

New Forest Fact File

OPEN FOREST

Ancient and Ornamental Woodlands and their Management

These woodlands are unenclosed and open to the browsing of deer, ponies, cattle and pigs, hence their description as pasture woodlands. There are also a limited number of pre-inclosed woodlands fenced within statutory inclosures. They were named "Ancient and Ornamental" woodlands by the New Forest Act 1877 and refer to unenclosed woods originating in the 18th Century or earlier consisting of mainly oak and beech with an underwood of holly. A & O woods are *semi-natural* since they are the result of both natural processes and the influence of people through the centuries. In total it covers some 3,692 hectares of woodland on the open forest.

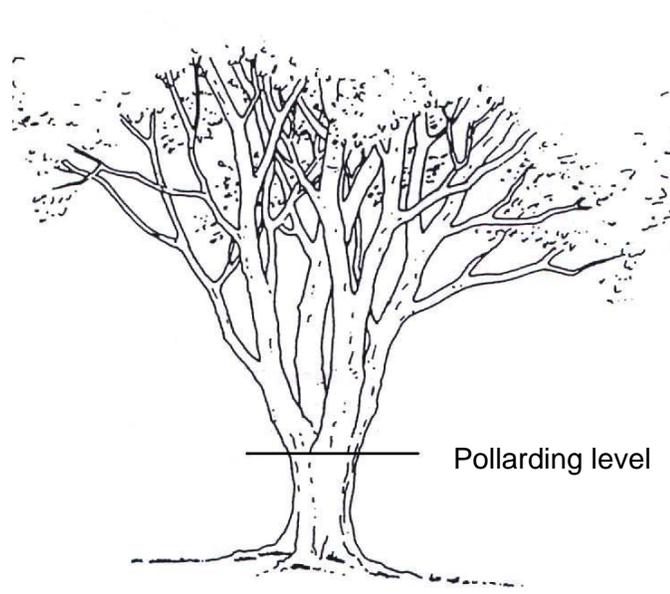
The Deer Removal Act of 1851 reduced the grazing pressure on these woodlands and allowed regeneration of oaks and beeches to occur to create a dense woodland canopy in many areas.

A & O woodland in The New Forest is one of the richest locations in Britain for beetles, fungi and other groups which rely on deadwood, both standing and fallen. In an effort to maintain this biodiversity (species richness) of deadwood species, the Forestry Commission and the Nature Conservancy Council (now English Nature) made an agreement in 1983 which restricted the removal of firewood from certain woods. These woods are known as 'inviolate' woods.

There has been growing concern for the effect of this policy with complaints being made about the amount of deadwood present in areas of high visibility, and the relaxation of constraints on removal of firewood that occurred following the storms of 1987 and 1990 which was neither endorsed or reviewed. Ground damage caused by extraction has occurred in a number of woods. These issues are currently being addressed through a review of and recommendations for the management of A & O woodland in the New Forest.

POLLARDING

In these woodlands, wood was harvested and renewed by lopping trees above the reach of the animals with the leaves and branches being used as fodder and fuel. This was widely practised throughout the New Forest until the end of the 17th century.



The top would be cut off a young tree often at a height convenient to a man standing on the back of a wagon. New branches would be allowed to grow from around the cut surface, to be cut again after a number of years depending on what the wood was to be used for.

In the New Forest, the branches would often have been left on the ground for the deer and commoners' animals to feed on - then the wood would be used for firewood. Pollarding was done in a similar way to coppicing except that the branches were cut higher up so that the deer, ponies and cattle could not reach the new growth.

Pollarding resets the biological time clock of trees, so trees managed in this way could live for a very long time - often far longer than non-pollarded trees. The practice of pollarding however stopped the trees growing tall and straight and were therefore unable to provide good timber for shipbuilding. Such timber was required in large quantities until the 19th century. In 1698 an act of Parliament made it illegal to start pollarding any more oak trees within the New Forest, meaning that any of the pollard oaks and beech seen within the Forest today must have been first pollarded before this date and be over 300 years old. Those that had been pollarded continued to be so up until the Deer Removal Act of 1851 when it was no longer necessary to provide winter fodder for the deer, ponies and cattle.

Holly pollarding is still being carried out in the Forest each winter to provide additional food for ponies. The process also benefits some species of lichen as it allows light into the trunks of oak and beech, therefore creating the best conditions for lichens. The pollarding of some young oak and beech trees may be started again soon in certain areas of the New Forest to help maintain the aesthetic value of the woods.

CONTEMPORARY MANAGEMENT OF "A & O" WOODLANDS

The Forestry Commission is responsible for caring for and maintaining the future growth and development of the Ancient and Ornamental Woodlands of the New Forest. Its policy for the last fifty years has largely been one of non-intervention but ecological studies are indicating that the structure of many of the woodlands is changing and are now presenting a cause for concern. Regeneration of these ancient woodlands is not occurring in some areas as rapidly as would be preferred for sustainability. This can be attributed to climatic factors, such as the drought of 1875-6 and the storms of 1987 and 1990 and varying pressures from grazing.

A document "*Plan for the Ancient and Ornamental Woodlands of The New Forest*" was published in April 1999 by the Forestry Commission in conjunction with English Nature and aided by sponsorship from Esso under their Living Tree campaign. This report reviews the distribution, composition and structure of the New Forest's "A & O" woodland and puts forward management measures which need to be implemented to aid the Forest's natural and continued ecological progression.

Management objectives

- ◆ **Pasturage** - Maintain the traditional use of the Open Forest as grazing land subject to common rights of pasturage.
- ◆ **Aesthetics** - Maintain the ornamental character of the woods.
- ◆ **Historic** - Maintain the living traditions and historic practices.

- ◆ **Public Access** - Visitors and residents should continue to have access to the Open Forest, including the Ancient and Ornamental woods, for quiet enjoyment of the 'natural' environment.
- ◆ **Nature Conservation** - Maintain and restore the semi-natural ecosystems and processes together with their range of naturally associated species.
- ◆ **Archaeology** - Maintain the artefacts left by past use of the Forest.
- ◆ **Timber and Other Wood Products** - Timber and fuel wood may be taken from the unenclosed woods where it is an integral part of the management system and to the degree that it does not conflict with other objectives of management.

Management Options

1) The Passive Option

If the woods have survived this long, why interfere now? These woods are natural in the sense that they consist mainly of native trees, perpetuated for many generations mainly by natural regeneration. The option is simply to leave them alone, much as they have been left for as long as anyone can remember. They have been left to respond naturally to whatever happens in and around them.

2) The Traditional Option

The woods would remain unfenced to allow pasturage and pollarding of younger trees would occur to perpetuate the existing character of the woods. Timber and firewood salvage would be permitted but controlled under the existing agreement. This option would result in woods which looked managed but this would be in keeping with the history and tradition of the woods.

3) The Natural Option

From an ecological and nature conservation point of view these woods are valuable, partly because they are more natural than most other woods and possess many of the characteristics of the primeval forest, containing many species which depend on the deadwood. This option is to allow the woods to function as naturally as possible. It would involve fencing to reduce grazing and browsing to levels which would allow regeneration to grow unchecked in any canopy gaps. No silviculture would be allowed and no dead wood would be removed. This option could not be applied to the Forest as a whole but to specific woods within the Forest.

These management strategies are, as they say, simply options and it is unlikely that any would be adopted in isolation, rather a combination of all three.

A Summary of the Plan for the New Forest Ancient and Ornamental Woodlands of the New Forest.

- Mainly focus on maintenance and enhancement of the existing woodlands which will include maintaining their visual appearance and sustaining pasturage and other historic practices.
- Minimum intervention will be the general policy.
- Current configuration of the A & O woods to be generally retained to avoid loss of their traditional pattern, meaning and historical context.

- Where tree recruitment required, temporary fencing will be erected as the most cost effective mechanism to achieve regeneration of oak in pasture woodlands.
- Elsewhere, management will concentrate on removal of exotic species and inappropriate plantings of native species, directing firewood collection away from core deadwood habitats, and the introduction of practices which would re-create and sustain the old spreading trees of the past.
- Removal of Scots pine and birch recommended only where it would not compromise the existing woodland structure and where it threatens the grazing status of the forest as a whole. Birch is accepted for its ability to suppress bracken and nurse young oak and beech regeneration on woodland margins.
- In planning all future programmes the risks of damage must be assessed and weighed against the benefits expected.
- Monitoring baseline parameters is essential to guide future management decisions.

Source: *Plan for the Ancient & Ornamental Woodlands of the New Forest*. Forestry Commission. 1999.



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