

Cutting through the wood — untangling family branches

by Melanie Winterbotham

It is no surprise in a parish blessed with such a large area of woodland that many inhabitants earned their living from it. In 1851, as soon as the census enumerator started on Ruislip Common, nearly every household recorded at least one member engaged in a woodland trade.

Thomas Lavender was a wood cutter. Next door was John Weatherly, a dealer in wood and sand, whose daughter and two younger sons were kindle makers; a 17 year old son was a wood cutter. Beyond four empty cottages and a shop, we find three sons of washerwoman Maria Tobutt making kindle. Next door but one Hannah Hunt, wife of a bricklayer, is also a kindle maker. Then comes James Lavender who is dealing in wood; his 11 year old son is already a wood cutter, as is his neighbour Charles Marcey (or Massey).

After the Reservoir keeper's house, we find more Lavenders and Marceys. Neighbours John and Henry Lavender are wood dealer and cutter respectively. James Marcey's stepson Eli Poulter is a kindle maker. Then come Thomas Hill wood cutter and his son Daniel a kindle maker. Two doors along are Edward Bray, a wood cutter, and his younger brother George who is a kindle maker. Their neighbours James Lavender and his son Matthew are also kindle makers. Around the Six Bells pub, wood trades are scarcer, but Charles Ive is a wood cutter and William Lavender a wood carter. Finally we find David Lavender, another wood cutter.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, there were always at least a dozen households in Ruislip parish headed by a wood dealer or cutter or kindle maker. As we have seen, many more households contained at least one person in that line of work. The names changed over the years, but further research has shown that two families had a virtual monopoly.

The ubiquitous Lavender clan had a substantial stake. Seven of them headed households involved in the trade over the period, and two Lavender girls married Henry and Eli Poulter who became wood cutter and wood dealer. In 1847 John Lavender had married Margaret Bray, uniting his family with the predominant network in the trade.

Edward Bray (Margaret's uncle) lived at Little Kingsend Cottage and was dealing in wood (as well as market gardening) from 1841 to 1881 and probably longer. His mother Mary (his father's trade is unrecorded) had been a sand merchant in Ducks Hill, and one by one Edward's relatives emerge as dealers or cutters. A Rebecca Bray married Charles Marcey wood cutter, and in turn their daughter Emma married Henry Tobutt hay and wood dealer. Edward's brother John sold sand and wood on Ducks Hill and his sons Edward and George became dealers in Ruislip Common. Sister Charlotte married a cousin Joseph Bray who farmed in Harefield Lane, near New Year's Green in Harefield parish, but their daughters married Ruislip woodmen. Margaret married Charles Ive who dealt in wood in the St Catherine's area. Charlotte married Henry Douglas, a Harefield labourer who was a wood dealer on Ducks Hill by 1881. Eliza married John Weatherly, sand and wood dealer.

Finally Margaret Bray (daughter of Joseph and Charlotte) married in 1850 Henry Woodman after whom Woodman's Farm in Bury Street is named¹. It is thought that it was at Woodman's Farm that the curate John Joseph Roumieu saw women and children cutting underwood into firewood for the London market 'seated like tailors round the walls of the barn'².

Henry had worked for Margaret's grandmother Mary Bray who left him 'my mare, cart and harness in consideration of his faithful services towards me' when she died in 1848. By 1851 he was a wood dealer in Harefield Lane, New Year's Green before returning to Ruislip. By 1871 his daughter Mary (19) and son William (16) were 'assistants in the business' (rather than 'wood cutter' or 'kindle maker' which normally describe younger family members in other wood trade households). The enumerator in 1881 is not so discerning, describing a daughter as a wood cutter and three sons as general labourers. Nevertheless, by 1891 son Joseph Edward Woodman was in the same line of business in Sharps Lane.

Sharps Lane was in a small focus of activity west of the village centre. In addition to Edward Bray, at Little Kings End, Thomas Tobutt (grandson of Rebecca Bray and husband of

Charlotte Lavender), a former hay dealer, was dealing in wood. A link with the transport of the timber was Charles Henwood³ at Kings End Farm in 1851 who was a clerk at a timber wharf, alas he does not say where.

The northern end of the woods had only James Birch in Sandpit Lane in 1851 dealing in wood, and later Daniel Norton at Northwood Hill Lodge in 1881, styling himself 'timber merchant'.

Fore Street in Eastcote also had wood cutters, including George and Thomas Allday whose relatives had been dealers in Tile Kiln and St Catherine's hamlets. George Lavender at Hill Corner was a wood ward or bailiff from 1861 to 1891.

On the margins of society, probably in temporary or mobile accommodation at Ruislip Common, were the Hearn family of travellers. In 1891, Mercy Hearn and four nieces and nephews, aged from 13 to 23, were recorded as wood choppers.

It is tempting to imagine that the Lavenders and Brays had a stranglehold on the trade, but it could simply be that the community around Ruislip Common kept itself to itself, despite being within easy distance of the village centre.

At the end of the day, even the selling side of the trade cannot have been particularly profitable. Poor Edward Bray the elder died in Uxbridge Workhouse in 1891 aged 80. He had no children and was probably too unwell to look after himself.

¹ Despite his name, Henry's father was an Uxbridge tailor.

² C. Cox *A Quiet and Secluded Spot* p24

³ Charles Henwood and Edward B ray established a dissenters chapel in Ducks Hill
RNELHS Journal 1993 p29

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The Society has a research group which is open to all members. Research ranges from delving into dusty archives to reading old newspapers, looking at censuses or interviewing long term residents. The First World War period is obviously popular at the moment, but more or less any topic is valid. Members have collected old postcards or written the history of their road. Our old Journals are gradually being put online, so you will be able to see what has been done previously.

We also presently mount two exhibitions each year at Manor Farm House, for which we need material, and would be grateful for help with presentation.

Eileen Bowlt and other researchers will provide support and guidance, and you can assist with a group project or carry out your own research.

If you would like to have a go, or just see what is involved, please contact

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