

The Historic Landscape Significance of Hatfield Forest

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Introduction: the features of a forest

Hatfield Forest contains a number of individual features of considerable archaeological and historical importance, some effectively unique. But it is the *combination* of these, and the extent of their survival, which makes its landscape so exceptional. Hatfield is probably the only place in England that we can really experience the appearance and atmosphere of the forests which once existed widely across medieval and post-medieval England. Indeed, even in Europe there are few, if any, comparable examples, although here the traditions of forest management were, in most places, rather different (Vera 2000, 132-8).

Most English forests, at least in lowland districts, comprised a number of recurrent features. They usually contained one or more lodges, used in part as accommodation for forest officials but also, in many cases, as bases for the royal hunt. They also usually contained a number of ovoid coppices which were separated by banks – topped with live or dead hedges – from the grazed ‘lawns’ or ‘plains’, which themselves contained varying numbers of pollarded trees (Rackham 1986, 129-139). These more open areas had the status of common land, and their outer margins were often, like other commons, circled by a girdle of farms and cottages, although this was more likely to be the case where forests existed in areas of the country characterised by dispersed rather than by nucleated settlement.

Forests often acquired other characteristic features in the course of the post-medieval centuries. Many, in particular, came to contain rabbit warrens, with their associated structures and facilities: most notably lodges (buildings used as accommodation for the warrener, and for processing carcasses and storing skins); and pillow mounds or ‘buries’, specially-constructed mounds used to accommodate all or some of the rabbits in contexts where soils were thin and/or seasonally waterlogged (Williamson 2007). Warrens were a particular feature of Ashdown and St Leonards Forests in Sussex and of Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire; but they could also be found elsewhere, in parts of the New Forest for example, or in Savernake Forest in Wiltshire. In Essex, a significant warren existed at High Beech, within Epping Forest, and a fine collection of pillow mounds still remains there.

Forests: survival and destruction

In the course of the post-medieval period the Crown gradually came to use the royal forests less and less for hunting, and as many as 47 were alienated altogether during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, mainly passing into the hands of wealthy courtiers, including Cranbourne Chase, Neroche in Somerset, Bernwood in Buckinghamshire - and Hatfield itself (Langton 2005, 4). Others were partially alienated. In Northamptonshire, for example, the royal parks in the three forests of Salcey,

Whittlewood and Rockingham were disparked and the woodlands in Rockingham progressively sold or granted away; Geddington Chase in Rockingham was sold in its entirety in 1676 (Pettit 1968). However, the new owners of forests usually maintained them in their traditional state, and often continued to use them for hunting, something reflected in the fact that laws continued to be passed - including the famous Black Act of 1722 - to protect deer in 'forest, chase, purlieu, paddock, park or other ground where deer are or have been normally kept' (13 Carl C10). In most cases, as at Hatfield, major change was difficult to carry through because, even though technically disafforested, common rights continued to be exercised over the wood-pasture 'plains' (and often, albeit to a more limited extent, over the enclosed coppices, where 'sere' wood might be collected and, in some cases, grazing was permitted late in the coppice rotation).

Forests were increasingly seen as an archaic form of land use, and as a source of social problems, by the governing classes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their ancient and complex organisational structures, the various measures to protect the deer, and the complex rights exercised by the communities living in and around them, all militated against sustainable management. In particular, local people did all they could to subvert attempts to preserve wood and timber. In many forests in the Middle Ages the commoners could only turn cattle (in the modern sense) into the forests, but by the sixteenth century sheep, more damaging to trees and underwood, were commonly being pastured on a large scale. The coppices were inadequately fenced and often grazed out of season, and overstocking was endemic: when Rockingham in Northamptonshire was enclosed, many commoners claimed the right to graze unlimited numbers of animals 'all year round' (Northamptonshire Record Office Brooke of Oakley 318/1). The forest officials were often as guilty of despoiling the woods as the commoners, claiming the right to lop trees (ostensibly for browse) and in some case the right to graze in the coppices. In 1720 the steward of the Boughton estate, much of which lay in Rockingham Forest, informed Lord Montagu that 'horses were put into copses of seven years old. I have seen them and can find any manner of damage done ... they say it is a privilege that the keepers of this and other chases have' (Toseland 2013, 42). Deer were poached on a large scale, and were continually disturbed by people entering the woods while nutting. In Whittlewood in the eighteenth century fights between forest officers and 'offending nutters' were said to be as fierce as any with poachers (Linnell 1932, 21, 103). In May 1659 in the Forest of Dean 'divers people in a tumultuous way and ... did break down the fences and carry away the gates of certain coppices enclosed for the promotion of timber, turned in their cattle and set divers places of the Forest on fire, too the great destruction of the young growing wood' (Hart 1966, 149).

Where forests remained under royal control, it was generally thought that they should be enclosed in whole or part and employed for growing timber, to supply the needs of the Royal Navy; or turned over to agriculture. The scale of such essentially practical and financial interests is again reflected in the volume of legislation. Between 1660 and 1850 around 450 laws primarily relating to the forests were passed, including the 1698 act 'for the increase and Preservation of Timber in the New Forest', which allowed the Crown to enclose substantial tracts for timber planting (Paley 2005, 30). The scale of government interest is also reflected in the number of surveys and enquiries which were conducted into the state of the forests, most notably those made between 1787 and 1793, following the passing of the Crown Lands Revenue Act of 1786. Where forests had, like Hatfield, passed into private hands such pressures were less, but nevertheless, by the eighteenth century, most

landowners believed that they were ripe for 'improvement'. Eradication of common rights through formal enclosure would allow them to be used in 'modern' ways, for farming or forestry.

So far as the evidence goes, many forests still retained their key features – especially the wood-pasture plains interspersed with embanked coppices – at the end of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, grazing and other pressures left many forest plains bereft of timber, and with dwindling numbers of pollards; and coppices were often badly managed and less productive than they should have been. At Cranbourne Chase in 1791 'The damage done to the woods ... is very considerable, so much so that the underwood is in very few instances fit to cut under eighteen years, which would otherwise be as fit at 12 and in some instances at 9' (Cheeseman 2005, 69). The right to collect 'sere and broken' wood, theoretically fallen material, was often interpreted to include green and growing wood, either from trees or coppices. In the forest of Dean commoners assisted nature in providing 'sere' wood by deliberately barking healthy timber trees (Hart 1966, 192). Attempts were made to preserve timber on the plains by leaving 'seed' trees, large oaks or ashes which could drop acorns or keys onto the surrounding ground: but such initiatives were often thwarted by the intensity of grazing. Wood-pasture plains thus grew steadily more open in character over time. Already, by 1580, the plains of Weldon, Benefield and Deenethorpe in Rockingham Forest were almost devoid of trees, but the density of charcoal hearths recovered by archaeological survey shows that it had been wooded in the Middle Ages (Williamson *et al.* 2013).

Yet degeneration of wood-pasture, to open pasture, was more gradual than we might expect. In 1565 a survey of the three Northamptonshire forests recorded 93,942 oak standards (valued at £46,355) in the plains and lawns, and in the enclosed woodland still in the hands of the Crown, and a further 14,198 (£4,609) in the remaining royal parks: a by no means negligible figure, given that the land in question probably amounted to some 200 square kilometres – a density of around 5 trees per hectare – and that it appears to exclude pollards (The National Archives/PRO LRRO 5139). As late as 1790 it was said that there were 'great Quantities' of 'Pollards and decayed trees' in Rockingham; 'thousands' of trees in Whittlewood were regularly lopped by the keepers (House of Commons Journal 1792). Even in 1807 Rudge was able to describe how 'notwithstanding the constant depredations committed, there still remains a large quantity of usable timber' in the Forest of Dean: in 1788 the forest contained 46,000 substantial oaks, 'besides unsound trees, which are numerous, and a considerable quantity of fine large beech, and young growing trees'. He believed that the amount of timber had been reduced by more than two thirds in the course of the eighteenth century, but 1,000 loads were still felled each year for the naval dockyards (Rudge 1807, 249, 252). Arthur Young similarly noted 'a considerable number' of thriving trees on the plains of Wychwood Forest in Oxfordshire, alongside those producing 'brush-fuel and browse for the deer'. His concern, like that of many contemporaries, was that more timber would be produced in enclosures, where trees could be preserved from lopping and the effects of grazing: 'when these trees are compared with the space of land in which they are found, they cease to be objects of any consideration' (Young 1809, 327-8).

It was enclosure and legal disafforestation, mainly in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century, rather than gradual degeneration, that destroyed the great wood pastures, and in many cases the associated coppices, of the forests. The resultant environmental change could be on an awesome scale. In Northamptonshire, Brigstock Bailiwick in Rockingham Forest was enclosed in 1805 (under an act passed in 1795) and Cliffe Bailiwick in 1806 (under an act of 1796); Salcey Forest was enclosed in 1826; the rest of Rockingham in 1837; and Whittlewood in two stages, with awards

in 1826 and 1856 (Pettit 1968; Williamson *et al.* 2013, 144-48). In all cases, the wood-pasture plains were destroyed immediately after enclosure, but in addition around 5,680 hectares of coppice had been converted to farmland (or occasionally to parkland) by the time the Ordnance Survey 25-inch maps were surveyed in the 1880s. In Whittlewood and Salcey, as in many other royal forests affected by enclosure, the Crown retained ownership of many of the coppiced woods. But these passed with the other Crown woodlands into the hands of the Forestry Commission in 1924 and, like other such areas, were then often converted to high forest (without coppiced understorey) and restocked with commercial conifers.

Other surviving forests

Degeneration as a consequence of poor management, followed by enclosure and conversion to new uses, has ensured that there are very few places where it is now possible to get a clear impression of what a medieval forest actually looked like. Of the lowland forests still partially intact and accessible to the public, as common land or in some other way, none boast the range of features surviving at Hatfield. The best-known examples are probably Sherwood, the New Forest, the Forest of Dean and Epping.

Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire was progressively enclosed during the post-medieval period, a process completed in 1855, and now survives in a fragmentary state. Extensive tracts of open heathland, some still scattered with pollards, still existed into the 1930s, especially in Rufford and Clipstone, but they were then planted up with conifers by the Forestry Commission; and while a number of veteran oaks still survive here, they do so within a wooded environment, and no lodges or similar buildings remain. Essentially, the forest now comprises tracts of woodland, much of it coniferous, interspersed with farmland and settlements.

The Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire contained much open ground between embanked coppice well into the nineteenth century but it is now almost continuously wooded and extensively coniferised; like Sherwood, it is administered by the Forestry Commission. It also almost everywhere bears the marks of early industrialisation, in the form of abandoned coal workings, tramways and the like.

Epping Forest in Essex, some 15 kilometres to the south-south-west of Hatfield, was saved from destruction in the nineteenth century, following a campaign mounted by the newly-formed Commons Preservation Society. It has, however, now lost any distinction between coppice and wood-pasture commons, and its ancient beech and hornbeam pollards are mainly buried in secondary woodland. The principal lodge (New Lodge) was demolished in the late nineteenth century but the Great Standing erected in a royal park cut out of the forest in the sixteenth century, 'Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge', remains.

The New Forest, the largest of these forest landscapes, has survived rather better. Having escaped enclosure and improvement in the nineteenth century, common rights remain intact and in many places farms and cottages still cluster on the edges of commons, albeit now mostly in the hands of wealthy commuters. Large tracts of both the open plains, and the enclosed coppices, were however planted up with conifers by the Forestry Commission in the course of the twentieth century and although this development has been reversed to some extent over recent decades much of the coppice structure has been lost. Moreover,

the surviving plains now comprise open heathland, invaded to varying extents by birch and other trees but without many pollards. It is an attractive area and important for both wildlife and recreation, but it has lost many of the characteristic elements of a forest landscape.

The recent landscapes history of these large and well-known examples of former forests has thus been characterised by some combination of the following developments:

- Partial destruction or fragmentation in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- Coniferisation of the coppices (and often the plains) by the Forestry Commission in the twentieth century.
- A loss of the distinction (through planting or natural regeneration) between coppice and plains.
- Where the plains have remained open, degeneration to open pasture.
- Loss of lodges and other buildings.

These features are shared by smaller and less well-known areas of forest. Grovely in Wiltshire for example was enclosed in the nineteenth century and the rump survives only as a large wood, important for recreation and conservation but displaying few of the features associated with medieval forests, although Grovely Lodge farm may contain parts of a medieval forest lodge. Wychwood in Oxfordshire, enclosed in 1857 (the same year as Hatfield), likewise survives only as a large (870-hectare) wood; Woolmer and Alice Holt Forests (Sussex and Hampshire) were both extensively coniferised by the Forestry Commission in the twentieth century, although this is now being reversed to some extent; the latter has few open areas, the former has mainly treeless heath between the woodland blocks. Savernake in Wiltshire was extensively 'landscaped' in the eighteenth century (it lies immediately to the north west of Tottenham House) and is now a mosaic of farmland and woodland managed by the Forestry Commission: numerous old pollards survive but, once again, within woodland, rather than in more open ground. The principal lodge was destroyed by fire in 1861 and only the sites of others exist, marked by farms bearing 'lodge' names. Some of these smaller and less well-known forests have left important physical traces. One example is Blackmore in Dorset, described in some detail by Oliver Rackham (Rackham 2006, 488-510). Even here, however, the forest plains have disappeared – enclosed or planted up with woodland – and the coppices extensively re-planted.

It is difficult to assess the importance of Hatfield within a wider European context, in part because most European forests lacked the clear distinction between plains and ovoid/subrectangular embanked coppices (Vera 2000, 132-8); where they did display similar features the distinction, as in England, has generally been lost. Moreover, very few places in Europe can boast the kind of concentration of veteran trees found in Hatfield Forest. One obvious comparison might be the hunting landscape of Par Force in Denmark, but this essentially comprises a largely wooded tract, with some more open areas, with a baroque landscaping veneer in the form of avenues focus on royal castles – very different from the landscape that we see at Hatfield.

The significance of Hatfield

In contrast to the fragmented or damaged forest landscapes found elsewhere in England, Hatfield has survived remarkably intact. Its bounds were truncated to the south and east by the parliamentary enclosure of 1857, and by the railway to the north in the 1860s and as a consequence it no longer has as many farms and cottages scattered around its margins, although it is still directly connected to Woodside Green, a little to the southwest, where houses front on the common. Otherwise, most of the main features we associate with a lowland forest remain. These include:

- (i) **Plains and coppices.** The distinction between relatively open wood-pasture plains, and embanked coppices, which was so characteristic of lowland forests is better preserved at Hatfield than anywhere else in England. It is true that the western plains (Warren Plain, Table Plain, Gravel Pit Plain, Wood Row and Thremhall Green) – although they remained relatively well treed well into the twentieth century – are now rather sparsely-timbered. But the eastern plains (Bush End Plain especially) still give an excellent impression of an ancient wood-pasture. The banks around the coppices generally survive in good condition, in places topped with what appear to be remnant hornbeam hedges, and the coppiced stools themselves survive and in many places are being actively coppiced.
- (ii) **The Forest Lodge.** This comprises only the service end of a medieval building, the rest having been rebuilt in stages in the seventeenth century. It has been suggested that when originally constructed the building served in part as a ‘standing’, or observation tower for the hunt, and that the lost eastern section of the original house was a tall tower-like structure. While it is possible that the lodge had such a function, part of the evidence advanced for this hypothesis – that the building is carefully positioned so as to enjoy the most extensive views possible across the adjacent plains – needs to be treated with caution, as this was a feature shared by most medieval lodges, in parks as in warrens. Keepers or warreners needed to be able to keep a good eye on their stock, and on any possible threats to it.

Whatever its history, and in spite of the fact that in its present form the building largely post-dates the medieval period, **it is nevertheless a unique survival: a forest lodge in its original setting, standing on the edge of an open plain surrounded by embanked coppices.** Indeed, few other lodges of medieval or even early post-medieval origins survive in anything approaching their original form, even those relating to private parks rather than forests. The exceptions are large buildings, essentially small country houses in their own right, which were used to accommodate their noble owners and guests: examples include Newhouse at Redlynch in Wiltshire and Newark Park, Ozleworth in Gloucestershire. Small lodges for the accommodation of the park keeper, of the type seen at Hatfield, have not survived well (McCann *et al.* 2014). As a *forest lodge*, surviving in recognisable form, that at Hatfield may be unique, and would be of considerable importance even if the essential features of its setting did not remain in place.

- (iii) **The Warren.** As noted, rabbit warrens were often found in forests, mainly established there in the post-medieval period, and Hatfield is a particularly important example because not only does the lodge itself remain – a red-brick, slightly archaic building of the later seventeenth century – but also the pillow mounds, the ‘coney burroughs’ constructed by Lord Morley in the 1630s (Rackham 1989, 103-5). A number of early

warren lodges remain in existence elsewhere in England – medieval examples at Thetford and Mildenhall in the East Anglian Breckland, the semi-ornamental/symbolic sixteenth-century example built by Thomas Tresham at Rushton in Northamptonshire, the early seventeenth-century Warren House at Kimbolton (Stanford 2014) – but only two others survive which are closely associated with extensive groups of pillow mounds. One – the ruined Norton Tower at Rylstone in Yorkshire – may well have primarily served as a deer park lodge; the other, in the middle of the vast rabbit warren on Minchinghampton Common in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds (also owned and administered by the National Trust), has been converted into a public house ('Old Lodge Inn').

The combination of well-preserved pillow mounds, and well-preserved warren lodge, in close proximity found at Hatfield would in itself be an archaeological *ensemble* of some considerable significance. It should be noted, in passing, that there is no convincing evidence to support the suggestion that the pillow mounds, which are arranged in a line or chain, were created out of a pre-existing (perhaps prehistoric) earthwork. Their substantial size – they are significantly higher than most examples found in southern England – is simply a reflection of the heavy, poorly-draining nature of the boulder clay soils on this site, as is the near-continuous drainage ditch which connects them (i.e., this does not represent the remains of an earlier feature). Conjoined pillow mounds, arranged in lines or as squares or open polygons, are in fact known from many places in England – the nearest examples are those at High Beech in Epping Forest.

In short, largely because it passed into private ownership at an early date – with the western section subsequently becoming, in effect, a detached pleasure ground/deer park for the Houblon family at Great Hallingbury – Hatfield displays more of the characteristic features of a lowland forest landscape than anywhere else in England.

Stasis or change?

All this said, it is important to emphasise that Hatfield does not represent an unchanged example of a medieval landscape, somehow frozen in aspic. As the presence of the rabbit warren indicates, it continued to develop through the post-medieval period. Indeed, some of the most important features of Hatfield Forest are not quite what they seem: although they appear to be of extreme antiquity, they are of relatively recent date.

- (i) As noted above, the best-preserved forest plains, studded with old hornbeam and oak pollards, are found in the eastern section of the forest. Here, to a greater extent than in the more sparsely-timbered western sections, it is possible to savour the atmosphere of an ancient wood-pasture. Yet, as Rackham has shown, these plains only came into existence some time around 1700, when a number of coppices – Low Street Coppice, Middle Coppice and Bush End Coppice – were cleared and converted to (replanted as?) wood-pasture with pollards.
- (ii) Indeed, a number of other features of the forest's archaeology hint at a process of continued change, extending through the medieval and post-medieval periods, rather than stasis. In particular, if (as seems likely) the earthworks known as Portingbury Hills within Hangman's Coppice, represent a medieval moated site with associated

enclosures, then the surrounding coppice is unlikely to have existed at the time (especially if, as the location of the complex may indicate, this was an earlier lodge site). The areas of coppice shown on the earliest maps, in other words, and surviving today, have not necessarily remained unchanged since the forest was first established. In this context attention might also be drawn to the fact that so many of the coppice boundaries run in a series of very straight alignments, in a manner which we would usually associate with a post-medieval rather than mediaeval origin. This is true of most of the boundaries of Table Coppice; of the southern and western boundaries of Spittlemoor Coppice; and of much of the eastern boundaries of Hangman's Coppice and Lodge Coppice. What is curious is that no archaeological evidence exists to suggest that these represent the tidying up of earlier, more irregular boundaries. Characterisation of the various coppices, and if possible dating them through excavation, should be major research priorities.

- (iii) These changes, some at least of which are of probably of post-medieval date, should be seen alongside such well-documented developments as the loss of the eastern coppices (Low Street, Middle, Bush End) around 1700, and of Doodle Oak Coppice and Warren Coppice in the nineteenth century, as part of a complex and continuing history. We might note, in addition, that while some aspects of the Forest's post-medieval development might appear to take have taken it in new directions, towards an aesthetic designed landscape, the extent of this change can also be exaggerated. What we often refer to as the 'lake' at Hatfield was created in the 1740s, with the attendant Shell House erected a little later. It might more usefully be thought of as a fish pond with associated pleasure house/fishing lodge: fish ponds had for centuries been features of hunting landscapes, especially deer parks, and in size and shape this was in origin little different from many medieval or post-medieval 'great waters' or *vivaria*, in spite of its more overtly ornamental character.
- (iv) None of this, it should be emphasised, reduces in any way the significance of the forest. Rather, it emphasizes its flexibility, and its ability to adapt to limited incremental change without destruction of its key character, as long as the basic principles on which it is managed are sustained. It is also a reminder that important landscapes have histories, not single 'dates' of origin; and that the traditional management not just of coppices, but also of wood-pastures, continued strongly into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and beyond. It is worth noting again, perhaps, that the best areas of wood-pasture at Hatfield, in the eastern plains, were created only a few decades before the construction of the Shell House and the lake.

Not only is Hatfield thus a landscape which evolved over time, in complex ways that remain, in part, under-researched. It is also, in spite of its somewhat 'wild' and 'natural' appearance, a very anthropogenic landscape which is one of very few places in the UK which still displays the complexity of a particular type of medieval land management – the intricate combination of enclosed coppices and wood-pasture 'plains'. With its coppices, pollards, plains and scrubs, and its associated common-edge settlements, it is a landscape which would be instantly recognisable to our medieval ancestors.

The forest does not, it should be emphasised, represent in any kind of straightforward and unproblematic way a direct link with the primaeval wildwood. Forests were intensively managed not only to provide deer but also to produce wood and timber, the former cut from the pollards in the

plains but mainly from the coppices. The vast majority of Hatfield Forest in fact originally comprised enclosed coppice: open areas are much more extensive now than they would have been in the sixteenth century, due to the loss of the three eastern coppices (Lower Street, Middle and Bush End) in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries; and of Doodle Oak Coppice and Warren Coppice in the nineteenth. Before this the forest would, in effect, have comprised a large block of coppiced woodland, divided into subsections, with a single broad swathe of wood-pasture running north-south through its centre from Thremhall Green to Wood Row. Coppices were in essence factories for producing wood and timber, and the composition of their underwood – and of the timber and pollards in the adjacent forest plains – was probably modified by human activity. Hornbeam, for example, which forms a significant element in the coppices (especially those towards the eastern side of the forest), and which is the main pollard found in the eastern plains, was poorly represented in the prehistoric landscape, to judge from pollen evidence, but became a major tree of parks, wooded commons and coppices in south Essex, Hertfordshire and other areas around London. Anne Rowe has suggested that the vast numbers found in deer parks and on the commons in south Hertfordshire were deliberately planted there, as late as the seventeenth century, by manorial lords keen to make money from London's insatiable appetite for firewood and charcoal (Rowe 2015). The creation of the hornbeam wood-pastures in the east of Hatfield Forest, as late as c. 1700, should perhaps be viewed in this light.

Conclusion

In spite of much important documentary research and archaeological survey work – by the late Oliver Rackham (Rackham 1989) but also, more recently, by Gascoyne and Medlycott (2011) – a number of aspects of the history of Hatfield Forest remain unclear, especially the dates of the various coppice banks and the process by which, and the reasons why, large areas of new wood-pasture were established at the expense of coppice on the eastern side of the forest as late as c.1700.

What is clear is that Hatfield is the best-preserved forest landscape in England, boasting a combination of features – lodge, warren, plains and enclosed coppices – without parallel elsewhere in England, and possibly Europe. The continuing survival of the complex mosaic of traditional management regimes (sward, coppice, pollards, scrub), and of the associated genetic pool of woody material, depends on the perpetuation of versions of archaic techniques, here practised on a uniquely extensive scale. This is a unique inheritance which deserves particular protection into the future.

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