



THE HISTORY AND MYTHS OF TREES

By John Nicholson

You have no doubt heard many of the myths about trees and woodland which pervade British culture. Not only are there tales of fairies and elves, but there are often more serious myths. How often have you heard ‘plant some poplars they will solve the drainage problem’, ‘if you remove the trees the water table will rise and we will be flooded’ and even once I was told ‘I have been a member 30 years and the trees are the same as when I joined’ all said from the heart with complete conviction.

So let's dispel some myths and look for the reasoned truth of what and why we have the trees and woodlands of today.

For hundreds of years Britain has been one of the least wooded countries in Europe. Yet more than a thousand years ago man learned to manage the British woodland sustainably to supply his need for timber products. The density of woodland and the need for timber varied regionally depending on the availability of alternative materials for building and fuels. Scotland, for example, had an abundance of coal and peat to burn as well as stone to construct buildings where as the more populated fens of East Anglia and Suffolk had a great reliance on timber.

This resulted in alternative management prescriptions of different intensity which in turn gave rise to the woodlands we now see as natural. It is therefore likely that ancient Caledonian pine forest remains as a result of low density population and the availability of other materials, where as the coppice woodlands of Kent result from the high density of population and the demand for poles and firewood and so changing the perception of what now appears natural to man today.

Further, as man became more mobile he introduced species which he favoured such as Sweet Chestnut and Walnut in Roman times, Sycamore in the sixteenth century, the Georgians admired the Cedar of Lebanon, the Victorians the Atlantic Cedar and Rhododendron. Tree species like architecture had fashions, for instance, the 1930s was typified by the Wheatley Elm, the 1960s was Poplars and the 1980s the dreaded Cypress.

We are now obsessed with native woodland but what is native to our shores. The majority of people would undoubtedly reply English Oak! After all, poets and song writers alike have adopted oak as the antipathy of England's green and pleasant land. However, pollen profiles show that in 4500BC the native woodland of the south of England was in fact Lime. Unfortunately, Lime had no timber value and therefore we changed the composition of the woodland to suit our needs. Nelson, Raleigh and Drake required ships and oak was the prime timber.

So how did we manage our woodland? Well, that depended again on what we were trying to produce. Timber was required for planks, beams, and posts. Wood was required for poles and rods for light construction or for firewood or charcoal production. This still affects our language today we for example we say timber buildings and wood fires.

The importance of wood was such that many laws and taxes were attached to it. Until the 17th century you could not harvest over a certain percentage of the Aspen on your land by law. This was to ensure a renewable source for arrow production, tithes were payable on wood but not timber in the middle ages and after the first war the Forestry Commission was formed to ensure that we would not run out of timber to support trench warfare as we had in 1917.

The Forestry Commission was given the task of planting vast areas with fast growing conifer to not only safeguard our shores but to also meet the demand of the post war rebuilding programmes. Thus large areas of what was then thought worthless infertile land were planted with Spruce and Pine.

Depending on the end product and often the political will of government different management regimes have been adopted over the years, effecting what we perceive as natural woodland.

Originally there were the wildwoods of Britain the naturally regenerated forests which covered the country. So what were the wildwoods? It is

likely that they varied regionally depending on soil type and climate but the general rule is that northern Scotland was dominated by Birch below which was the Caledonian Pine forest then south running from central Scotland to the Humber Oak and Hazel with Lime dominating the south of England. Elm was common through out Britain but only dominated in south west Wales.

Then the need for man to survive influenced the methods used to manage the woodland and therefore changed its composition and character sometimes intentionally to create a crop and sometimes unintentionally by allowing more light into the woodland or by enriching the woodland floor through grazing. Next it was the turn of commerce and politics to have an influence. All these factors contribute to what we regard as natural today.



It is known that as early as 4000BC man was clearing the wildwoods by burning to establish clearings for grazing and to establish camps. This created the heathland we know today and the management regime of burning continued up until the Second World War and is still considered by many as an acceptable method of management today.

So the truth is that what most of us regard as natural woodland is in fact highly managed. If one considers that the majority of native species to Britain are not shade tolerant, then one assumes that the wildwoods would have been high closed canopy woodland with little under-storey or areas of dense scrub. Both of which would be quite foreboding places and certainly not attractive to live in.

So man began to create more acceptable habitats by clearing and managing the woods in fact the first book on woodland management was produced by John Evelyn, *Sylva* in 1664 and even at this point Evelyn was concerned with the loss of woodland.

By the time of the Romans, the wildwood was virtually gone and by 1200 AD much of the modern landscape was already recognisable. Nearly all our villages and settlements were present and the proportion of farmland to woodland was virtually the same as that of today.

Management prescription were changing at first we collected timber and wood for our needs in the easiest fashion possible this then evolved into coppice management where stools were grown on to produce a renewable source of poles and as man domesticated animals the need to produce poles above the browsing line led to trees being pollarded. These were possibly the first organised forms of management.

It is interesting that another myth which now pervades is that the only way a tree dies is by some undesirable person felling it. When in fact this does not kill the tree at all. When thought of rationally, the tree will continue to grow from the stool and will more than likely have an



even longer life span as a result. This is demonstrated by the ancient pollards which still exist today.

So is there any such thing as non intervention management? As with all things, man intervenes, often unintentionally and woodlands are no different.

The majority of the native trees to Britain are not shade tolerant and so a woodland can only reproduce on its margins. This is where we intervene either building houses, mowing grass or by cultivating the land. Therefore, removing the woodlands capability to reproduce, we must manage to redress the balance.

The storm of 1987 showed how vulnerable trees can be and should have made us more aware of the fragility of our unmanaged woodlands for it was those that suffered to the greatest degree.

With the modern awareness of global warming it has never been more important to manage and expand our woodland heritage. Management requires the felling of trees something often regarded as sacrosanct however the public must learn that it is essential if a woodland is to remain healthy to remove trees in order to allow those retained to reach their potential.

Further the best way to combat the problem of global warming is to ensure that we have a healthy environment which converts CO2 emissions and we must not forget that that includes all plants not just trees.

Yet, it is rather ironic that we hear so much from our politicians regarding green taxes and yet they fail to invest in the creation and management of our woodland.

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