

OUR forests

A people's vision for the future of England's public woods and forests



Ancient Woodland on the Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate in England

“British foresters are now making great efforts to restore our lost native woodland. The Forestry Commission is in the vanguard of this movement.”

Dr George Peterken MBE, 2002 - Ecologist & woodland specialist

“The Forestry Commission’s Broadleaves’ Review in 1985 and amendments to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1985 that gave the Forestry Commission a new duty to take account of environmental issues, marked a turning point in post-war forestry policy. There was no longer an overwhelming emphasis on timber production through afforestation with exotic conifers as the main purpose for forestry in the UK.”

Wildlife & Countryside Link - Making the Link 30 years review

During the public outcry over the Government’s declared proposals to dispose of the public woods and forests managed by the Forestry Commission, particular concerns were raised about sites classed as Ancient Woodland – both those areas most closely meeting that definition and also the larger area in process of, or awaiting restoration. Some commentators raised concerns about the risks to these if sold on or managed by others than the Forestry Commission, but also it was implied that the latter was ‘failing’ in its stated intention and duty to restore the larger body of Ancient Woodland damaged through earlier plantings, especially with conifers.

Therefore, Our Forests feel it is helpful to ascertain the facts about the state of Ancient Woodland under the Forestry Commission’s current management – and put those facts out into the public domain and so to contribute to the ongoing debate about the future of our public woods and forests. Hence this summary briefing.

Ancient Woodland

Very little, if any, woodland exists in England that has not been touched by human hand or axe over hundreds if not thousands of years. The 'Wildwood' of myth and legend was largely cleared thousands of years ago, first by Neolithic settlers and that which survived, then later by Iron-Age farmers. The remaining woods were managed from at least Saxon times – coppiced and pollarded on a regenerating basis for fuel and essential materials such as timber. The names of some of our native trees reflect this, e.g. ash - from the Saxon word 'aesc' for spear and maple from 'maser' for bowl. It is the remnants of these valued and managed woods and forests that make up our remaining Ancient Woodland.

A further wave of destruction occurred post the First and Second World Wars driven by Government policies to convert ancient woodland to plantation for a 'strategic supply of timber' and to boost agricultural food production. Indeed, the majority of the Ancient Woodland sites under the Forestry Commission's management in England during those utilitarian times were extensively replanted with conifers and beech. According to Professor Oliver Rackham¹, as much Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland was destroyed in the 30-40 years after World War Two as in the previous four hundred.

But since 1985, as Wildlife Link acknowledges, Government forestry policy and that of the Forestry Commission has been to reverse that trend and restore Ancient Woodland sites from plantations to native woodlands again.

Ancient Woodland is generally defined as land that has been continuously wooded since 1600. English Nature provides a useful, more expanded explanation of the classification in its guidance note to local authorities on how to identify such sites and so avoid permitting their development and destruction (See Appendix I at end of this document).

Current status of wildlife and Ancient Woodland on the Public Forest Estate

The Forestry Commission Public Forest Estate (PFE) totals 258,000 hectares, of which 199,000 hectares is made-up of woodland or forest. The remainder is composed of other open habitats, heathland and other land types.

The Forestry Commission looks after the largest number and area (bar the MoD) of key wildlife sites (SSSIs) in England - 99% of which are in 'favourable' or favourable recovering condition i.e. the two top condition classes. That is a better record than for any other public, private or charitable organisation.

The Forestry Commission was the first state forest service in the world to achieve the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) sustainability mark across all the public woods and forests it manages – in recognition of which WWF gave it a 'Gift to the Earth' award in 2001. Only 16% of woodlands outside of the public forest estate are managed to FSC standards.

The total area of woodland in England classed as Ancient Woodland is estimated at 220,000 hectares - of which the Forestry Commission manages 49,470 hectares. That places around 22% of all Ancient Woodland in England within the PFE and under the Forestry Commission's management. So the majority of Ancient Woodland (as the majority of woodland) lies outside the PFE and is owned and managed by private individuals, institutions, conservation groups and local authorities.

Of the 49,470ha of Ancient Woodland on the FC PFE in England, over 33,000 hectares of Ancient Woodland have been or are in the process of being restored from Plantation Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) to native woodland.²

¹The History of the Countryside, 1986

²These figures exclude the Forest of Dean and the New Forest where additional extensive areas of plantations within the old 'Statutory Inclosures' will be replaced by oak plantations, other forest habitats and other native woodland as stands are felled and restocked. The total area under restoration to native woodland, traditional oak plantation and heathland habitat in these forests is in excess of 2000ha in addition to the areas above.

All PAWS (Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites) stands on the PFE are under restoration programmes apart from exceptional circumstances, for example in the national arboreta at Westonbirt and Bedgebury, or where particularly cherished stands of tall conifers are retained as new and valued features within those woods.

Forestry Commission baseline assessment of existing Ancient Woodland

In 2002, the Forestry Commission surveyed all the Ancient Woodland on the PFE in England creating an up-to-date database that enables it to quantify exactly: how much Ancient Woodland is on the PFE, in what condition, and at what stage of restoration.³

The survey identified 4 classes of ancient woodland: Class 1: Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland; Classes 2, 3 & 4 describe different types of Plantations on Ancient Woodlands (PAWS):

		Area in March 2002	Area in March 2010
SN1	<p>Ancient semi natural or restored PAWS. This consists of woodland with 80% or more of site native tree species of either planted origin or of natural origin from coppice regrowth or natural regeneration. The increase in area from 2002 reflects the amount of woodland restored to native woodland from other classes below. This amounts to 1821ha, or 228ha per annum (not including several hundred hectares sold since 2002).</p>	15,952 ha	17,773 ha
SN2	<p>Re-asserting semi-natural woodland. Woodland on ancient sites with 50 – 80% site native tree species of either planted origin or natural regeneration within non-native plantations. This category has a higher % of non native species inappropriate to ancient semi-natural woodland and has reduced in area as restoration has proceeded towards native woodland (i.e. SN1).</p>	4,129 ha	3,534 ha
SN3	<p>Plantations, with 20 – 50% site native tree species. As above but with a higher proportion of plantation species. This category “loses” area to SN1 and SN2 as the restoration proceeds and more native woodland is restored, but “recruits” area from classes below, as thinning and felling reduce the number of non native trees and they are replaced over time by natural regeneration of native woodland species.</p>	6,548 ha	5,223 ha
SN4	<p>Plantations with less than 20% site native tree species. These are virtually pure plantations and the most challenging to restore. The area has reduced by 1809ha as areas are either clear felled and replanted with native species such as oak, or regularly thinned allowing native tree species to regenerate in the more sunlit glades and spaces.</p>	24,749 ha	22,940 ha
Total⁴		51,378 ha	49,470 ha

³ Report “Ancient Woodland on the Forestry Commission Estate in England” J.W.Spencer 2002.

Restoration takes time

The area fully restored to date is some 1,821 hectares – with the remaining area progressing to full restoration over the next 20 years (See table above). That may seem a small area and slow progress since the Forestry Commission committed to the principle of restoring PAWS in its 'Keepers of Time' policy document of 2005 - as The Woodland Trust has commented.⁵

Forestry Commission Ancient Woods in restoration are thinned every 5 years as heavily as possible to allow native woodland species to regenerate, but not so heavily that conditions are too open and hostile for the surviving woodland plant and animals.

The long-term nature of woodland restoration within PAWs is an aspect of restoration recognised and acknowledged by all engaged in the practice.⁶ Plantations are also thinned or harvested as close to when the timber will give the maximum financial return to the taxpayer.

For comparison, the Woodland Trust has some 2,600 hectares of Ancient Woodland that it states is in the process of being restored.

Ancient Woodland – does not mean 'untouched by human hand or axe'

It is a popular fallacy that Ancient Woodlands don't need managing – indeed the historical record and studies⁷ show that Ancient Woods and their wildlife are a product of active management over centuries.

Much of the wildlife and ecological interest associated with Ancient Woodland has developed with and is dependent upon various forms of active management – as recognised by groups such as Butterfly Conservation, BTO, Plantlife and RSPB. Hence, all the wildlife and conservation organisations represented by Wildlife Link have endorsed the Forestry Commission's Woodfuel Strategy, which has been designed to help bring into positive management the large number of privately owned woods in England that are considered to be in a neglected or moribund state⁸ through creating a viable market for woodfuel produced by the type of rotational felling and replanting that mimics traditional, historic management practices:

"The "Woodfuel Target" could play a key role in contributing to a new low carbon economy and in addressing the urgent need for positive management of many woods and forests across the country. The potential for woodfuel to underpin a new market for products from our woodland presents a unique opportunity for the UK to restore healthy woodland ecosystems based upon sustainable management."

Neglect – however benignly intended - means that the historic fabric of coppice stools, pollards wood-banks etc will simply erode away over time if not traditionally managed.

"If you want to keep an ancient wood in good condition treat it like an ancient wood and not some fragment of a long lost paradise that it never was... "

Jonathan Spencer, Chief Ecologist, Forestry Commission

⁴This total area excludes the 'Statutory Inclosures' of the New Forest and Forest of Dean.

⁵Failings in restoration:

The Forestry Commission's 'Keepers of Time' policy on ancient woodland published in 2005 commits it to the principle of restoring ancient woodland and to preparing an action plan for this to happen on its own estate. Since 2002 it has restored 1,890 ha of planted ancient woods on its estate (figures at April 2009).

⁶We advocate two distinct operational phases. First to maintain and enhance remnant ancient woodland features by reducing immediate threats to their survival. This process may take some years. Second to make long term improvement to the general ecological value of the site, by gradually shifting the canopy towards a more semi-natural species composition and structure.

⁷ Rackham, Peterken, Byfield et al

⁸ It has been estimated that 60% of private woodlands in England are under-managed.

Appendix I

What is ancient woodland?

Ancient woodland in England is defined as an area that has been wooded continuously since at least 1600 AD. Ancient Woodland is divided into ancient semi-natural woodland and plantations on ancient woodland sites. Both types of stand are classed as ancient woods. The trees and shrubs in ancient woodlands may have been felled or cut for coppice at various times since 1600, but as long as the area has remained as woodland, i.e. the coppice stools have regrown or the stand has been replanted soon after felling, then it still counts as ancient woodland. Because it may have been cut over many times in the past, ancient woodland does not necessarily contain old trees.

If woodland has clearly been through a phase in the last 400 years when the land was open, for example as grassland, heath, moor or arable, then the site is classed as recent woodland. It may still have value for nature conservation, but it is not an ancient wood. Some ancient woods may be 'primary' in the sense that they are on sites that have always been woodland, back to the pre-Neolithic wildwood. However in many cases ancient woods have been cleared in the distant past: for example they may contain the remains of early Medieval, Saxon, Roman or Iron Age remains. As long as there has been no complete clearance of the site since 1600 such woods are still 'ancient'.

The ancient woodland concept in its current form was proposed about 30 years ago by Peterken (1977) and Rackham (1971, 1976), albeit that Watkins (1988) has shown that the idea can be traced back to at least the 19th century. The date used to define ancient woodland for England – 1600 AD – was chosen by Peterken (1977), because it reflected the point at which good maps started to become more common and was prior to the impetus for new woodland planting from the publication of Evelyn's influential book 'Sylva' (1670). Other dates could be argued for: 1650 was used by Peterken and Harding (1974) to distinguish post-medieval woods in Rockingham Forest, as a detailed map for that area was produced at that time, while Rackham uses 1700. In practice 1600 has been adopted for policy and practice purposes in England.⁹

Sources:

Ancient Woodland on the Forestry Commission Estate in England, Survey Report March 2002

Managing ancient & native woodland in England, Practice Guide Forestry Commission 2010

Ancient Woods, A guide for woodland owners & managers, Woodland Trust 2009

Wildlife & Countryside Link Making the Link 30 years review:

http://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/2010/Making_the_Link_2010_14Jul10.pdf

The FC SSSI Recovery Programme...reaching the December 2010 target. FC Jan 2010

⁹ Ancient woodland: guidance material for local authorities, Keith Kirby and Emma Goldberg, English Nature, 2002/3

OUR forests

A people's vision for the future of England's public woods and forests

Along with the over half a million people signing the 38 Degrees' petition, we believe that there are unique values and benefits provided to society from having a national body of woodland and forest owned by and managed sustainably on behalf of the public.

Therefore, as a core principle, **Our Forests** will work to retain and expand what is currently referred to as the 'Public Forest Estate' – but which would better be termed 'Common Wood and Forest Land'.

A short-term aim is to ensure that the 'Independent Panel' frames its recommendations within the findings of the earlier and extensive public consultation concluded just before the change of Government, as well as incorporating the views of the over half a million signatories to 38 Degrees' petition.

Our Forests will also set-out a long-term vision for the future of England's public woods and forests – but one that is genuinely 'A People's Vision' by engaging directly with 'Big Society' via our working partnership with 38 Degrees, as well as through the many local & grassroots groups with whom we are networked.