

of light and air. Clanger is a friendly wood (unlike Green Lane wood nearby, which feels wild, hostile and suspicious) and I feel it understands the need for coppicing. Many of the hazels have huge ancient moss-covered stools, showing the wood has been worked in this way for centuries.

I turn off the main ride, aiming to find the perimeter path and avoid the worst of the noise of chainsaws. The ground rises a little, and near the top I find a small clearing with snowdrops growing at the foot of a hazel. I stop for a while, and become aware of voices coming towards me. A couple are walking along, one talking loudly. I move quietly behind the hazel and stand quite still, interested to know if they will sense my presence. As they pass I see the woman is talking into her mobile phone, while her partner walks resignedly on ahead. Neither of them notices me, and within two minutes they are out of sight and earshot.



I sit on a fallen tree and enjoy the quiet. The air is chill. A robin scouts round the area, here and there, finally finds a worm and flies off. I move on, looking for elf-cups which I have seen in this part of the wood last year. These bright-red or orange cup-shaped fungi grow on rotting hazel branches, and gleam like jewels among the fallen leaves. Just as I think there are none this year, I find two, close to hazel boles beside the path.

Further on I meet a woman walking three spaniels. She tells me the wood is drying out, that it's been terribly muddy but just this week things have improved. We both understand, without saying so, that this is a sign of the approaching spring. I tell her about the snowdrops and elf-cups, and she says she would not know what an elf-cup was. We wish each other a good walk and continue. A little further on I see, right by the path where she must have passed them, a dozen bright elf-cups in perfect condition, glowing scarlet.

I'm walking along the south border of the wood now. Following this path one summer evening I saw roe deer several times, but at this time of day and season the wood is quiet. Soon I approach an old friend, an ancient hollow ash tree which grows right beside the path which at this point in the wood follows the old pale, the raised bank which marks the ancient boundary of Clanger. I greet the ash and, as always, sit on the huge root which makes a mossy seat beside its hollow trunk. I lean on my staff and listen. All is still. There is hardly any birdsong, just one small woodland bird in the distance sounding a warning note, probably because of my intrusion into its territory. Overhead the tall ash and oak form a lattice against the blue February sky, and grey-and-white gulls circle. The wood sleeps.

It is drifting towards waking, however. All around the hazel catkins are on the trees, some still small and tight, but others hanging loose, stirred by the slight breeze. Primrose leaves are everywhere along the path, and the first bright-green shoots of bluebell are showing here and there. At the north-east corner of the wood I find spathes of the wild arum coming up. It has several names: Lords and Ladies, Cuckoo-Pint, or Parson-in-the-Pulpit. When I was a child in the Pewsey Vale we knew it, especially when its poisonous scarlet berries were in evidence, as Snake's Food.

At a point where wild honeysuckle is showing new leaves, I turn aside, following the east edge of the wood, always choosing the least-used paths. More and more these days, my Druidry is defined and nurtured by walking the land, a semi-meditative practice which is both a joy and a support to the spirit. For this reason I usually walk alone, and avoid busy places. I carry a mobile phone (switched off) in case of accidents, and my staff for support and security. Whether I walk in woodland, by field paths or on downland tracks, I rarely meet anyone. It seems to me that one is in far more danger of being attacked in a city than out in the country. In any case, I choose not to be intimidated by fear of what might happen. It is best to take reasonable precautions against accident (sensible clothing for the time of year, a map, a compass or GPS if the landscape is unfamiliar) and then step out cheerfully and with confidence. It has always worked for me – so far so good!

Soon I cross over a stream and move into Picket Wood, which adjoins Clanger and is effectively all the same woodland. This is the highest part of the wood, and as I reach the north-eastern corner I see Trowbridge in the distance. It is clear why Clanger is always colder than Trowbridge: the woodland is on much higher ground. Not far away is the escarpment of Salisbury Plain, and Clanger lies on land which is beginning to rise to meet the scarp. In this area hazel has given way to young elm, and one or two mature beeches stand beside the path, their thin bark marked with the carved names of young lovers. Here in late summer grow Helleborine orchids, but at this time of year there is no sign of them, and even the grass seems stunted.

I greet a man walking his golden retriever, then stride off down the slope, back to the claylands. Here at another corner of the wood the low sun shines in my eyes, dazzling me, and suddenly I am forced to take more notice of my other senses. A great tit calls on my right, 'tee-cher, tee-cher, tee-cher' and the sound of traffic ahead grows louder as I move back towards the road. I cross another marked boundary bank, and the trees shield me from the sun once again. Here hazels mix with young elm, and to my left I begin to see firs. After a hundred yards or so I turn left, cross the stream again and head for a memorial seat beneath an oak in a clearing. Here in summer I have sat and listened to the song of the nightingales, but already the light is going and it is too cold to sit for long. I walk through a grove of strangely twisted oaks, which remind me of pictures I have seen of Whistman's Wood in Devon, all contorted shapes hung with mosses and lichens. To my right is a fir plantation, the ground beneath the trees deeply covered in lush green moss. I reach another wide ride, turn right and follow this for a few yards before climbing up and walking along the bank to avoid the sticky mud which stretches across the ride for many yards at this point.

Further along the bank I find a great stump which nature has sculpted into the shape of a boar's head. I see the open jaws, a deep eye-socket, and a tuft of bristles springing from between the ears. Shaggy mosses complete the effect of hair on the neck. I pause for a few minutes, delighted to find this character on my path, and decide to seek him out on further visits, to see how he changes with the seasons.



Leaving the boar, I cross a drainage ditch and look for the steps up the bank on the left which I must take. A few steps beyond these is a deep ditch which used to have a log bridge across, but the wood is visited from time to time by destructive people who seem to delight in vandalism. Time and time again I have found rustic benches pulled to pieces and log bridges smashed. This bridge has been missing for a year or so, and I have become quite used to jumping the deep ditch. A little further on is a clearing where there used to be a collection of beehives, and I would regularly come and watch the bees work, thinking of my father who loved bees and kept them when I was a child. But one day, a year or so ago, I found the hives gone. In their place today are newly-coppiced trees, so perhaps they were removed in preparation for this work, and one day I will pass this way and find the hives back in their old place, the clearing alive once again with the humming of honey bees.

Now I make my way towards the central path that slices from the car park down the length of the wood. This is a wide ride with a hard surface, much used by those who just want a little stroll over easy ground. I reach it and turn right, heading back to where I began my walk over an hour ago. Children have passed this way, for on every puddle on the track the ice has been broken by enthusiastic feet. It lies in chunks all around, and I realise how cold it still is, in spite of the slight warming of the air that has brought the first signs of spring to Clanger.

Once back at the car, I remove my muddy walking boots and then take a moment to send thanks to the spirit of the place. I feel calm, restored, energised. Once again, this ancient woodland has worked its magic.

Katy Jordan
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