

Lord of a fairy-tale land

Having sold everything, Julian Hastings set out to restore a neglected wood. The result was paradise. By Jane Hughes

JULIAN HASTINGS used to spend his time renovating old houses, but a year ago he sold everything he owned to buy and restore a neglected Cornish wood. Despite his enthusiasm for wildlife and a desire to preserve one of the largest remaining wooded areas in West Cornwall, it was a bold move.

Sitting in his caravan, I watched as he prepared an evening snack of peanut butter sandwiches by candlelight, and admitted to moments of self-doubt about the enormity of what he has taken on.

"Giving up a large house with central heating, hot water and electricity was one of the hardest things I have ever done. It will take years of work to bring the woodland back into balance, but I just fell ridiculously in love with it."

It's true that Julian's wood, the 21-acre Cubit Plantation that sits astride the hills near St Ives and was once part of the local estate, is in a bad way. Overrun with rhododendron, cherry laurel and ivy, it is an arboreal battleground as native and foreign species fight for light and space.

It was probably managed at some point - the Victorians cultivated local woods to feed the tin-mining industry, introducing Scots pine, beech, evergreen oak and sweet chestnut to create good roosting conditions for pheasants. But today there is little evidence of coppicing or maintenance work. Before Julian installed himself as guardian and fenced off the perimeters, the wood was used as a dumping ground for burnt-out cars and rubbish.

Yet while not strictly natural, the mixed broadleaf plantation has a magical atmosphere. Towering sweet chestnuts and native oaks dominate the slopes. Between them, colonies of ash, hazel, and hawthorn and Scots pine are punctuated by pussy willow and holly. And, from the highest point, you can

look over the luscious canopy to the Hayle estuary.

A family of foxes inhabits the wood and Julian thinks that the bats he hears each night have set up home in the crevasses of the slate quarry that sits to the side of the main path. Badger tracks criss-cross the peaty soil close to a set near the top of the wood. The air, cool and pure in the central valley basin where Julian has carved out a lake, is alive with birdsong. He has spotted chaffinches, goldcrests, great tits, woodcocks, woodpeckers, and owls.

Now 34, Julian has spent all his adult life in Cornwall. He bought Cubit Plantation from a private owner after spotting an advertisement in the local paper. It lies down a narrow, high-hedged lane that threads its way between the gatehouse and the old manor farm. The plantation entrance was once a bottle dump for the estate and the shelves of Julian's caravan now hold the best of his discoveries, including a malt-extract bottle from Harrods.

The caravan is not for life. Julian intends to move into the wooden barn he has built next door. But, in the meantime, he shares the clearing at the head of the lake with a cat, two large dogs and Foaly the pony. Occasionally the local pheasant puts in an appearance, wandering complacently around the washing line and tripping over the dogs' paws.

Several springs rise in the woods, the largest of which feeds into the lake after cascading down a 10ft fern-edged waterfall and glinting over a rough pebble bed. It is from this stream that Julian takes his water for drinking and filling his "mineral bath".

The lake is stunning: crystal clear and dappled with the reflections of trees growing on a series of small islands, the water is already 8ft deep in places and drains away in a second waterfall that feeds a



Julian Hastings has created an idyllic life in the woods

Simon Burt/Aper

series of small pools.

Newts and frogs inhabit the shallows and the surface is alive with insects, including pond skaters and water boatmen. On lazy afternoons, Julian glides out into the water in a small boat with Foaly the pony swimming behind.

Soon he will begin removing some of the non-native species like sycamore, but the rhododendrons are a priority, having

encroached another 10ft in the year since he moved in.

The woodland floor is awash with hearts tongue ferns, mosses and lichens and a spread of wild flowers, from honeysuckle and marsh marigold, to primroses and foxgloves.

Eventually Julian wants to create a nature trail through the wood for children. But his efforts are limited by lack of money - his only source of

income is the one-off pieces of furniture he has begun carving from the aromatic fallen trunks of sweet chestnut around his home. But at least he will never starve - when hunger strikes he can gather basketfuls of wild strawberries and garlic to eat.

Julian Hastings can be contacted c/o Cubit Lodge, Trevethoe, Lelant, St Ives, TR26 3HS; mobile: 07787 562390