

Stacks of fun!



article Woody Morris
photos Woody Morris
and Robin Phelps

Woody Morris, whose home is on the edge of the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire, was inspired by a host of impromptu 'sculptures' that mysteriously appeared on a recently clear felled patch of conifers called Moseley Green. At the time he was on an Art Foundation course, and used these sculptures as the basis of a course project. This Article is based on the project submission, a public exhibition, and an email exchange with M.S.. Woody is currently studying anthropology at the School of Oriental & African Studies, London University.

Robin Phelps has lived in The Forest of Dean his whole life. In his spare time he draws cartoons depicting forest life.

In May 2009. I was working on my final major project for art foundation, and was struggling for ideas. The breakthrough came when I decided to investigate something I had noticed many months before. It was what appeared to be dozens of 'sculptures' someone had made in a recently felled plot in the middle of the forest.

Actually, it looked as if someone had been playing with bits of wood left by the forestry.



The Forest of Dean is well known for its sculpture trail, begun in 1986. For two or three years after its inauguration one could find occasional examples of where people – usually families, most likely - had gathered branches, fir cones, leaves, stones, sometimes flowers, and sometimes artefacts such as drink cans, and made ‘sculptures’. Or, perhaps some of these were the abandoned paraphernalia of play, with no intention of making ‘art’. Or, perhaps there is no boundary between these two activities....



This period didn't last long. Later, there were very few signs of any such activity. In addition, the use of the Forest for artwork by school classes, also evident for a while after 1986, quickly waned – no doubt partly for financial reasons, and pressing H & S regulations.

The woodpiles at Moseley Green, which is well away from the sculpture trail, came out of shifting and stacking large sections of conifer trunks, left after clear felling of conifers. In time, the wooden slices became bleached by the sunlight, similar to the bleached bones of dead things. I'd seen nothing like them - the sheer abundance of them fascinated me; scores of them! They seemed most powerful when I was in the clearing surrounded by them. Most were stacked in a very specific way, the individual pieces of wood by no means light, and therefore involving a great deal of intent. I was intrigued by the way that someone was being influenced by and influencing the landscape.

The wood stacks had caught my imagination, but when I first inquired about them, no one seemed the least bit interested. This made me more intrigued. However, as I investigated further, and talked to more people, the more I found that they were just as fascinated as me to find out where the stacks had come from.

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I heard that walkers were quite fond of them - and were known to add to the stacks. I also think most locals were fond of them - but probably not enough to think it worth making a film about them! Amongst people local to Moseley Green there was a very interesting range of opinion and comments, from the simple "Someone started piling them up.... It's no more than that. Anybody walking over there can just pile them up." to the explosive "What the f***g Hell's that all about then?"

Several people said they had seen someone who walked his dog in the area who looked as though he was the maker. "He used to come every day", one said: "he wasn't doing any harm...." Another was enthusiastic: "I've been watching them.... They look really good, don't they? " One man seemed to have practical matters, not art, in mind, suggesting that these log sections were handy for sitting on.

A professional sculptor, familiar with working with wood, had "observed them over a while and thought that they were well... half interesting". Some years previously he had made some sculptures of old tree-roots and wondered if the mystery artist had seen them. He hadn't.

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There were though, certainly some copycat reactions to the Moseley Green structures. For example, two young boys I talked with had had a go – though they were a bit sheepish: "We haven't really done much of it.... I did one once." But they added.

"They're pretty cool!" When asked how many they thought there were, one rather accurately guessed, "about a hundred". The mystery stacker later said he had done ninety six of them.



Some people, though, found them rather un-cool, and certainly didn't add any. A local art teacher expressed his views on this 'artwork' very clearly: "No - I don't like it. I didn't make any". He jokingly added "I never stack up wood - and I'm an artist!" I asked if he thought they looked beautiful: "No: I think they look trivial!" He was puzzled and concerned about someone feeling they had to "Interfere with landscape to make something of it." His view was that one "doesn't have to interfere with the landscape to learn from the landscape", and that anyone sensitive to it wouldn't need to make such interventions. He admitted kicking some of the stacks over himself because "they got on my nerves", distracting him from a particularly attractive view.

He wasn't the only one who knocked some of them down... and probably some others would have liked to, including an old 'sheep badger' [a native Forester who had the right to keep sheep in the forest], He contemplated them, and concluded: "Looks like some f***er wanna get a job!"

I am lucky that the stacker turned out to be someone as eccentric and exciting as Robin Phelps, who is also a great photographer and draws elaborate comedy cartoon sketches. He used to walk his dog in the woods at Moseley Green and one day he went there and the trees were all being cut down. Later he started making the stacks by accident when he was looking for lizards under the pieces of wood - and it just went on from there.

And I was lucky because when Robin casually showed me the photos he had been taking of the stacks, I knew straight away that my Foundation course project, as a collaboration between two very different people had a lot of potential.

Robin would never describe himself as an artist. He just did it for fun, and “had walked on Moseley Green for many years; looking for things hibernating beneath pieces of wood” as part of his enjoyment of the forest. This included the peacefulness and carpeting of mosses under the trees. But the time came for harvesting the timber, and machines were brought in to cut down the trees, “It looked like the Second World War....”

However, Robin found a potential in the debris left after harvesting. “What would be under the next piece of wood? The expectation of a find kept me going.” Lifting the wood out of the way, he inadvertently began his stacks. This then took over as his main activity. “Over time, building the stacks became an obsession – back-breaking at times – until there were scores of stacks spread over a very large area. I couldn’t leave them alone... did one, then another, then another... did four or five every time I walked the dog....”

“After a while the stacks took on a different meaning, no longer the by-product of looking for things: I liked them; there was a certain ‘feel’ about them. I liked how vast the whole thing had become. To me they were redolent of cairns on top of peaks, ancient standing stones, monoliths and megaliths. For me, and, no doubt others, such structures have always posed questions: ‘Who, why, and what for?’ I think I got as close to knowing as I could, or at least sensing it, but I’m not articulate enough to express it in words.”

Robin stresses that this wasn’t art. He just did it because he liked doing it! Besides his ‘stacks’, He has also experimented with rock piles in streams. And he has probably done a lot more in the year and a half since I made the film. “This was not a deliberate attempt at ‘art’; there was no point to it all in that respect – not for a wider audience – but maybe others may have construed it as such. I did it only for me. I certainly didn’t think that the stacks would interest someone enough to want to make a film about them!”

“Clearly, though, what I had done struck a chord, a reaction in others: passers-by would either build their own stacks, knock mine over (perhaps to leave their own ‘mark’), or just look at them. For others to like or dislike it, to interpret what I had done, was purely coincidental. It was a private thing but in a public place.”

After some publicity in a local paper, the stacks had quite a few visitors – some of whom seem to have taken souvenirs – “just bits of wood!”

Robin has a further, intriguing, thought about his stack-building. “The trees that had once stood there were now dead. It could have been a sub-conscious, futile attempt at resurrection, perhaps mourning for a favourite place lost. And yet the area, although now bleak and empty, to me wasn’t dead. The stacks provided places for newts and lizards to hide; vantage points for birds, and as for sheep – now sheep al-



ways seem to enjoy something to gather around and rub against....

Whether or not they were art, I'm unsure. Certainly they added something to that specific area, and they made you think and wonder. Whether this makes them art I don't know. I suppose it doesn't really matter.

Why don't we see more things like this? It would be exciting to see more examples of people experimenting and playing with the environment around them. This kind of thing is spontaneous. People will do it if they want to enough, or are the kind of person whose mind easily wanders. . Living in London, I see an awful lot of this sort of 'play'. I'm sure it does happen a lot in the Forest, on a smaller scale than Robin's, but we just don't see it - or notice it.

So, what do I think of the Stacks on reflection? I think their important message is to be we can be encouraged by Robin's enthusiasm. What I now find as interesting if not more so than the stacks are Robin and the people I met on my journey.

For me, these stacks are one man's resilience against a changing forest. As far as I know the stacks are still there constantly being added to. Go and check them out for yourself.

DVD's of the project are available -
Contact woodrow.morris@gmail.com



Robin Phelps and Woody Morris

When farm boys get bored!



"It seems that there is a deep desire in humans to stack, pile and pattern objects in landscape regardless of ideas about art or defining the stackers as artists! I hope you all enjoy these images of straw bales being played with."

Jeff





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