

Conference Report

The Society's Winter Conference, 2010

Woods and their uses in medieval to modern Britain

by Elizabeth Griffiths

Jane Whittle continues to find popular, and indeed seasonal, themes for this conference, which attract an impressive turnout. The subject of wood drew a contingent from the Woodland Trust, entirely new faces, who enthusiastically asked questions all the way through, greatly adding to the success of the occasion. The audience, having braced icy journeys wrapped in woolly scarves, were not surprised to learn from Paul Warde that domestic fuel consumption accounted for half the annual supply of wood in the early modern period.

After a welcome cup of coffee, Della Hooke, University of Birmingham, started the proceedings with a fascinating survey of woodland usage in early medieval England. Maps of the colonization of Roman and Anglo-Saxon Warwickshire showed the extent of clearance of dense forest by Anglo-Saxon times. As crop land reverted to pasture, regeneration of woodland took the form of the open savannah type as grazing animals checked and shaped the recovery; this became the wood pasture of medieval England, characterised most typically by the New Forest and the Weald. These areas fostered a rich and diverse economy. Wood literally underpinned medieval society, providing timber and coppice for building and transport; fuel for domestic consumption and industrial processes; grazing and shelter for cattle, pigs, sheep and horses; and, of course, a splendid amenity for hunting. Since Anglo-Saxon times, laws have regulated access to this valuable resource generating a wealth of documentation. Della explained how the manorial system in parts of England came to reflect the dependency on woodland. In Kent, estates on the periphery of the

Weald were linked to their wooded 'dens' by drove ways, evidence of which survives in place names such as Beneden, Biddenden, Newenden and Tenterden. Nearby, Hawkhurst, Goudhurst and Sandhurst, with 'hurst' meaning wood, also provide further clues to the character of the High Weald. Much of Della's research has concentrated on the West Midlands so we were treated to slides of the Malvern Hills, the Wyre Forest and the well-documented estates of the Bishops of Worcester. In this part of England, parallel route ways can be found leading from the Severn meadows up to the wooded hills, with pollarded oaks and hollies a particular feature. Noted for their long taproots and ability to resist aggressive grazing, oaks were highly valued, while evergreen hollies, whose shoots provided tasty winter fodder, especially for deer, became a protected species imbued with almost mystical qualities. Woods were often dangerous and mysterious places to the medieval mind, steeped in folklore, traditions and names dating back to pagan times; with these thoughts we moved on to the next paper.

From his seasonal title, on the running of the deer, we half-expected a hearty rendition of the 'Holly and the Ivy' (both enjoyed by deer) from John Langton, Oxford University, but no, this was a serious study of English forests as human habitats and the impact of forest law on those communities. John reminded us that forests were areas, specifically designated for hunting, clearly bounded, heavily policed and governed by draconian laws. A landlord, with land in the forest, had severe restrictions imposed upon him by the forest lord; he could not interfere with the free passage of

hunting animals across his farms and fields. Fees for non-compliance were collected by an elaborate forest bureaucracy: in contrast to the lightly officered woodlands controlled by manorial courts. He took us through the intricate system of forest law as it evolved since pre-conquest times; kings from Canute on were always interested in protecting their hunting rights. As an exercise of arbitrary power, over supposedly wild animals and other people's lands, forest law has over the centuries incurred the antipathy of the populace, commentators and academics alike. Despite 'The Anathema of the Forest', such laws persisted to modern times. In recent years there has been a change in perception as to their role and impact. Today, we realize that measures such as these have helped to preserve large swathes of the countryside: it is no coincidence that ancient forests are invariably designated areas of outstanding national beauty. The paper, ending on a controversial note, attracted many questions. We were reminded that the administration of game reserves in colonial Africa and India had benefited from this tradition of strict regulation; without controls many species were now in danger of extinction. By lunchtime, the forest laws were viewed in a different light; anathema had turned into an appreciation of their role in protecting the landscape.

In the afternoon, Paul Warde, University of East Anglia, took us down a slightly different path, introducing us to his work on wood in the English economy; he is known for his remarkable study of wood and the role it played in south-west Germany in the early modern period, so this is a new and exciting development. The task is to quantify the scale, supply, uses and consumption levels of wood and wood products in England from 1550 to 1750. Reflecting its value to society, he reminded us that there was always concern about wood supplies and worries about scarcity. The trick was to ensure that consumption did not exceed sustainable levels of supply; consumption needed to be only marginally above this level for it to have a serious and damaging impact on stock. Consumers had to confine themselves to cutting down the increment rather than destroying the core. By the end of the sixteenth century, with a sharply rising population, this core came under pressure. There might have been an increase in absolute supplies, mainly from hedgerow trees, but wood needed to be accessible, easy to cut and cheap to transport. Between 1570 and 1620, coal became a viable substitute for wood, as it was more efficient, generating more heat by

volume. The cost of fuel was affected by many factors, such as labour, rent, and freight charges, which would tip the balance in favour of one product. The switch to coal was particularly evident in industrial processes, such as iron making, but wood retained its position in the building and brewing trades and in shipbuilding, which also required huge quantities of pitch and tar, a by-product of pine trees. In the early eighteenth century, wood for these purposes increasingly came from the Baltic, but that market was soon overtaken by the American colonies. With his tables, Paul showed that the supply and use of English wood did not decline; it was supplemented by coal and imported wood to meet the demands of England's burgeoning economy.

The fruits of industrial growth and England's imperial economy were strongly in evidence in the final paper, from Charles Watkins, Nottingham University, on English estate forestry in the nineteenth century. In this period, tree planting became a craze, used to project power, wealth and status. Charles addressed the topic under four headings: 'ancient and modern', concerned with established woods and new plantations; 'ornamental and exotic', chosen for display and novelty; 'power and spectacle', designed around shooting and hunting, and finally, 'new landscapes', indicating the massive increase of woods and the impact on the countryside. The enthusiasm for forestry generated a huge literature with experts, often nurserymen, advising landowners and foresters how to set about their tasks and where to buy the best trees. Debates raged over the respective virtues of indigenous over exotic and whether broad leaf trees should be planted intermixed with larches; did they draw them up to the light or lead to spindly specimens? Power and spectacle was fascinatingly illustrated by a map of Holkham Park, planted to protect and nurture thousands of pheasants, with a battle plan of a day's shooting; a photograph showed beaters dressed in white to avoid being shot. The needs of scientific shooting effectively drove planting policy on large estates in the late nineteenth century; the popularity of rhododendrons stemmed not from their flowers, but their resistance to rabbits and the cover they provided for pheasants. The days of wood being usefully coppiced to make wattles, tools and brooms were well and truly over. On that note, we thanked Jane for organising such a stimulating conference, had a quick cup of tea and made our way out into the snow, warmly reassured by the presence of so many woodland enthusiasts.