

1000yrs of Forestry and working landscape

The history of woodland in Kempley begins with the taming of the Ancient Woodland which developed on the retreat of the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago

According to the Domesday Book, in the late 11th century the Dymock estate included a wood measuring three leagues by one league - about 4 square miles.. There is also evidence that the south-western part of Dymock parish once belonged to a great wood called Teds or Tetills wood that extended across the county boundary.

In the mid 12th century the lord of Dymock gave half of his woodlands to the Cistercian monks of Flaxley Abbey. These included 3 on the parish borders of Kempley – Haind (**pronounce Hend**) Park, Allum's, and Cockshoot. The monks cleared parts, and a further eight men, including two smiths, a forester and a charcoal burner, had cleared forest areas known as 'assarts' here.

The woodland retained by the Manor was wasted during the wars immediately following the accession of Henry III in 1216, but this quickly regenerated. By 1335 the woodland is described as common pasture.

Dymock Wood, which was enclosed in the early 16th century, was already long managed as coppice, and supported significant charcoal burning activity.

In Hay Wood in the late 1630s a 'woodward' was employed to preserve the woods from depredation by local cottagers and their animals. He cut turned large quantities of coppice into charcoal, providing fuel to the ironmaster John Foley at Oxenhall. The woods were managed on a perpetual, sustainable rotation cycle of 14 years' growth.

Some of the smaller groves attached to tenant farms were also used and leases granted by the Manor usually reserved all timber on the farms except that allowed to tenants to be used for the upkeep of buildings and hedgerows.

The large quantities of oak bark produced by such cording operations were sold in the 1630s to Gloucester city leather tanners and by the early 18th century the area was supplying bark for tanneries in Newent and elsewhere, as well as wood for making hoops (for barrels), laths for building and broomsticks.

Throughout history the nation's oak forest has supplied wood to build English warships and in 1802 Lord Nelson, anticipating the future requirement to the dockyards of the Royal Navy, ordered that thousands of acorns be planted in the Forest of Dean, including the Dymock Forest. It took the timber from six thousand trees to build just one first-rate ship of the line like his flagship HMS Victory. What Nelson didn't anticipate was that by the 20th century ships would be built of steel, not wood. Nevertheless Dean oak was used to help repair HMS Victory in time for the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar in 2005.

In 1901, the parish's woodlands gave employment to 3 woodmen and woodcutters, a gamekeeper who lived next to Haind Wood, and a timber merchant with employees at Broom's Green.

The Dymock Forest woods were acquired by the Crown in 1914, and from 1924 administered by the newly formed Forestry Commission. After the First World War forestry planting provided employment and strategic replenishment of fuel and timber resources. Charcoal burning ended in the 1920s but the supply of oak bark to the tanning industry continued until the mid-20th century.

1948 saw the introduction of a national policy of widespread conifer planting, the objective being to create a reserve of timber in event of a major national emergency, for example a war like the one the country was still recovering from.

Although much of the Forest of Dean was under planted with larch and first, many areas locally were still maintained in a traditional ancient woodland manner – evidenced by the tall oaks, the hazel dappled shade promoting the carpets of nationally rare wild daffodils that still attract springtime visitors today..

Jon Anderson is a retired Dymock beat forester and lives in what was the original Crown lodge in Queen's Wood. He came to Gloucestershire in 1962 and at that time the Forestry Commission's work locally involved four foresters, around a dozen labourers, one lorry and a horse. These dozen local men were not schooled or trained in forestry – looking after the woodland encircling their homes was in their blood, passed down over generations from father to son. Forestry practice was expressed in the local vernacular, with techniques and tools specific to the Dymock Forest. Areas had evocative local names, like Piccadilly and Misery Patch, not registered on any map.

A working day back then would involve loading the lorry in the morning with wood for pit props to shore up the coal mines of South Wales; when the lorry returned in the afternoon it would be loaded up with larch poles for lap fencing. All the loading was done by hand without the aid of mechanical hoists.

Forestry work had long been hard graft for little reward, as Jon Anderson recalls.

***Audio:** the wages were extremely low. And this piecework system was worked to try to get more out of the blokes and for them to get a bit better wages and they were expected to earn 25-30 % more than their weekly wage on piecework. At one time there was no wet time paid, and then there was an agreement, a minimum of 2 hours rain and you got paid, but an hour and a half rain you didn't get paid and so workers tended to work all through the wet weather.*

When Jon was training in the mid 1950s, he learned to use a hand-axe, but the early 1960s saw a change that challenged the piecework system of performance-related pay.

By the time I got to Dymock, workers, although they were employed by the Forestry Commission, were starting to buy their own chain-saws and that caused major problems with piecework – they had the initiative to buy their own chain saws and their productivity rocketed up

Then slowly forest management began to take a different direction, with a gradual shift from working the woodland to leisure and conservation.

From the 1970s there was this pressure from the public on landscape, destruction of ancient forest, people were getting cars and getting into the countryside and they wanted recreation. They didn't know where to go so things were starting to change

Jon's role went on to create cycle trails, the sculpture trail, and camping facilities – all within the Public Forest Estate. Preservation of species and habitat became a role for the Forest Conservation ranger.

Broad-leaved woodland can take up to a century to grow to full maturity, so after 1000 years under management, what does Jon think the future holds for the Dymock Forest?

People love wood and it's used more and more in building. All right things do change, and they've always changed in the past, but I think it's assured we're going to need wood right into the future. The type of wood may well change, with all this fuel business, you could start changing dramatically, we might go back to coppice with big harvesters, chipping coppice every 15 years as we did before. And also people's expectations are different now, I feel. Tourism, for example. Your forests have got to look good for people to be attracted there. And so landscape is very important. It might be in Dymock Forest it wouldn't surprise me if in 50 years time there's no conifers at all. It'll be judged that this little Forest is so important, its past history, it's good broad leaves that it can grow, why are we bothering with bits of conifer here and there? There would be more benefit going back to a completely broad-leaved forest. That could well happen, that these old forests go back to what they were.

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