

The BIG Interview Professor Dower

Professor Michael Dower is a highly qualified arboriculturalist who kindly looks after our woods at the bottom of the playing fields on a voluntary basis. He also works closely with our Forest School students, and has recently become a school Governor. Highly respected in his field, Professor Dower is a former Director of the Peak National Park, Director General of the Countryside Commission (now Natural England), and was also later appointed full-time professor at Cheltenham and Gloucester College (European Rural Development).



Dr Dower

Q1: Do you plan on any campaigns or protests?

DR DOWER: Yes I'm running a big campaign in this area which is called Beaminster Area Eco Group. The first meeting was held in Broadwindsor, and the school, community shop, WI and parish council are all involved. I also took part in the Rise for Climate change in September last year.

Q2: Where was the best place you've planted trees?

DR DOWER: I've been planting trees on school grounds on the playing fields where we are planting this morning. The loveliest thing for me is when I was your age my grandfather asked me to plant a 4 acre wood and 1,415 trees in it. So because of that we called it Agincourt Wood, as 1415 was the year that King Henry Vth beat the French at the Battle of Agincourt. Now when I go back to that wood the trees are 60 feet high, and it gives me such pleasure to go back there again.

Q3: Where else have you planted trees?

DR DOWER: I'm the manager of your school wood just down at the bottom of the field. It had been planted 20 years before and when I came it had not been looked after properly. It was too thick, so I thinned it out and then in places where the light shines through the canopy I planted other trees, particularly sweet chesnuts. Half the wood is made of ash trees and ash is a tree that is suffering from disease. I'm afraid that my ash trees may die from this disease, so I want other plants to come in to replace them, and that's why I'm planting them. Children from your school are helping to plant them with me, particularly Mrs Mattison's Forest School group.

Q4: How long have you been planting trees?

DR DOWER: Well, I'm 85 now and I've been planting trees since I was 12, so that's how many? About 73 years that I've been planting trees in various places, and I've told you about the ones that excited me the most.

Q5: What is your favourite plant?

DR DOWER: My favourite plant is an ash tree because I was brought up in Yorkshire, which is limestone country, and the most common British tree in a limestone area is

ash. They are very, very beautiful trees. I call them the smiling tree, because if you look at them in the winter, when there are no leaves on them, you can see the shape, the branches come down, and then they curl up at the edge like a smile. They are very beautiful, and also very useful trees because they are good timber and are lovely right through the year.

Q6: What is the largest number of trees you've planted?

DR DOWER: Well the 1,415 with my grandad! But today we're going to plant 500 trees with Year 9 and 10 students. In the Memorial Playing Field they've created a new playground for the children of the town, and there are two walls that surround it that they want planted with a big hedge to be rich in wildlife and birds.

So we're going to plant 500 trees, which include (if I can remember them all!), hawthorn, which has very lovely red

berries in the autumn which the birds love; dogwood, which has black berries, dog rose, which is the wild rose that you see in hedges with beautiful rose hips; field maple, which has a very attractive greeny flower and keys like a sycamore tree has seeds; bird cherry, which has lovely flowers in what they call a raceme (a stalk with lots of little flowers on it that makes lots of little berries in the autumn which of course the birds love). All of these are good for birds as they eat the berries, oh, and of course hazel, which produces nuts for the squirrels also (although I rather hope we won't have any squirrels as they might eat the tree shoots and damage them)!



Tree planting with Professor Dower

So, we're planting those 6 varieties because they're very good for birds, and also good for pollinating insects like bees because of the flowers. Of course, in order to have flowers, you must have bees and other small insects. The hedge will also have the benefit of reducing and absorbing some of the noise which the children playing on the swings might make, so the neighbours will be pleased about that!

Q7: Are some of the berries edible for humans?

DR DOWER: Yes, you can eat the hazelnuts of course, and some of the roses. There was a trick when I was a boy where we used to split open the ripe rose hips to take off the outside and eat it, then, on the inside are hairy seeds which we used to put down each other's necks as it makes you itch!

You can also eat haw of the hawthorn, which is the one we're planting most of because it's quick growing and makes a good thick thorny hedge against sheep and so on (although there will be no sheep down there). The haw is a small, fleshy berry, and if you go to a lot of effort to take out the pips and seeds, it makes an excellent jelly that people have with venison.

Q8: Have you ever done anything international?

DR DOWER: Indeed, I have. I've been working for 30 years throughout the whole of Europe, not just the European Union, trying to promote the wellbeing of rural populations, i.e. people who live in the countryside who very often don't have good jobs, enough services, enough good housing and so on. I finished this work in 2016, after being co-ordinator of the European Rural Parliament, which brought together people from 40 countries every 2 years to discuss how we can best promote the interests of rural people. Among those interests was forestry, because 40% of Europe's land is in forests, so they have to be looked after, and what I'm doing today is planting trees. I want to explain very quickly that we need to reduce our emissions of carbon, and trees have the magic ability to catch and hold carbon. When we breathe, we breathe in oxygen, and breathe out carbon dioxide; trees do the opposite, it's lovely. They take in carbon dioxide and fix it and they breathe out oxygen for us. We need the trees in order to fix the carbon and to try to slow down the warming of the world.

Q9: How did you first get involved in trees and woods?

Because of my grandfather, he had an estate in Wallington, Northumberland, which now belongs to the National Trust. He and I used to work in the woods

together and I used to go searching for birds nests.

Q10: So did you enjoy nature as a child?

Absolutely, I could go out in the woods and fields alone and I found all sorts of things, and one day I found something very special. You know the way a primrose has its leaves, stalk and then a flower? Well I found something very unusual which was a primrose which had a stalk, and then the leaves *under* the flower, a special aberration. My mother had a friend, Alfred McKenny-Hughes, who was the Head of Lepidoptery or Etymology (I don't quite remember which) at the National History Museum, and so I sent these flowers to him. He told me they had been specially pressed and put in their collection with my name on them – that gave me great excitement! But then I must tell you that when I was 16 I started shooting on the estate - rabbits, pheasants, woodcock, hares, foxes, deer, grouse, snipe, until I had my first son, much later on ... and then I suddenly realised that I didn't want to kill anything anymore, so I stopped shooting and sold my gun.

Q11: What do you think the Government is doing about climate change?

Well, not enough. They subsidised solar energy (I have solar panels on my roof) and supported wind turbines, for example, but have now stopped subsidising wind turbines on land. They are not taxing petrol enough and are supporting fracking, which I think is terrible and they should leave the shale oil gas in the ground. I'd like to see them doing much more, for example, by cutting carbon emissions by closing down coal and gas fired power stations faster, the use of plastics, waste and the loss of wildlife. That's why I'm so pleased that your contemporaries, the students here and throughout the country and the world, are protesting about the inaction of governments on climate change. I shall show pictures of the Swedish girl who started the whole thing off, Greta Thunberg, at my meeting in Broadwindsor. I was certainly amused that her parents were very supportive, if a bit sceptical about what she was doing at the beginning, but they still let her do it and then they swung around.

By Kai Kenway 7P and Lucy Readings 8W

We would all like to thank Professor Dower very much for giving up his time to give us such an interesting interview. We wish him the very best of luck with his other campaigns. Thank you.