

Ruislip Woods' 20th anniversary as a National Nature Reserve

by David Duncan

The annual Ruislip Woods Festival held on the 14 May 2017 in the grounds of The White Cottage, adjacent to Mad Bess Wood, was also a celebration of 20 years of the Woods being a National Nature Reserve (NNR).

On the 21 May 1997 the Earl of Cranbrook, chairman of English Nature, declared Ruislip Woods as London's first NNR. Pictured below is the handover of the declaration from the Earl, left, to Cllr John Major.



A television film clip of the occasion can be found at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kz8uSszT_BA#

This declaration was the culmination of a carefully considered approach both to the London Borough of Hillingdon, which owned Ruislip Woods, and English Nature, which supervised Ruislip Woods from a regulatory point of view as Ruislip Woods was already a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

In summary the features that supported such an approach were as follows:

1. Ruislip Woods are a remnant of the ancient deciduous woodland that covered most of Middlesex in prehistoric times. Such ancient woodland is now exceptionally rare in Europe (Rackham, 1976) and Ruislip Woods are arguably the best example of their type remaining in the country. From at least medieval times, and probably much earlier, the woods were a major economic asset being a source of timber, firewood, charcoal, bean sticks, food for pigs and

employment and a major part of the economy of Ruislip.

2. Ruislip Woods have been managed from at least the thirteenth century for two purposes; to provide sport (originally hunting deer and wild boar and later shooting pheasants and woodcock), and a substantial income from timber and wood for the owners and fuel and grazing for the tenants.

3. Sale of wood and pannage (i.e. 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 according to the 1289 Minister's Accounts (S.C. 6/917/26). The people of Ruislip found employment, fuel, building materials and fodder for their animals in the Common Wood and in addition clay for making tiles around the north of the Common Wood and south of Westwood (Mad Bess Wood). Tile making was carried on in the Tile Kiln Lane area and in Northwood from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. Bricks were made in Eastcote.

4. Timber from Ruislip Woods was used at the Tower of London in 1339, Westminster Palace and Windsor Castle in 1344, and the Black Prince's Manor House at Kennington in 1346 (Cockburn & Baker, 1971: 139).

5. By late Saxon times a settlement was established in and around the Manor Farm area of Ruislip, owned by Wlward Wit, Thane in Edward the Confessor's household. Fields to the south of Eastcote Road can be presumed to have been brought under the plough and Park Wood to have been enclosed from the rest of the wooded waste, for the preservation of game.

6. The Domesday Book of 1086 recorded Ernulf de Hesdin as the owner of the Manor of Ruislip, including all woodland, enclosed and waste alike. The Domesday Book also refers to a Park for wild beasts of the forest (Parcum est ibi ferarum silvaticarum), one of only two parks recorded in Domesday Middlesex, the other being at Enfield. Evidence of the boundaries of the Park may be seen in the massive earth banks which can be seen in Park Wood.

7. Ernulf de Hesdin who was described as being charitable to the poor, prompt in his payment of tithes and skilled at farming gave the manor of Ruislip to the Abbey of Bec in 1086 except for one hide that he gave to the Abbey of the Holy Trinity at Rouen, the dividing bank between the gifts can be seen by the entrance to Mad Bess Wood. He then joined a crusade to the Holy Land and died before the gates of Antioch

8. From the late eleventh century to the present day Park Wood and Copse Wood have been owned by:

Ernulf de Hesdin 1066-1087	21 yrs
Abbey of Bec c1087-1404	316 yrs
John, Duke of Bedford 1404-1436	32 yrs
King Henry VI 1436	1 yr
John Somerset 1437-1450	13 yrs
King's College, Cambridge 1451-1932	481 yrs
Local Authority - RNUDC/LBH 1932-1997	65 yrs

9. Park Hearne was a hamlet submerged by the formation of Ruislip Reservoir in 1811 by the Grand Junction Canal Company and the reservoir is now Ruislip Lido.

10. The opening of a railway station at Northwood in 1887 and the sale of the Eastbury Estate for building development to Frank Murray Maxwell Hallowell Carew, encouraged King's College, Cambridge, to consider very seriously letting the northern portion of Copse Wood on building leases in 1899. A railway station at Ruislip in 1904 provided a great incentive for developing the whole Demesne and low density housing throughout Park and Copse Woods. A major shopping centre at the highest point of Park Wood was envisaged in a Town Plan drawn up by Messrs A. & J. Soutar in 1911. The Ruislip and Northwood Urban District Council Town Plan of 1914 moved the shopping area south to Windmill Hill, but still intended the woods to be built over.

11. The Ruislip Residents' Association (founded in 1919 as the Ruislip Association) began to express disquiet about the proposed demolition of ancient buildings and increasing building in the woods from 1923 onwards. They initiated negotiations with King's College in 1930 which led to the purchase of Park Wood by the Ruislip Northwood Urban District Council (RNUDC) in conjunction with Middlesex County Council in July 1932. The purchase price was £28,000. Manor Farm and the Old Post Office were included as a gift from the College. Middlesex County Council

contributed 75% of the price on the grounds that many railway trippers used the woods. It was agreed that the Urban District Council was to maintain Park Wood as an open space under a lease of one guinea a year. No buildings were to be put up and no trees cut down without permission from the Middlesex County Council.

12. The southern portion of Copse Wood (62 hectares (155 acres)) was bought for £23,250 in 1936 in conjunction with the Middlesex County Council, the contract being signed on 11 May. At this point much of the northern portion was already developed. The Ruislip Northwood Urban District Council, in conjunction with Middlesex County Council and London County Council, purchased the 74 hectares (186 acres) of Mad Bess Wood for £28,000 by Compulsory Purchase Order. The sale included two farms lying north of the Wood.

13. The woods which passed into public ownership in 1932-36 were therefore the result of an intensive management regime extending back at least five centuries. Very little management work took place in the following almost fifty years with the result that much of the coppice had grown too large and was starting to die. The neglected parts of the wood had become very gloomy, with no ground vegetation, and dead branches and dead rotting hornbeam stools were commonplace.

14. Recognising that action was long overdue, in 1978 the Leisure Committee of the London Borough of Hillingdon approved a special three-year programme of increased expenditure on the woods in order to start their restoration. Due to public disquiet with the method proposed and after a public meeting, the Ruislip-Northwood Woods Advisory Working Party was established. The Working Party considered in detail alternative methods of management and also the requirements of the various users of the woodlands. Their conclusions were embodied in the Long-Term Management Plan described by George Peterken as one of the most thoroughly researched and considered plans of its type.

15. The Plan was formally adopted by the London Borough of Hillingdon in 1982 to provide the basis for the management of the woods for the following one hundred years. The working party which was comprised of local nature conservation experts and members of the local residents' associations were reformed into the Ruislip Woods

Management Advisory Group (RWMAG) with the aim of advising the London Borough of Hillingdon on the implementation of the Plan, a function that they have carried out ever since. The current condition of the woods is due to the combined efforts of the advisory group, London Borough of Hillingdon and English Nature.

16. In late 1996 the proposal to designate Ruislip Woods as an NNR was welcomed by the members of RWMAG whilst recognising the added visitor pressure and level of interest that this proposal would bring. With this in mind the five residents' associations that border the woods resolved to form The Ruislip Woods Trust to undertake the educational, interpretative and monitoring aspects of the NNR whilst continuing to advise LBH on the management of the woods and liaise closely with English Nature. This initiative was warmly received by all the elected members of the Leisure Committee of the London Borough of Hillingdon and the chief officers concerned.

The first task undertaken by the Trust was to write an interim NNR Plan which was based very much on the original 1982 Plan. This Plan was delivered to English Nature on schedule and has been approved by both English Nature and LBH for the Ruislip Woods NNR.

17. Local residents, lovers of the woods and wildlife experts have on three occasions by coming forward with constructive proposals been instrumental in; first, saving the woods from development, secondly, instituting a considered management regime and, thirdly, enabling others to share in their enjoyment of the woods. These woods stand in part as their testament.

Perversely, in the case of Ruislip Woods the most important aspect justifying National Nature Reserve status is the heathland known as Poor's Field (Ruislip Common) and not the woods themselves. Equally perplexing to the general public is that Ruislip Lido is neither part of the SSSI nor part of the NNR. The SSSI is defined as Copse Wood, Mad Bess Wood, Park Wood, Bayhurst Wood, Poor's Field (Ruislip Common), Grub Ground, the Ruislip Local Nature Reserve, the Northern Finger and Tarleton's Lake.

To put into perspective the significance of Ruislip Wood's NNR designation is to consider its peers. The second and only other National Nature Reserve in Greater London is Richmond Park!

Ruislip Woods' history and importance to nature conservation

Ruislip Woods are of a type called 'ancient semi natural woodland' and some parts are a remnant of the Wildwood that once completely covered England after the last ice age, about 8,000 years ago. When the land was first cleared for agriculture some woodland was left to provide timber and firewood. However, as time went by these bits of woodland started to be cleared and to maintain a timber supply many new woods were planted. England is one of the least wooded countries in the European Community (England 7.5%, France 27% European Average 36%) and of these woods less than one sixth are 'ancient semi natural woodland' (ASNW). Since the Ruislip Association and public outcry saved Ruislip Woods from development in the 1930s almost half of the ASNW in England has been cleared. This figure would have been higher had Hillingdon Council succeeded with its scheme in 1979 to fell the majority of the woods, poison the stumps and replant with exotic trees.

Ruislip Woods have a great importance for nature conservation partly because of the unbroken historical link with the Wildwood, but also because of their size. They are the largest single area of woodland and comprise 10% of the ASNW in Greater London. Park Wood is one of the largest ancient woods in England in a completely semi natural state. On a half day visit to Ruislip Woods experts attending the European Mycology Congress at Kew identified 585 species of fungus including four that had never been recorded previously in Britain. Ruislip Woods are the richest site in Greater London for lichens on trees. A recent Bat survey carried out by volunteers over two years has shown that the Woods could well be the richest site in the region for these mammals.

Developments in the past twenty years

From its declaration as a NNR cattle have returned to graze on Poor's Field, after an absence of several decades. A series of local farmers have provided a dozen or so cattle each year in spring time to spend six months or so helping to keep down the scrub vegetation that will inevitably take over the heathland unless suppressed by man or beast.

To enable the cattle to graze on this piece of common land some legal and technical problems had to be overcome. On the one hand, for the safety of the cattle their movements had to be limited by some form of fencing or they would soon stray on to Reservoir Road or Ducks Hill Road but on the other hand Poor's Field is common land and cannot be fenced! The solution was to install fencing around Copse Wood (the local nature reserve and the miniature railway were already fenced).

Prior to the Declaration as a NNR annual open days had been held in the Woods. As part of the celebration of the NNR Declaration the Open Day was moved to the Willow Lawn at Ruislip Lido. Special guided walks were arranged during the last week of May including a Bat Walk. The Bat Walks have continued ever since and are traditionally held the evening before the Open Day. The Open Day was re-named the Ruislip Woods Festival in 2009 and in 2017, because of the size of the crowds attracted to the Ruislip Woods Festival the venue was moved to the fields on Breakspear Road North diagonally opposite the car park at Bayhurst Wood.

In the 1970s and 1980s Bayhurst Wood hosted visits from school parties, not just from Hillingdon schools but also from schools as far afield as east London. The school children were shown many of the woodland crafts by George Mist, Head Countryside Warden of Bayhurst Country Park as it then was. One of the achievements of the Ruislip Woods Trust has been to restore those teaching opportunities. In 2007 it introduced the 'Classroom in the Woods' programme for all children, via schools and other groups such as Beavers, Cubs and Scouts. These are led by the LBH woodlands management team using materials supplied by the Ruislip Woods Trust.

During the past twenty years the conditions for walkers in the Woods have improved significantly. A tremendous amount of work has been done by the 'Vollies', an un-paid group of enthusiasts who meet at least once a week with the woodland ranger to carry out repairs and improvements. A series of bridges and walkways have been constructed in those parts of the Woods that are prone to flooding in winter time. Gates have been installed; fencing replaced; coppicing completed; dangerous trees felled; horse barriers installed and much else.

What is a National Nature Reserve?

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 in England enabled the Nature Conservancy Council for England (NCC), later re-named English Nature and now known as Natural England, to establish nature reserves. This was the primary means of protecting high value nature conservation land from inappropriate development by '*preserving flora, fauna or geological or physiographical features of special interest in the area and/or for providing opportunities for the study of, and research into, those features*'. The first NNR was created in 1951.

Later these provisions were strengthened by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the primary regulatory role was transferred to the existing concept of Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Ruislip Woods was first scheduled as a SSSI in August 1950 under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The NNR remains a management-facilitating designation and a high level national accolade.

The Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006, applying to England only, extended the role of NNRs to include the provision of opportunities for public enjoyment of nature and/or open-air recreation.

What is a Site of Special Scientific Interest?

SSSIs are the basic building blocks of site-based nature conservation legislation, and most other conservation designations in the United Kingdom are based on them. For example, 218 out of 224 NNRs are SSSIs but less than 10% of the several thousand SSSIs are NNRs.

A key feature of SSSIs and therefore by extension of NNRs are the schedules of potentially damaging operations. These stipulate what cannot be done within a SSSI; for example, raw materials, animals, plants or seeds cannot be brought in nor can natural materials, plants, animals, flowers or seeds be removed; management practices cannot be changed; the structure of water courses cannot be changed. These apparent restrictions have been put to good effect over the past twenty years by the Ruislip Woods Volunteers who have installed many bridges, ramps and walk ways using materials sourced within Ruislip Woods.

Similar provisions are in force throughout other parts of the UK via the operations of Scottish Natural Heritage, Countryside Council for Wales and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Management plans

In modern times the first management plan adopted by the London Borough of Hillingdon was the Ruislip Woods Long Term Management Plan in 1982. This provided the basis for the future of the woodlands, heathland and common for at least one hundred years from 1982 by returning to the traditional way of management, using a twenty year coppice cycle, a ten year light thinning-inspectional cycle for non-coppice areas and a return to open aspect grasslands.

The management plan for the NNR was set out in the Ruislip Woods National Nature Reserve Long Term Management Plan prepared in January 1997 for the purpose of proposing that Ruislip Woods SSSI be declared a NNR.

The most recent management plan to be published is the Ruislip Woods National Nature Reserve Management Plan 2010-2015.

Ruislip Woods Trust

Ruislip Woods Trust was established in 1997 as a charity. It was set up by the five local Residents Associations which surround the Woods; these are Eastcote, Harefield, Northwood, Northwood Hills and Ruislip.

The objectives of the Ruislip Woods Trust are:-

1. The advancement of the education of the public in the history, ecology, management and economy of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or such successor designation, which embraces Bayhurst Wood, Copse Wood, Mad Bess Wood, Park Wood, Poor's Field, the Ruislip Local Nature Reserve, The Northern Finger, Grub Ground, Tarleton's Lake and surrounding land in the London Borough of Hillingdon known locally as 'Ruislip Woods'; and to promote the conservation protection and enhancement of the said area for the benefit of the public.
2. To encourage such studies of Ruislip Woods as are in keeping with their SSSI status, with a view to publication.
3. To monitor the effects of the woodland management, public pressure and other relevant factors, on the biological health of Ruislip Woods.
4. To raise money by subscriptions, donations, grants, or otherwise, to invite and accept gifts of all sorts.
5. To advise the London Borough of Hillingdon on the management of Ruislip Woods in line with the Trust's Long Term Management Plan.
6. To advise the London Borough of Hillingdon on the use of Ruislip Woods as a public amenity, commensurate with their importance for wildlife.

Acknowledgements

Ruislip Woods Long Term Management Plan (1982)

The Goodliest Place in Middlesex by Eileen Bowlt

Ruislip Woods National Nature Reserve Long Term Management Plan (1997)

Ruislip Woods National Nature Reserve Management Plan 2010-2015