



South East Woodland News

Promoting thriving woodlands in England's most wooded region

Autumn/Winter 2003-04

Woods – ancient and modern

Not only does the South East have more woods than any other region, it also has more 'ancient' woodlands; some 123,000 hectares or 300,000 acres in total. These are sites which have been wooded for a very long time, some since the last Ice Age.

A long continuity of woodland cover has allowed ancient woodlands to be colonised by the widest possible range of plants and wildlife. Some, such as herb paris and the pearl bordered fritillary butterfly, are found exclusively in these woodlands.

The large amount of ancient woodland in the South East can make us a bit blasé about it; in the same way as the inhabitants of the Amazon basin probably don't get too excited about all the rainforest nearby! But even in our well-wooded region, ancient woodland covers only 6.4% of the land surface – and there is great variation in ancient woodland density as we move about the region.

So where are the main concentrations of ancient woodland? First there is the Weald, where the predominantly oak and hazel woods would once have been coppiced for a range of wood products. In the Chilterns, aptly described as an ancient woodland hotspot, woodlands have more commonly been managed to produce timber for furniture – beech is a relatively common species. In Kent, ancient woodlands have often been converted into sweet chestnut coppices which provided hop poles. Many are still producing useful products such as fencing today. Around the region we can also see 'wood pastures' where cattle would have grazed between pollarded trees.

All in all, an impressive portfolio of woodlands – and that's just looking at the ancient ones!



Herb paris – found exclusively in ancient woodland sites – shown here with bluebell (Forest Life Picture Library)



Working up hazel coppice to be used for a variety of products (Forest Research Photo Library)

Editorial

The second issue of *South East Woodland News* takes a closer look at ancient woodlands – the woodland habitats that are so special they have been described as our country's 'rainforests'.

Inside this issue we look at what evidence the dormouse, a typical ancient woodland species, leaves behind. Page 3 describes the successes enjoyed by the owner of one ancient woodland in the region and on page 4 we have an article about the ongoing restoration work in some of these woods. But it's not all ancient woods – so have a look inside for ideas about making better use of your own wood, ancient or modern!

Game, sett and match

So, where do badgers live then? Is it a set or a sett? Many of you got in touch to say that we'd spelt it wrongly in the first edition but not according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. On the other hand, 'the expert' did miss an important piece of advice on felling trees. In addition to the rules of felling licences, tree preservation orders and conservation areas, some trees can be subject to planning consents and/or Section 106 agreements. The penalties for breaching any of these regulations can be steep – so you should check with your local authority before you do any felling. In addition, make sure when you move to a new house that your solicitor does a full search and provides you with details of all restrictions and covenants.

If you have comments on anything in this second newsletter – the address is on page 4.

Firewood

Firewood is the cheapest fuel available, especially if you have your own wood. It is also a renewable resource and a non-fossil fuel.

Freshly cut logs will contain around 50% water and are normally difficult to burn without some drying or 'seasoning'. Wood felled during one winter should be stored outside, under cover, but where air can circulate. Logs can then be burnt the next winter when they should contain only around a third water. Some species naturally contain less water than others; freshly felled ash, for example, can be burnt straight away. Some types of tree make better firewood than others: broadleaved trees are denser than conifers and provide more heat for a similar sized bag or trailer load. Willow and pine logs will spit dangerously and should be burnt with care.

Logs can be burnt on a traditional open fire, but there are plenty of alternatives including wood-burning stoves, dedicated log or woodchip boilers and hybrid systems which supplement wood fuel with fossil fuel at times of peak demand.

If you would like to find out more about using wood for heating, or want to find out what type of wood heating is best for you, contact British Biogen's Heating Advisory Service:

Tel: 020 7831 7222 E-mail: info@britishbiogen.co.uk

Or fill in the questionnaire on their website at

www.britishbiogen.co.uk/bioenergy/heating/hwwquest.htm

How to... prune young trees

The most valuable trees for timber are those where the trunk is perfectly straight and branch – free to several metres. 'Formative pruning' can help achieve this.

While the tree is still young, ideally while the branches are not thicker than a finger, pruning can:

- remove one side of a fork to favour a single 'leader'
- reduce the number of large branches
- remove steeply ascending branches.

Normally only those trees which have some potential as timber would be pruned – and that's likely to be less than half of your planted trees. For most species pruning is best done in early spring, just before the trees come into leaf so that wounds heal quickly. Exceptions are cherry and walnut which should be pruned in late June or July to prevent diseases.

Woodland Heritage publishes two very helpful leaflets on pruning and these are available (priced £4 for the two or free to members) from:

Tel: 01428 652159

Email: woodland.heritage@talk21.com

Signs of life – the dormouse

Common dormouse

also known as

- Hazel mouse
- Sleeper
- Muscardin (in France)
- Haselmaus (in Germany)



Neither a miniature squirrel (as our ancestors thought) or a type of mouse, the dormouse is found in woodlands throughout the region. Distribution is very patchy and even in the very best habitats of regularly coppiced hazel, densities rarely exceed ten animals per hectare. Fragmentation of woodland over the centuries has had a huge impact on dormouse distribution as they are not good at moving through the countryside, except in tree crowns.

Dormice favour woodlands with a dense understorey – where they will nest and find food plants such as bramble flowers, nuts and insects. As they are nocturnal and hibernate from October to April the woodland visitor rarely sees them. Their nests can also be difficult to spot. In winter a woven grass ball on the forest floor is sometimes encountered but more commonly the summer nest of woven honeysuckle bark is found above ground, often hidden in tree hollows or old bird nests. In recent years nestboxes have been successfully used to increase the dormouse population of many woods.



Hazelnut opened by dormouse.

If you are lucky enough to have dormice in your wood, the main sign will be the presence of hazelnuts with circular openings where the kernel has been removed. The hole has a smooth edge, unlike the serrated edge that is produced during predation by other species.

The Mammal Society can provide more information about dormice. *A Practical Guide to Dormouse Conservation*, Occasional Publication No. 11 is available (priced £3.50). They also have information about dormouse nestboxes.

Tel: 020 7350 2200

E-mail: enquiries@mammal.org.uk

A new lease of life

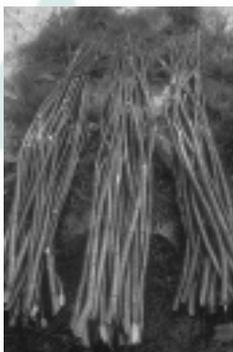
Bittle's Copse near Wisborough Green in West Sussex was given a new lease of life in 1999 through the 'Coppice for Butterflies' scheme. The neglected hazel was cut by a local coppice cutter and the area was fenced using permanent deer fencing.

The open, light conditions which followed the cutting of the hazel allowed the ground flora to develop, and this has encouraged rare butterflies such as the silver washed and dark green fritillaries to colonise the wood. Incredibly, 16 species of butterfly were found in the coppiced area, compared to only two in the uncut areas nearby. A wide variety of birds have been attracted to the area too, to the delight of the owner.



Silver washed fritillary (Alan Barnes / Butterfly Conservation)

In the intervening four years, the deer fence has done its work and protected the coppice from browsing. So, not only are the hazel poles straight, but they have



Bundles of hazel for use in hurdle marking (Forest Research Photo Library)

grown at a phenomenal rate, with some being 16 feet high! Local cutters Alan and Jo Waters are cutting the coppice to produce a variety of products including hurdles and fences, garden products, thatching spars, bean poles and pea sticks.

So, this is a real success story:

- for the wildlife of the wood
- for it's wildlife-loving owner
- for those whose livelihoods depend on working the woods.

Coppicing can look a bit of a mess at first – and it often provokes a good deal of comment from the general public. A new signboard has been produced which coppice cutters can use to help explain its benefits to passers by. Sponsored by Nationwide, the signboards are available from County Council woodland officers. If you don't know who yours is, call 01420 23337.

Taking the long view

Gunpowder became part of the military arsenal in the 14th century. An essential ingredient of the gunpowder was high quality charcoal from the region's woods. Alder, willow, hornbeam and dogwood were used, all of which made a friable charcoal that could easily be ground to a fine powder. Also included in the finished product were sulphur and saltpetre, the latter originally being made from pigeon manure!

The early charcoal industry was concentrated in Surrey with mills at Tolworth, Godstone and Wotton, and later Faversham in Kent. In 1626 mills were established at Chilworth near Guildford in Surrey, the remains of which can still be visited today. As well as gunpowder, the intense heat of burning charcoal made it valuable for furnaces, and being lightweight it was more efficient to transport into London than wood. Throughout the region, charcoal hearths dating from this period can still be spotted in our woodlands.

The charcoal was so useful that the woods from which it was produced were a precious resource, and that helps to explain why the South East has so many woods today. The charcoal produced in our region today is used in more peaceful ways – the summer barbecue! Why not try some next summer?

Ask the expert...

What is an ancient woodland, and how do I know if I've got one?



An ancient woodland is defined by English Nature as one which has existed since at least 1600 AD. Before then, planting of woods was uncommon and some that existed in 1600 are remnants of the original wildwood which once covered much of Britain.

English Nature has produced a provisional list of ancient woodlands for each county – but these are known to be incomplete in some respects. As well as by looking at this provisional inventory, you can look for clues in the wood itself. The following can suggest an ancient woodland:

- located adjacent to parish boundaries, common land or heaths
- sinuous, irregular boundaries
- on steep slopes or in gullies
- surrounded by large ditches and woodbanks
- with old coppice stools, pollards or veteran trees
- with characteristic plants such as bluebells and wood anemones.

For more information, see English Nature's booklet *Guidelines for Identifying Ancient Woodland*. This is now out of print but copies are available from:

Tel: 01420 23337

E-mail: fc.seeng.cons@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

PAWS for thought

The term 'Plantation on an Ancient Woodland Site' or PAWS is used to describe ancient woodlands which have been planted with species which wouldn't naturally be found on the site. Often that means conifers, which tend to be more productive than broadleaved trees and were planted by owners who wanted to produce timber. About four-fifths of the conifer woodland in the SE region is found on these ancient woodland sites.

The problem with these conifers is that their dense, evergreen canopies shade the ground so much that most wildflowers and shrubs can't grow. Now that the extraordinary value of ancient woodland is increasingly being recognised, some owners are restoring these sites to more natural conditions by gradual removal of conifers. In this region, Forest Enterprise (part of the Forestry Commission) is taking a lead and you can see sites undergoing restoration at Friston Forest near Eastbourne, Chiddingfold Forest in Surrey, Shabington and Waterperry Woods near Oxford and West Wood near Winchester.

The Forestry Commission has recently published a comprehensive guide to the practice of restoring these sites – essential reading if you're thinking of undertaking any such work in your own woodland. *Restoration of Native Woodland on Ancient Woodland Sites* (priced £9) is available from:

Tel: 0870 121 4180

E-mail: forestry@twoten.press.net

The Forestry Commission will be running two seminars on PAWS restoration in Spring 2004 -- if you would like to receive details when available, please contact us on 01420 23337, or preferably by e-mail at fc.seeng.cons@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

A good read

Winter is a great time to curl up indoors with a good book and there are some great ones for woodland and tree enthusiasts.

- **Silva: the tree in Britain** by Archie Miles (Ebury Press). A fascinating book describing the part that trees have played in all areas of British life.
- **Meetings with remarkable trees** by Thomas Pakenham (Cassell Illustrated Classics). A beautifully illustrated tour of 60 of the most remarkable trees of Britain.
- **Trees and woodland in the British landscape: the complete history of Britain's trees, woodlands and hedgerows** by Oliver Rackham (Weidenfeld & Nicholson History). An absorbing and definitive work.

Maybe you know someone who would appreciate one of these in their Christmas stocking!

Grants for improving your wood

The Woodland Improvement Grants (WIG) available from the Forestry Commission represent an excellent opportunity to help fund the management of woodlands. They have been extremely popular with woodland owners and managers throughout the South East over recent years. WIGs are available under three project titles for 50% of the agreed costs of management activities.

- **Project 1** Providing public recreation in woodlands, e.g. construction and upgrading of paths.
- **Project 2** Undermanaged woods, e.g. cutting coppice and rhododendron control.
- **Project 3** Woodland biodiversity, e.g. work in important habitats and coppice management for rare butterflies and dormice.

For more information on applying for a WIG please contact your local Forestry Commission office:

Kent and East Sussex: 01580 211123

West Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, Isle of Wight: 01420 23337

Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire: 01296 681381

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We want you to enjoy your copy of the newsletter and we know how irritating it must be to receive multiple copies from different partners. If this happens, please let us know and we'll ensure you only receive one copy in future.

It might be even more annoying not to be on any mailing list at all, and to know you might miss future issues of this twice yearly newsletter! If you should be in this unfortunate position, please let us know and we'll make sure this doesn't happen.

The number to call is 01420 23337, or email fc.seeng.cons@forestry.gsi.gov.uk, or write to The Forestry Commission, South East England Conservancy, Alice Holt, Wrecclesham, Farnham, Surrey, GU10 4LF.

This edition of *South East Woodland News* was brought to you by the Forestry Commission and the following counties and unitary authorities of the South East Region:



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