

History of Ruislip Woods Exhibition

by Brian Grisdale

During August and September 2015 an exhibition prepared by the Society illustrating the history of Ruislip Woods was displayed in Manor Farm House, Ruislip. The display included maps and information describing various aspects of the Woods including its origins, development and management. This article is intended as a record of the exhibition and not a comprehensive history. With one exception, all of the following

text and pictorial material was included in the exhibition display; conversely not all of the displayed exhibits are included in this article. The one pictorial exception is the map (Fig. 1) which illustrates the collective arrangement of the Woods, which replaces the displayed original. Any omissions are by reason of their size or quality and consequent unsuitability for a printed Journal article. There are also pictorial omissions to reduce the length of the article.

Origins and Ownership

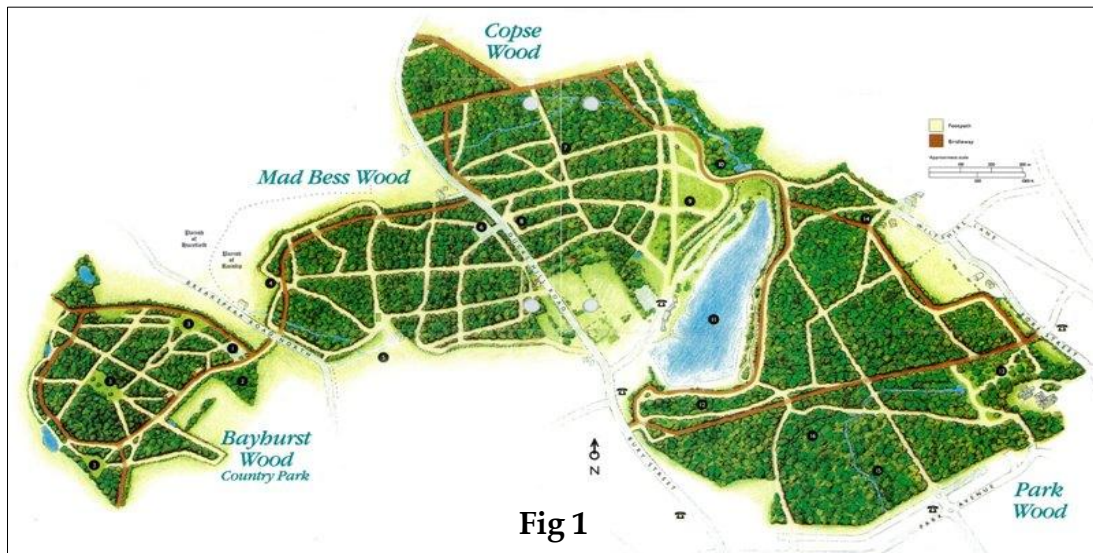


Fig 1

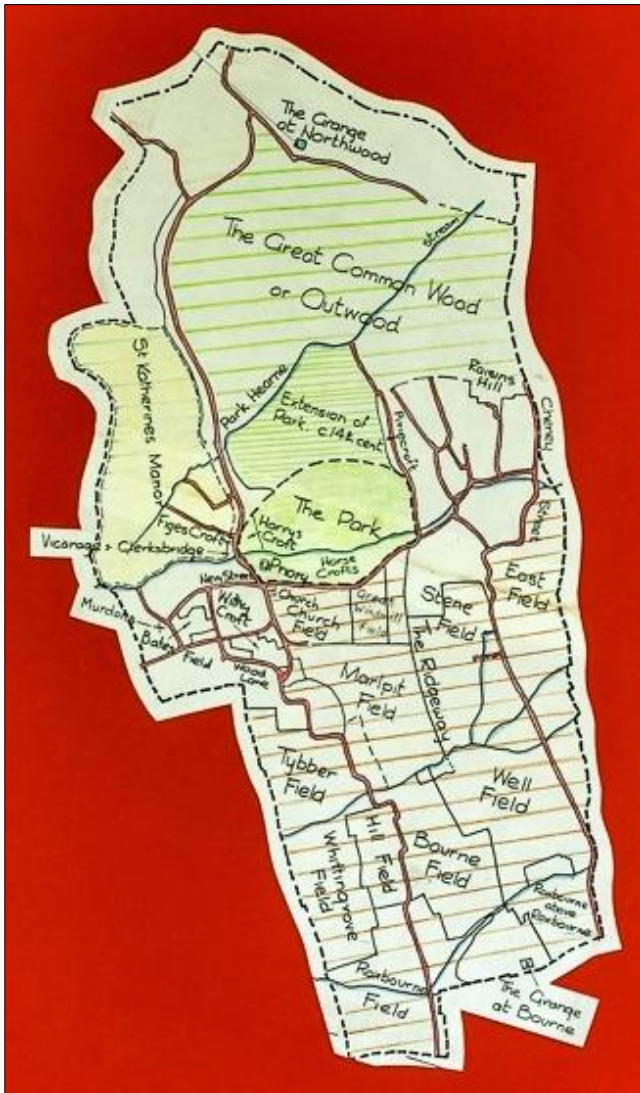
Middlesex was mostly covered by deciduous woodland in prehistoric times, being part of the Western and Central European forest. The oak was predominant in heavy clay areas like the old parish of Ruislip (modern Ruislip, Northwood & Eastcote). The common oak (*Quercus Robur*) gave way to the Sessile oak (*Quercus Petraea*) on sandy or gravelly surfaces. Both types are to be found in Ruislip Woods in the appropriate soil areas.

Throughout Middlesex the commonest shrub or underwood, as it was generally known, was hornbeam, also now found in great profusion in our woods. Ruislip Woods are the remnant of this ancient woodland after land was cleared for settlement and for crops in medieval times, and for suburban development during the last one hundred years.

To begin with the woodlands might be said to have belonged to anyone who came, settled in them and was strong enough to hold them. By late Saxon times a settlement was established in and around the Manor Farm area of Ruislip, owned by Wlward Wit, a Steward in Edward the Confessor's household. From the late 11th century to the 1930s **Park** and **Copse** Woods were owned by the Lords of the Manor - Ernulf de Hesdin, 1066-c.1096; The Abbey of Bec, c.1096-1404; and others until 1450; King's College Cambridge, 1451 onwards.

The Wood now known as **Mad Bess** was once part of St Catherine's Manor and subsequently had other owners. Ruislip Common or Poor's Field is part of a wooded area that was grubbed up in 1608 and eventually was set aside under Enclosure Award and administered by Trustees and a Charity.

Early Medieval Ruiship



The Map of Fig. 2 shows the layout of Medieval Ruislip with the Church at its centre.

Park Wood

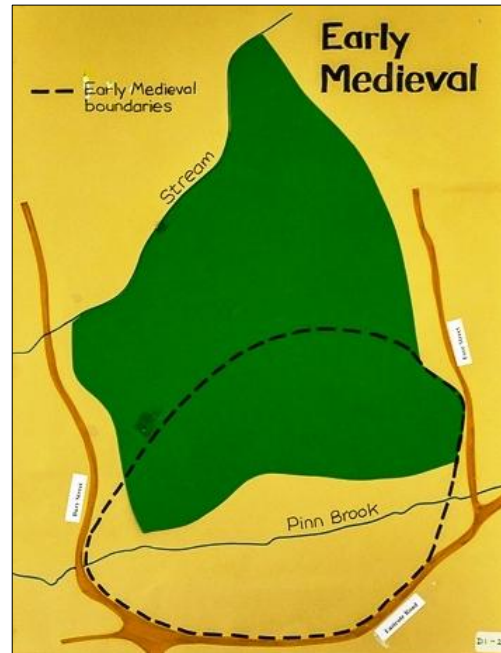


Fig. 3

By 1086 'a park for woodland beasts' (an area where deer could be reserved) had already been enclosed from the surrounding woods. Part of the embankments can still be seen in Park Wood. Bury Street, Eastcote Road and Fore Street, still curve around the park.

In later medieval times the park was extended northwards to a stream running from Northwood through a shallow valley (see Fig. 2). In 1270 five live does from the Archbishop of Canterbury's Harrow Wood were delivered to the Prior of Ruislip to stock his park.

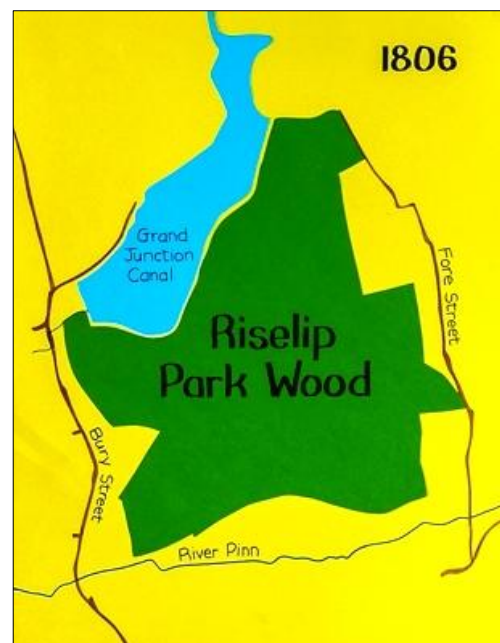


Fig. 4

Major changes from the earlier map in the shape of the wood are apparent in Fig. 4. The Enclosure Commissioners sold 39 acres 2 roods to the Grand Junction Canal Company for £40 an acre to create a Reservoir to serve as a Canal Feeder. Reservoir construction began in 1811 and water ran in the feeder in 1816. The hamlet of Park Hearne was submerged beneath the reservoir.

25 Acres in the north-east corner of the wood was given to the Vicar of Ruislip in compensation for twenty loads of 'wood for his fire', to which earlier vicars had been entitled.

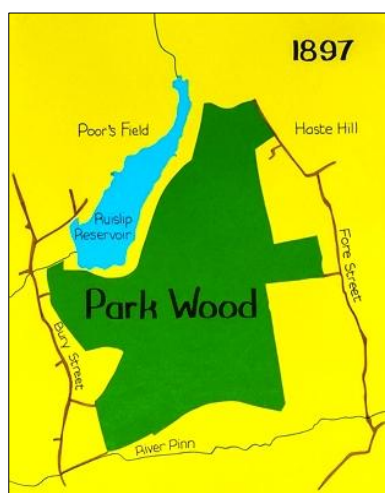


Fig. 5

Grub Ground - land in the south-east corner of Park Wood was grubbed up about 1873. Wembley Hill Estates purchased this ground between the wars and planned to build their Boundary Wood Estate there.

In 1971 the Borough of Hillingdon bought the land. Grangewood School was built in 1977 and Coteford Junior School in 1982. The remainder, although allocated for educational purposes remains open space.

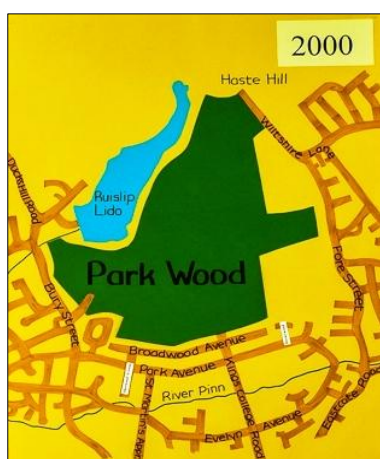


Fig. 6

Fig. 6 shows Park Wood reduced to 250 statute acres. Broadwood Ave., Park Ave., Sherwood Ave. and Dormywood have all been built within the Park. Oak, coppiced hornbeam, bluebells and wood anemones and a boundary bank remain at the bottom of Sherwood Avenue.

Copse Wood

Tenants of the manor had grazing and other rights in the Common Wood (see Fig. 2).

In 1608 a major clearance of the Common Wood took place when the 1st Earl of Salisbury grubbed up 568 acres and sold the oaks for £4000.

The remaining woodland, perhaps containing more coppiced hornbeam than oaks, was enclosed and became Cope Wood.

The area which is now Poors Field, Haste Hill and Northwood Hills became open common or waste, where tenants could continue to exercise their common rights. Cows still graze Ruislip Common.

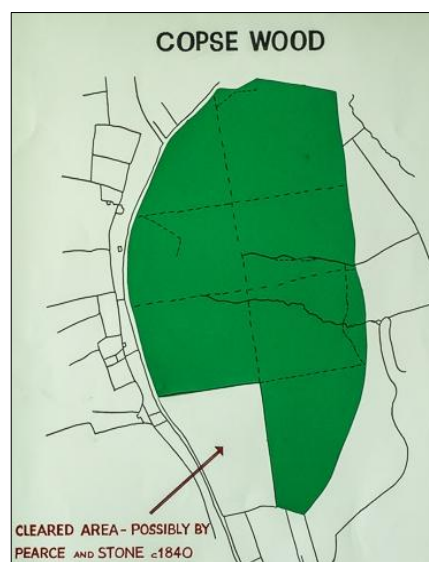
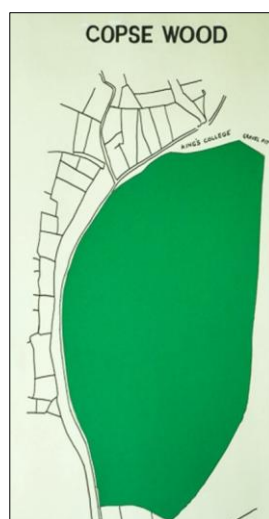


Fig. 7

An 1840 Lease from Ralph Deane of Eastcote House to John Pierce and Edward Stone refers to ground on Ducks Hill as 'part lately woodland, but has been grubbed up and remaining part is to be grubbed up by Peace [sic] and Stone....'

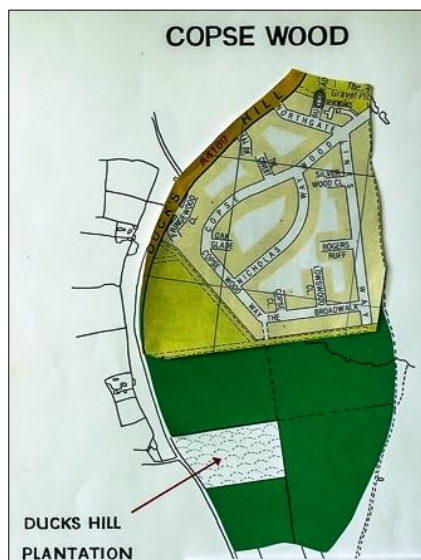


Fig. 8

By 1897, the SW corner had been replanted and was known as Ducks Hill Plantation.

1898: The Gravel Pits at the top end of the wood became a public place.

1905: King's College released 10 acres of Ducks Hill Plantation to Josef Conn, who in 1908 built a house called Horsens that Mrs. Conn ran as a Health Hydro. It became a United Airforces HQ for Clandestine Operations during the 2nd World War and was named Battle of Britain House in 1948, subsequently becoming a short-term Residential College for children and adults.

The house burned down in August 1984 and the site returned to woodland whence it sprang.

1920s: The Copse Wood Estate began to be built.

1936: The southern part of Copse Wood was purchased by RNUDC in conjunction with MCC and the LCC.

1938: King's College was willing to similarly sell the undeveloped portion of the northern half, but no agreement was reached. That section of Copse Wood is now in private hands.

Mad Bess Wood

Ernulf de Hesdin gifted the Manor of Ruislip to the Abbey of Bec in 1087 but this did not include the portion of Ruislip that lies west of Bury Street and Ducks Hill (set back 100 yards or so from the road frontages), from the northern edge of Mad Bess Wood down to the River Pinn. This area of wooded wasteland had been granted to the monks of Holy Trinity, Rouen in 1069, 'wherein the lord

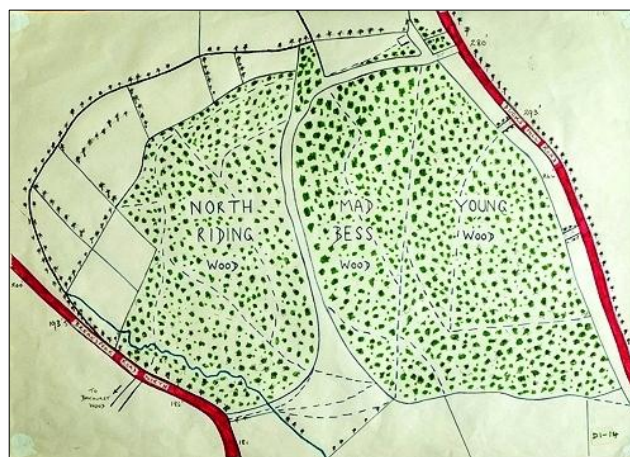


Fig. 9

hath wood and soil and the tenants have free liberty of common herbage for their cattle and pannage for their swine'.

From that time until 1391, this part of Ruislip was part of the Manor of Harmondsworth. The monks at Rouen had a relic of St Catherine of Alexandria and the Saint's name became attached to the monastery. Hence the name of this part of Ruislip became St Catherine's Manor, which was also known as Katherine End and the Little Manor. A sub-manor called Southcote, which was apparently the estate of the Forester of Harmondsworth, was situated north of Ladygate Lane.

As part of Harmondsworth, St Catherine's was sold to William of Wykeham in 1391 and formed part of the endowment of Winchester College until 1543, when it was granted to the Pagets of West Drayton. After several sales, when it came on the market again in 1873, the portion north of Ladygate Lane was bought by L J Baker of Haydon Hall. He ran the woodlands as a sporting estate and built several Gamekeepers' cottages. He sold the estate to Henry Richard Cox in 1884.

By 1769 when St Catherine's Manor was enclosed, there were five different parcels of woodland, namely Sansons Hill, Standale Wood, Westcote Wood, North Riding and Mad Bess (the earliest known reference to this name). The boundary banks created when the various parcels of woodland were enclosed piecemeal from the wooded waste still cross the wood.

Fig. 9 (based on the 1866 OS 25") shows three parcels, Youngwood, Mad Bess and North Riding. There is no known reason for the name Mad Bess, but in recent years it has been adopted as the overall name of these woods.

In 1936 the RNUDC (with the MCC & LCC) purchased Mad Bess Wood (186 acres) for £28,000 from Sir Howard Stransom Button, by compulsory purchase order.

Bayhurst Wood



Fig. 10

This wood lies in the parish of Harefield. It was granted to The Knights Hospitallers of St John by Beatrice de Bollers in the late 12th century and was attached to their main English home at Clerkenwell. They kept it as part of their Manor of Moorhall until the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

The Newdigates of Harefield Place owned it from 1553 until 1877 when it was sold to Richard Cox of Hillingdon House (RAF Uxbridge). Howard Stransom Button purchased it in 1922 and ran it along with Mad Bess Wood as a sporting estate until 1936 when both were acquired by the Ruislip Northwood Urban District Council.

The earlier wood boundary is indicated by the outer hedges of the fields cleared from the wood and enclosed for agricultural purposes before 1813. These cleared areas are called assarts.

Woodland Management

Ruislip Woods have been managed in some fashion or other from the 11th century at least, for two purposes; to provide sport, hunting deer, wild boar, pheasants and woodcock; and to provide timber and wood for building and fuel. The owners derived a considerable income from the woods while the tenants had certain rights of grazing and fuel collecting.

Palings must have fenced the Park on top of the earth banks to keep in the game animals, for it is noted that their repair was ordered in 1436.

Much later, Gamekeepers' Cottages appeared in the woods. Two were built c.1875, one in the south east corner of the Park (now at the end of Coteford Close), the other south of Mad Bess Wood (now Mad Bess Cottage near the Scout Camp).

Sale of wood, and pannage (the tax paid by tenants for the right to pasture their pigs on the acorn fall) provided 25% of the total income of the Manor in 1289. The people of Ruislip found employment, fuel, building materials and fodder for their animals. Tile making was carried out in Ruislip and Northwood from the 14th to the 19th centuries.

Intermittent wars with France throughout the 14th century led to the Crown's seizure of all lands belonging to Alien Priories. The oaks in Ruislip Woods proved a temptation to royal builders and many depredations were made upon them. In 1339 a letter from King Edward III ordered the delivery of 24 oaks from the wood of Ruislip for works in the Tower of London.

Foresters and Keepers managed the woods. There is an 1110 reference to a forester who almost certainly had the house and estate north of Ladygate Lane called Southcote. Circa 1390 Forester Roger de Southcote was obliged to cut down timber and firewood as ordered by the Lord and to prepare it for carting, to collect pannage and to keep trespassers out of the woods.

A distinction was made between 'wood' (oak) and 'underwood' (hornbeam) because they were managed in different ways. The oak was felled as required for timber. Hornbeam was coppiced (i.e. cut down but leaving a stool which sprouted again into long straight stems) to provide firewood and poles, stakes etc depending on their size. Trees growing on earth banks were often stubbed somewhat higher than coppicing to define boundaries.

From 1872 the woods were retained in hand by King's College and only sporting leases were let. A woodman was appointed to look after them.

In March each year oaks ready for felling were marked by the woodman and a sale was held at a local public house. Oak was felled in large quantities in the First World War and continued to a lesser degree until the 1930s.

Another sale was held in October of the underwood.

Coppicing was carried out in compartments on a rotation variously reported as a 5 to 12 year cycle. Replanting of underwood was never necessary. The only enemy to regeneration was the rabbit. Keepers caught and sold about 500 every year.

By 1930, letters between the local Residents' Association and King's College complained about the state of the woods, and in November of that year discussions took place with the College regarding future plans. Negotiations eventually resulted in Ruislip Woods coming into public ownership in 1932 - 36. This new ownership did not result in increased management except for a little coppicing and the woods continued to deteriorate until the 1980s.

In 1978 Hillingdon Council recognised that it was necessary to take action to restore the woods to a healthy state for the benefit of all, and at a Public Meeting in 1979 it was agreed to establish a Woods Advisory Working Party. In early 1982 a Long Term Management Plan for Park, Copse and Mad Bess Woods and Poor's Field was the result of the Party's deliberations. Its main 100 year objective was to maintain those areas principally for use by the public consistent with their continuance as woodland and heathland, and designation as a SSSI.

Many other recommendations were identified including a management committee which presently exists as the Ruislip Woods Management Advisory Group comprising the Council and other users. In addition to being a SSSI, Ruislip Woods was awarded the status of a National Nature Reserve in 1997, the same year as the establishment of an environmental charity the Ruislip Woods Trust.

Daily management is presently overseen by a Council Woodlands Officer supported by other Council workers, contractors and regular volunteers.

Annually during winter the management largely consists of coppicing the hornbeam, which is in the best interests of the conservation and historical value of the woods. The re-introduction of such regular coppicing prevents the new growth becoming too tall, dense and heavy causing some trees to die; leaving standing poles, fallen trees and rotting stumps. Long neglected coppicing is characterised by impoverished

ground flora and the lack of diversity in birds and insects. (See Fig. 11)



Fig. 11

Other work includes the removal of trees, bushes and flora which have regenerated naturally in areas where they are invasive or not required. This can include Birch, Holly, Sycamore, non native species and garden escapees. Regular maintenance and construction is also required for fences, hedges, footpaths, bridleways, ditches, boardwalks and bridges. Some of the coppiced wood is stacked for insect habitat and some used for charcoal making.

Woodland Products

Oak Timber

This was a valuable product of the woods used in the construction of buildings great and small. Timber from Ruislip was demanded from the Prior of Ogbourne, who lived at the Priory at Manor Farm on several occasions between 1339 - 52, for use at the Tower of London, the Palace of Westminster, Windsor Castle and at the Black Prince's Manor of Kensington.

20 Feb 1339 - Edward III, who had confiscated Ruislip Priory in 1336 as an Alien Priory, ordered delivery of 24 oaks from the wood of Ruislip, for works in the Tower of London, to Nicholas de la Beche, Constable of the Tower.

Local oak timber provided the sturdy frames for all the barns and house at Manor Farm and the other medieval and 16th/17th century houses around Ruislip, Northwood and Eastcote. Split oak lathes were used in the walls and tied into the beams using withies. Main posts were pegged into the beams.

Charcoal

This was made from closely stacked wood covered by turf and burned very slowly. It was produced from the coppice, but there are only a few references to it in Ruislip. Some tenants of the manor were making charcoal in the Common Wood in the 16th century.

Basket Making

1720/1 - The little Aldergrove south of the Park and north of the Moors (on the Pinn Fields), was leased by Ralph Hawtrey to John Paine, a basket maker, for 20s a year. Timber trees and the bodies of pollards were reserved to Ralph Hawtrey and Paine was to keep the fence in good repair.

Hoop Making

18th century - 14 loads of hoops were sold for £41 19s 0d.

Bark for Tanning Leather

Among the archives of King's College there is a document giving the sizes of Oak trees cut in Copse Wood between 1678 and 1680 which is shown graphically in Fig. 12.

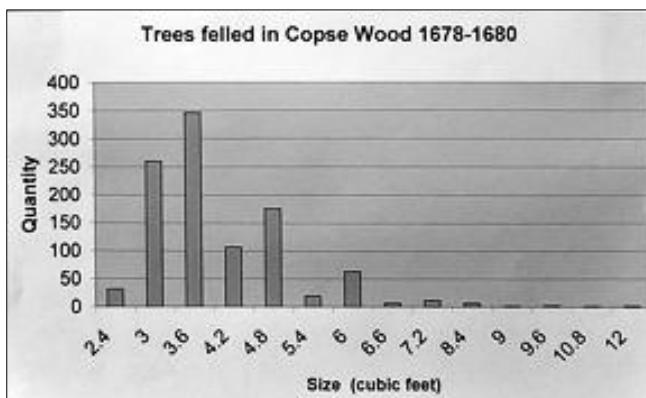


Fig. 12

Most were less than 5 cubic feet in volume. A good sized Oak contains about 40 cubic feet, so clearly these would have been unsuitable for constructional purposes. The bark was probably stripped and sold to local tanneries; there was one in Uxbridge by 1672. Other records in the archives record cutting of underwood (largely Hornbeam for fuel) in the autumn, and 'trees' of Oak in the spring. Bark is more easily stripped when the sap is rising.

A 'Wood Book' c1740 among the Hawtrey Papers at the London Metropolitan Archives mentions 3477 yards of bark, sold for £202 16s 6d (1s 6d per yard).

A note for the 30 March 1750 says: 'Powell (*the College agent*) assured me that the Bark of a Load of large and clean Timber is not worth 11s. clear of charges, and that he thinks the Bark of a Load of Timber in the Common Wood at Ruislip will not bring in clear of charges more than 5s. or 6s. at most, some not more than 4s. and that Miss Rogers (*of Eastcote House*) sells the Timber from 34s. to 36s./Load'. A load was 40 cu. ft.

Bavins

These bundles of brushwood bound with one withy, frequently appear in Ruislip records. Bush Bavins were given to the parish poor for firewood and Lash Bavins (tidier, trimmed bundles) are also mentioned in the 17th & 18th centuries. There are references to **Faggots** in the same period.

1719 - Ralph Hawtrey Esq. of Eastcote House, lessee of the demesne, allowed John Reading Gent, who was subleasing Manor Farm (then called Ruislip Court) 'to have yearly 800 of lash bavins out of Ruislip Park Wood'.

Ethers or Rods

10 - 12 feet long, 1 inch thick, 20 a bundle - a score. They were used exclusively for hedging, but in earlier times were interwoven with wattles. The bundles were tied with withies.

Stakes

5 - 6 feet long, 2 inch thick, 12 to the bundle.

Bean Sticks

6 - 7 feet long, 3/4 inch thick, 15 to the bundle, called a 'dozen'.

Pea Sticks

4 feet long, 1/2 inch thick, 25 to the bundle.

The Church House (now the Almshouses): the inhabitants of the ten cottages into which the building was divided, received **kindlewood** from the Overseers of the Poor from time to time.

Wood Cutting and Selling

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, there were at least a dozen households in Ruislip parish headed by a wood dealer or cutter or kindle maker. Many more households contained at least one person working in wood.

The majority were in the Ruislip Common area, with a few dealers at King's End, and only one in the north of the parish (in 1881 Daniel Norton at Northwood Hill Lodge styled himself 'timber merchant').

Wood cutters also lived in Eastcote, and George Lavender at Hill Corner was a wood ward or bailiff from 1861 to 1891. The Lavender, Bray and Woodman families were all prominent in the wood trade.

In 1875 the local curate recorded that 'The underwood is sold by auction in convenient lots to wood-dealers, and is cut up into fire-wood by women and children, for the London market, who seated like tailors round the walls of a barn, earn as much as, or more than the male members of the family.'

This barn was probably at Woodman's Farm, occupied by Henry Woodman whose father coincidentally was a tailor in Uxbridge. Henry was a wood dealer from 1861; ten years later his daughter Mary (19) and son William (16) were 'assistants in the business'. By 1891 his son Joseph Edward Woodman was also a dealer in Sharps Lane.

Ruislip was well placed to supply wood to the London market in particular, and evidence of the auctions is found in newspapers from at least 1816. No doubt they date back much earlier. Wood Sales often took place at Public Houses such as the Six Bells, Black Horse or The George (see Fig. 13).



Fig. 13

In March the King's College woodman marked the oaks ready for felling with white paint. Wood dealers examined the timber beforehand and bid for stands of oak at the sale and felled those they bought in March or early April.

In October sales of underwood (the hornbeam) were held. The woodman marked out 4 or 5 acre lots, by cutting the larger growth about 4 ft from ground around the boundary.

Hunting and Shooting

Ruislip Woods' exhibition included a section on sporting activities but its inclusion here would be an unnecessary repeat of a previous Journal article. See below.

References

Melanie Winterbotham, 'Cutting through the wood', RNELHS Journal 2015 Ref. 15/5

Melanie Winterbotham, 'Hunting and Shooting', RNELHS Journal 2015 Ref. 15/9