challenges them to count how many they can see as we walk along.

I hand out slips of paper with titbits of practical use and folklore, and we all take turns to read them out. I tell them an abbreviated version of Hans Christian Anderson's Little Elder-Mother story, and then invite them to make up their own adventure story – where would they go on a magical elder journey and what of all the special things they have read about would elder do for them? They start to use their imaginations, scribbling down ideas and spinning their own magical or fantastical tales.

As we turn back the rain, which has held off until now, lashes down, and we all run headlong across the field to the school.

### **Pine**

A glorious morning in Migdale and Ledmore forest, a huge expanse of dense, wild pinewood over in East Sutherland. I am met by Chris, the woodsman, and his large, gentle dog and then others arrive, from cars secreted in lay-bys. We begin with Gabriela Mistral's poem, 'The Pine Forest', then wander down the grassy, muddy track. Pines tower over a tangle of blaeberry, heather, bracken, rose, birch and willow. We break off the track and set out into the heart of the wood, down towards the murmur of the Spinningdale Burn. As we get close, its song becomes more and more welcoming. Past a stand of planted pine, over ground suggestive of earlier human activity but long reclaimed by nature, we reach a marvellous Granny pine who presides over our creative session.

We have got to know each other a little as we walked in and begin with green paper 'needles', each telling of some of the many ecological marvels of scots pine, from its achingly slow production of seeds, to the Scottish accent of its resident crossbill.

Then everyone goes to select themselves their own tree. I ask them to get to know it, to do something with it that they wouldn't normally do with a new human acquaintance and to begin writing.

After a while we gather again. A fire is underway, to keep midgies at bay. We hear Drummond's ghostly poem and read out, cone by cone, nuggets of folklore about pine, including all their powerful male erotic symbolism, tales of everlasting love and immortality.

Returning to our adopted trees, flights of fancy are encouraged - a change of size to become as big as the tree perhaps, or becoming the tree and writing from its perspective.

We reconvene and share what we have written. One tree is 'disturbed', with distorted branches. Another tells of its future with its sibling trees. Another, with its smell of a relative, invoked itself as the mast of a boat.

We share blobs of 'paper resin' telling of practical uses of the tree, from turpentine to ammunition boxes, from a cold remedy to lighting tapers. We finish by reading 'Pine Trees and the Sky: Evening' by Rupert Brooke, who after seeing pine trees, no longer wishes to die.

Then flasks and sandwiches come out. Lunch. Chat. When the fire has died down we go our separate ways. I follow the murmuring stream deeper into this enchanting wood and it takes me hours to tear myself away.

### **Gorse**

Croy on a Saturday morning. Driving rain. Several other indoor options at the Reforesting Scotland gathering that look interesting. Who in their right mind would have gone outside to get soaked and pricked communing with a gorse bush? No-one. Which is precisely who comes along.

I go anyway, read over the titbits of fact and folklore, walk, look, smell, touch, listen, get wet and scribble. I find a little beetle living inside a gorse flower, and write it a tiny poem.

### **Heather**

It is a lovely morning but by 1.30 rain has started. I arrive at Lochinver Primary School clutching a bunch of heathers: ling, bell heather and bog heather. Some of the children playing in the yard recognise me and others deduce from the heather that I am the person taking them to the woods. When the school bell rings, the children come in, and proceed to put their wet weather gear on. Most of them are pretty damp already, but it has clearly not been wet enough to merit raincoats at playtime! A minibus full of children from Stoer Primary School arrives, also all togged up for bad weather. We set out for the woods.

The children are remarkably well-behaved, pairing up to cross the road, chatting amiably with me as we walk up the hill, discussing the various fungi we pass in the regenerating woodland. I stop at a heathery patch and let everyone catch up. We do identification of the three types of heather and their various names, in English, Scots and Gaelic. They are sceptical that heather is a tree.

We carry on a bit further until we reach a multi-stemmed oak and lots of heather. I hand out leaves of paper with practical uses of the plant. There are enough for everyone, as if by magic I have got precisely the right number. They take it in turns to read out what's on their leaf, and they listen attentively to each other. Some of the uses take extra explanation – how to make a heather bed, for example. They chip in with their own experiences of heather.

I talk briefly about some of the ecological interest in heather, finishing with bees. I ask them to imagine being as small as a bee. We look at how much bigger the multi-stemmed oak tree is than they are. I try to persuade them that if they were bee-sized, a heather bush would be just as big as the multi-stemmed oak. They look a bit less sceptical that heather is a tree.

To help them to think as small as a bee, I get out my magic jar of heather honey, which, like the bottle labelled 'Drink me!' in Alice in Wonderland, will help them shrink. They have brought spoons, and they all come up to get a spoonful – some love it and take a big scoop, some loathe it and take the most meagre scraping – and then they start to get small. I ask them what useful things they can see among the heather, what the heather is like to them now, what animals they might meet and what will they be like, and then I send them off to write about being a tiny thing under a heather tree. They have all brought pencils and their teacher gives them all paper. They lean on each other's backs and up against trees to write.

After a while I bring them all back together to share what they have written. Their imaginations have been blazing. They've made beds of leaves, umbrellas of toadstools, a bouncy castle of sphagnum moss. They've befriended butterflies to fly on, a ladybird as a dog, a snail to ride on. Some have been scared of spiders and beetles and one has become a dragonfly.

They don't want me to make them big again, so we make our way back to school just as they are. A delightful, if somewhat damp, afternoon in the woods.

### **Aspen**

At Dundreggan, Trees for Life volunteers take some time out of tree-planting to come and get to know some aspen trees. In a grove of trees we each get to know a tree, intimately, using all our senses and writing down observations about it. Then we share titbits of ecology, and as the participants are knowledgeable about trees this soon goes beyond the slips of paper into a thorough discussion of management of natural regeneration.

We stroll on towards some magnificent aspens up a stream gully and there we read some poems and explore the folklore connotations – especially the strange coincidence of Odin's hanging, with a gash in his side, on an aspen, and the belief that Jesus was crucified on an aspen. Then I encourage them to write haiku, and there are some marvellous results.

### **Yew**

In the morning, at Falkland Centre for Stewardship, I have a group of children with nowhere to go during the school holiday, some of whom are clearly having hard lives. We walk to a yew tree, big and dark, but not huge, probably only a couple of hundred years old, which has a xylophone underneath it. I explain how poisonous it is, and then we share titbits of ecology and practical facts.

I ask them to think about what the world might have been like when the tree was the same age as them. This is clearly a tough thing to imagine. We go back to shelter (it is wet) and they draw pictures of life 'in the old days'. They are encouraged to pick up on any of the practical facts they have learned. There is a lot of shooting people with bows and arrows, someone is being hung,

another is getting drunk – I am quite disturbed by what the children seem to want to draw. Writing is nearly impossible to get anywhere with, though once the pictures are well under way some of the children are willing to annotate them with words. We return to the yew tree after a while and travel forward in time, into an imagined future. This in turn becomes drawings, no longer much linked to the tree. Imaginations run wild.

In the afternoon I have a second session, this time with adults. It has been advertised as for teachers and rangers and there is a group of six enthusiasts. We share the slips of practical and ecological facts again and then delve into the folklore, which is deep and dark and fascinating. Yew is a tree associated with death and graveyards and this leads inevitably to personal reminiscences of loved ones. We read Sylvia Plath's *The Yew Tree and the Moon* – a dark poem. This draws out some deep and moving writing. Tears. Tenderness. Yew is also a tree to transcend death, and time. Having shared the new writings produced in the quiet shady space under the tree, we stroll back into daylight, enriched and strangely peaceful.

## Feedback

I gathered email addresses from participants and asked for feedback at the end of the events. Here's a sample of the responses. Irritatingly, except for Alyth I haven't managed to get feedback, other than verbal thanks and appreciation, from the schools and community woodland groups.

- ▲ Ash: 'Thanks for a great morning in Alyth - enjoyed by all. The work the kids did is wonderful - it is on the wall outside the headteachers office for everyone to see.'
- ▲ Willow: 'The bit I was part of was interesting - I found out about some new things I had never heard of before - the Gaelic alphabet and trees and also about the Willow itself was interesting and informative. The pieces of paper definitely got us discussing the properties of the willow and the baskets were fascinating. Perhaps a leaflet to take away would have been an idea? Good stuff overall - engaging and interesting.'
- ▲ Ivy: 'It was an enjoyable, stimulating, thought- and discussion-inducing event.'
- ▲ Hawthorn: 'I enjoyed your session tremendously. I loved the mixture of poetry readings to inspire us, then the slips of paper with factual, botanical, historical, or folkloric info on them to inspire us to write. I was thrilled to see the 'cloots' hanging from the hawthorn and, as you said, the belief in the healing power of the hawthorn was still going on. A magical day. An imaginative and inspiring project which not only produced lovely poetry but I am sure has helped people to appreciate our trees more.'
- ▲ Oak: 'I really enjoyed your event at Dawyck and thought the sharing of snippets was a clever way to get us all to participate and take in some of the information. My only query is a practical one. I have a suspicion that you would have attracted more people if you had not mentioned in your flyer the idea of producing written responses. I had two or three possible joiners lined up in the cafe but they chickened out when they discovered that they might have to put pen to paper. Perhaps you didn't want those people anyway? But if they had come, they might have learnt things, enjoyed your enthusiasm, and maybe even surprised themselves by writing something. Curiously, I did produce a poem just after the event but it was nothing to do with trees. However, I'm sure that being with you at Dawyck was instrumental in getting me to write something that wasn't just journalism. Thank you.'
- ▲ Oak: 'Thanks so much for a brilliant afternoon.'
- ▲ Willow: 'Great workshop.'
- ▲ Birch: 'Thank you for inspiring me. I had a fantastic afternoon, even the weather seemed right in a way.'
- ▲ Overall: 'It was a brilliant project and I enjoyed it so much!'



## **Publicity and media coverage**

The project was publicised through email alerts, a facebook page was set up and regular tweets were put out on Twitter. A webpage was created at <http://mandyhaggith.worldforests.org/a-b-tree.asp>, linked from the homepage, supplemented by news items, with the events calendar kept up to date. Individual web pages were created for each page during December 2011. The project was also written about on Mandy's blog cybercrofter.

200 copies of a paper flyer was created, which was tailored for individual events, used for single events and as a programme of the October 'tour', distributed by host organisations. Several of these host organisations also put their events out in their newsletters or email bulletins, including the Botanic Gardens, Moray Greens and the Woodland Trust, and several blogs have covered it.

Press releases were put out at the start, in October and at the end of the events. Several events were publicised in local newspapers: the Assynt News, Am Bratach, Northern Times, Evening News, Peebleshire Advertiser, Forres Gazette and the Dunoon Observer. The online arts magazine Northings published an article on the project. An interview with Mandy about the project featured on BBC Scotland Radio's Out of Doors on Saturday 26 November, including a quote being used as the trailer for the programme.

## ***Conclusions***

### **Phase 1 – the events**

The first three objectives were achieved through the events: spreading the word about our ancient link between writing and trees, encouraging creativity and giving people experiences that strengthen their connection with nature.

Events are best attended when they are organised by groups with a strong local constituency or where participants can be guaranteed (e.g. school pupils).

The slips of paper 'leaves' of folklore, ecology and practical uses of trees proved very popular and an effective way of getting everyone to participate.

People love having poems read out to them.

The session with mental health service users was profoundly inspiring and it would be lovely to have more opportunities to work with this kind of group.

There was lots of great writing during events, but it is taken away in notebooks. How to capture it?

It is important not to leave publicity entirely to the host organisation.

Some potential participants are put off by the fear of having to write. Should creative writing be 'sneaked in by the back door'?

Getting feedback is difficult and perhaps a quick way to get feedback at the events is needed, or some reward for later responses. Perhaps I should have been taping these events, to capture the words and ideas generated during them.

The events can be a way to start writing but ideally, to produce polished work, there needs to be follow-up after the event. The offer to publish writing on the website has not been sufficient to attract results. How do other creative writing event facilitators ensure this happens? Perhaps events need to be presented with a kind of route map from the event to a written or published outcome. Or perhaps it is sufficient to trust that the process is what matters rather than look for outcomes.

Wet weather options are needed unless participants are under 18. Perhaps Mandy should investigate becoming a waterproof notebook sales agent.

## Phase 2 - Sharing the results

The project has created a useful resource by gathering the poems and titbits of folklore, ecology and practical use about the species of the alphabet. The A-B-Tree web pages, where all this material is gathered with photos by Bill Ritchie, is a lasting legacy.

The Facebook page has grown in 'likes' slowly but it does not generate a great deal of response.

The Twitter 'forest of tweets' frenzy in December, by contrast, generated daily debate and interaction, some serious, some frivolous, much genuinely curious. People tuned in to offer links to poems, anecdotes and to ask questions. When I started being heckled on Twitter, I realised that this daily sharing of folklore was something like the old oral tradition, only instead of telling stories around a fireside, we were using the latest in communication technology, allowing people in Africa and Amsterdam to tune into a ceilidh with folk in Assynt and Argyll.

However, as one critic has pointed out, Twitter risks being 'literature committing suicide'. The result is a stack of one-liners, and it lacks narrative.

## Phase 3 – Into the future

### Future events and activity support

To fully achieve the final objective of the project, which is to provide a lasting support for groups and teachers to run A-B-Tree or similar events, it would be nice to make the titbits of ecology, folklore and practical uses of trees available for practical use. One suggestion for school use is to create a set of hard-wearing laminated cards, with titbits, illustrations and activities for each tree. What format would fit with the curriculum or be most effective for generating learning and creativity? Can the Gaelic content be deepened? Does this idea mesh with the Forest Education Initiative?

It would be possible to explore promotion of more events in schools (particularly forest schools), with mental health patients and with woodland organisations. Mandy's listing on the Scottish Book Trust has been updated, which is one way for potential hosts of future events to gain funding to help cover costs. What kind of promotion would work best? Shall I draw up a list of possible hosts and offer events to them? Are there initiatives or agencies who would find these events useful?

### Publication

There are a range of potential options for publication and production of materials. Which of the following merit further work?

- ⤴ *A-B-Tree pamphlet*: I have written a poem for each tree, which together form a draft poetry pamphlet laid up alongside Bill Ritchie's photos. I am unsure whether it merits publication, but will continue working on it.
- ⤴ *An anthology of poetry*: I have drafted a proposal for a poetry anthology, and had preliminary discussion with Calder Wood Press about production. They might consider something in 2013, although they seem daunted by the prospect of seeking permissions for reproduction of previously published work. I will approach other publishers.
- ⤴ *A-B-Tree – the column*: I am preparing a pitch for a weekly or monthly magazine or newspaper column, working through the alphabet. Any ideas of likely target periodicals?
- ⤴ *A-B-Tree - the radio broadcasts*: The folklore and ecology of each tree could make a short radio segment. I am planning to explore this with my local radio station, Loch Broom FM,

and see how that goes.

- ♣ *A-B-Tree – the book*: Is there a book in this? If so, which publisher might be interested? I envisage something that takes the forest of tweets, makes a narrative for each tree, and also picks out particular themes which occur over and over, such as wood as fuel, love charms, the use of wood in boats, weather forecasting, the moon, tree blossom uses and taboos, medicinal uses of parts of trees, dyes, domestic uses, etc.
- ♣ *A-B-Tree – the movie...*

## **Networking**

The success of the 'forest of tweets' in December suggests that there is real potential to grow the network of contacts with people interested the tree alphabet. Among the memberships of the many woodland and forest and environmental organisations there must be lots of people who would find it fascinating. I plan to offer a short article about A-B-Tree to a range of forest-related organisations for them to put out to their members. Any other advice on how to reach people who love trees?

Why was the Facebook page not effective but Twitter was? What other online events might generate interaction? Are there other networks out there I can tap into? Who needs A-B-Tree but does not know about it yet?

## ***Appendices***

### **About Mandy Haggith**

Mandy Haggith is a writer who lives on a coastal woodland croft in Assynt. She has two published poetry collections (letting light in and Castings) and her novel, *The Last Bear*, won the Robin Jenkins Literary Award for environmental writing in 2009. This novel is structured around the Ogham: each of its 20 chapters has a tree title and draws on the Celtic tree lore for that species.

Mandy has been a forest researcher and activist for the past fifteen years, prior to which she was an academic specialising in computer tools to support environmental decisions. She has worked on forest issues for many organisations, including the Centre for International Forestry Research, WWF, Greenpeace, the Taiga Rescue Network, Culag Woods and Assynt Foundation. She was the co-ordinator of the European Environmental Paper Network from 2005-2009.

Mandy brings together her joint passions for woods and for words in inspirational teaching of nature writing. An experienced facilitator of writing events, she has led many creative writing retreat weeks and poetry courses, as well as teaching evening classes, leading guided writing walks and running workshops.

### ***Poetry***

#### ***Tree lore***

(in attached files)