

# THE RUISLIP WOODS IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

by Colin Bowlt.

Coppicing has been the traditional method of harvesting woodlands since, at least, mediaeval times (Fig. 1). This was repeated at intervals of a few years and produced the small *wood* for tools, hurdles and, in particular, fuel. The other woodland product was *timber* from trees, usually oak, which had been allowed to grow for a few tens of years. This was required for the construction of buildings and carts.

It is not known for how long the Ruislip Woods have been coppiced. There are records for timber (the big stuff) being taken from the woods in the 14th century for use at such places as the Tower of London, Westminster and Windsor but the earliest references to wood (the small stuff) seem to be in the Paget Survey of 1587 for the wood now known as Mad Bess Wood, but then as West Wood. This may be because until parcels of the waste – the so-called ‘Outwood’ – were protected from the depredations of rough grazing and inclosed, the amount of wood coppiced for sale, as opposed to unorganised cutting for personal use, was small.



Fig. 1

## Area coppiced in Bayhurst Wood 2009/10

By the middle of the 17th century there are references to faggots (bundles of twiggy material) and bavins (small logs) for fuel, and in 1796 to stakes, rake stales (handles) and broomsticks.

References in the 19th century refer to pea and bean sticks, stakes, props, rods and poles. This is interesting since the bulk of the old coppice stools today in the Ruislip Woods are hornbeam. Now hornbeam is not suitable for stakes or tool handles, and it is totally unsuitable for hurdles. These are usually made from hazel, of which there is only a small amount in the Ruislip Woods. However, hornbeam makes splendid fuel and certainly by the 19th century was supplying the London market with firewood (Bowl, E. & C. 1982).

How frequently the underwood was cut would have depended upon rates of growth and size requirements. It is unlikely that it was strictly regular – the so-called coppice cycle. Records from Eastern England show that the time between cuts varied between four and 28 years, but was typically between four to eight years in mediaeval times increasing over the centuries, and with none less than ten years after 1850 (Rackham 1981). A number of reasons have been suggested for this, including changed rates of growth, demand for larger logs and rising cost of labour (Rackham 1981).

Little documentation exists on coppicing in the Ruislip Woods but a map for 1872 in the King's College archives (Figs. 2a and 2b) shows not only the arable and pasture lands on the Ruislip Demesne, but also the years of coppice growth for Copse Wood and Park Wood. As absentee landlords King's College had usually leased out their Demesne lands. The last lease relating to the woods was granted in 1852 for a period of 20 years. In 1872 King's College decided to retain the woods in hand with a woodman to manage them on their behalf.

It has been suggested that with the great deal of speculation in railway building in Victorian Middlesex, the College wished to be able to sell them at will (Bowl, E. 1994). This is probably the reason for the production of the 1872 map.

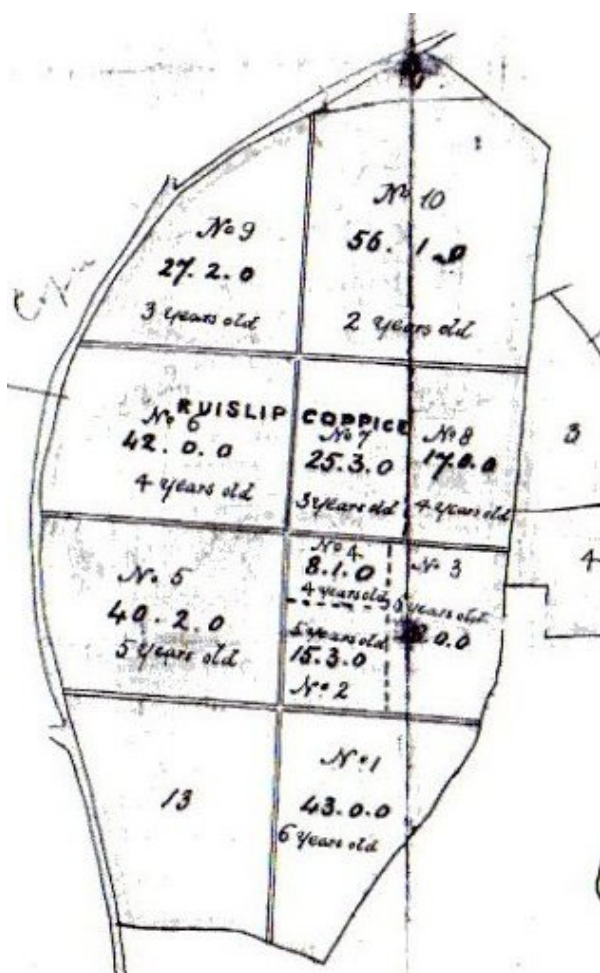


Fig. 2a

### Copse Wood as shown on the 1872 map

The map shows Copse Wood and Park Wood divided into numbered compartments with their areas given in acres/roods/perches. The compartment in Copse Wood marked 13 had been cleared of woodland in the 1840s. The reason for this is not known. It has now (2010) reverted to secondary woodland, but without any old coppice stools. Its outline today can be identified by a bank and ditch. The age of coppice growth in Copse Wood in 1872 varies between two and six years. Park Wood is shown divided into eight numbered compartments with coppice growth between one and ten years. The short period of re-growth, particularly in Copse Wood, suggests that the previous lessees had anticipated being unable to continue their lease and had sold much of the coppice during their tenure.

The coppiced areas in 1872 in Copse Wood ranged from eight to 56 acres. In Park Wood they varied between eight and 89 acres. Following coppicing in the 19th century, large tracts of the woods must have looked rather bare until the stools started to sprout again. Aesthetically this would not have mattered since the woods were not then open to the public. Current coppice areas are very much less.

When the Long-term Management Plan for Ruislip Woods was being formulated in 1979/82 there was much (at times heated) concern about the reintroduction of coppicing to manage the woods and its visual effect. During some meetings of the Woods Advisory Working Party at Manor Farm some members of the public protested with placards against coppicing, outside the library. Eventually as a compromise solution it was agreed to recommend that 'units of coppice of approximately 1 acre should be coppiced according to a 20 year rotation bearing in mind that contiguous plots should not be coppiced at intervals of less than two years'. Since the reintroduction of coppicing in 1982/3 the areas of the coppice units have increased to several acres, more in line with traditional practice, and are now accepted by the public.

### References

- Bowl, E, 1994 *Ruislip Past*,  
Historical Publications
- Bowl, E & C, 1982 *Ruislip Woods*,  
RNELHS
- Rackham, O, 1981 *Ancient Woodland*,  
Edward Arnold

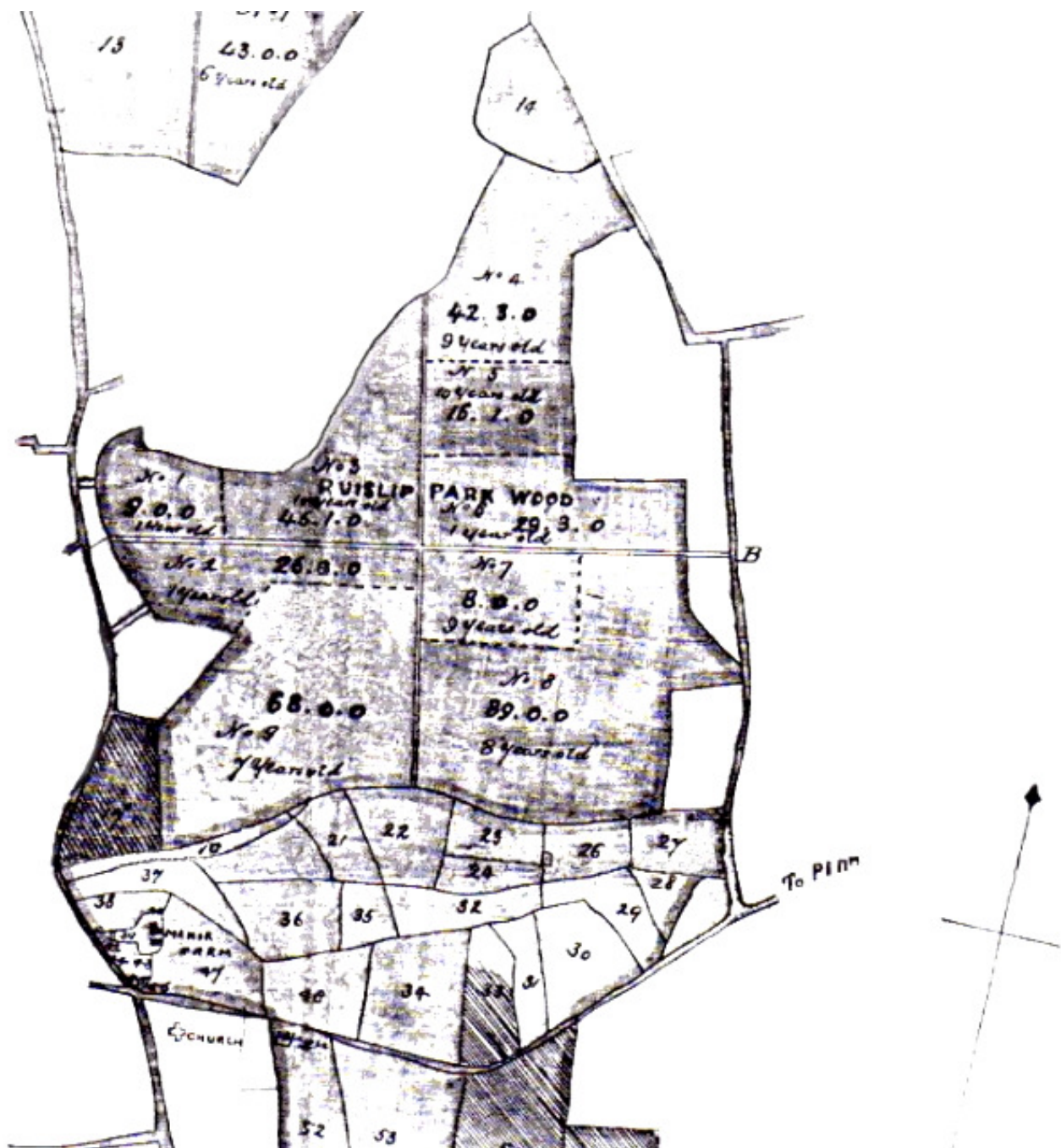


Fig. 2b

Park Wood as shown on the 1872 map