



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about WOODLAND

Trees are an essential part of what makes the landscape of the Hundred Parishes so distinctive, as silhouettes on the horizon or adding to the pleasing appearance of a garden, tree-lined street or churchyard.

Trees enhance our lives, they frame a view, produce oxygen and give shelter from excessive sun or wind. They absorb carbon dioxide, help reduce flood risk and provide fuel and timber. Certain species furnish us with fruits or nuts and all support various forms of wildlife.

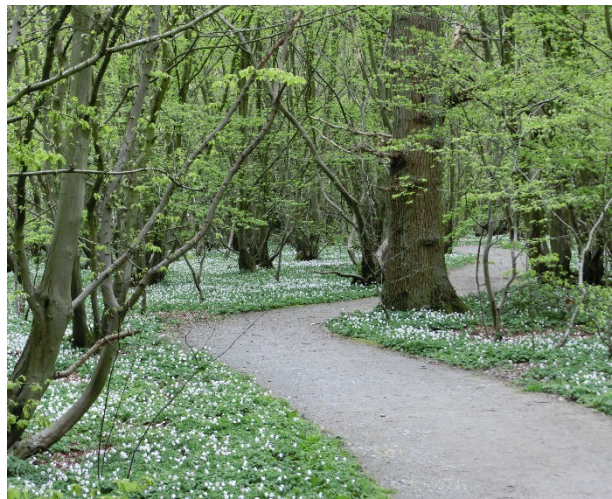
In the year 1217, the Charter of the Forest recognized the importance of woodland when King Henry III re-established the right of free men to forage for food and to graze their animals.

In 2017, the 800th anniversary of the Charter of the Forest, The Woodland Trust initiated a project to highlight the importance of trees today through a new ten-point Charter for Trees, Woods and People. This charter is intended to guide UK policy and practice. Further details can be found at <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/support-us/act/tree-charter/>

Since 1217, our countryside has experienced many changes, driven by fluctuations in climate, the requirements of a rising population and economic necessity. 90% of the UK's current timber requirement is imported but some is produced in woods within the Hundred Parishes, some managed by the Woodland Trust or the Wildlife Trust and open to the public. The What's On page of the Hundred Parishes website often includes opportunities to participate in woodland conservation activities.

One way to appreciate trees is to take a leisurely walk in the local countryside. Many of the routes on our website pass through or beside woodland. For example, Hundred Parishes walk number 144 includes about a mile through Birchanger Wood.

Many of us will have driven through Birchanger Wood on the A120 just west of M11 junction 8, but perhaps without realizing what beauty lies just off the bypass inside this ancient woodland. In springtime, it has an amazing carpet of wood anemones, as shown here, and then the dominant colour changes from white to blue as the bluebells come into bloom. Wood anemones are a sign of ancient woodland because they are very slow to spread. "Ancient woodland" is defined as woodland that has been in existence for at least 400 years.



Birchanger Wood covers some 60 acres and is maintained by volunteers whose fund-raising efforts enabled three miles of good paths to be laid. This has encouraged greater use by wheelchair users, mums with buggies and kids on bikes. Use of the paths leaves most of the forest floor undisturbed, allowing the wood anemones and bluebells to flourish. You can read more at www.birchangerwoodtrust.org .



A little further East, Hatfield Forest, managed by the National Trust, has around 400 hectares, 1½ square miles, of ancient forest to explore. Some walkways have been installed, as shown here. Walk number 159 includes 2 miles through the forest.

Please see www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hatfield-forest for more information.

Man's usage of woodlands has changed over time. For centuries they were managed for the benefits they brought to mankind, timber of all sizes from appropriate trees being used in the construction of buildings and ships and the manufacture of fences, tools and furniture.

Over the last century, manmade materials, especially plastics, have reduced the use of wood, particularly smaller timber that was traditionally produced by coppicing. Coppicing is the practice of cutting tree stems near ground level, as opposed to pollarding, where branches are cut at a higher level. Coppiced woods are known as copses.

Both techniques, coppicing and pollarding, have been fundamental elements of woodland management for hundreds of years. Older woodlands today often show signs that these traditional techniques were once practised but are no longer.

Below, we show examples of pollarding on the left and coppicing on the right.

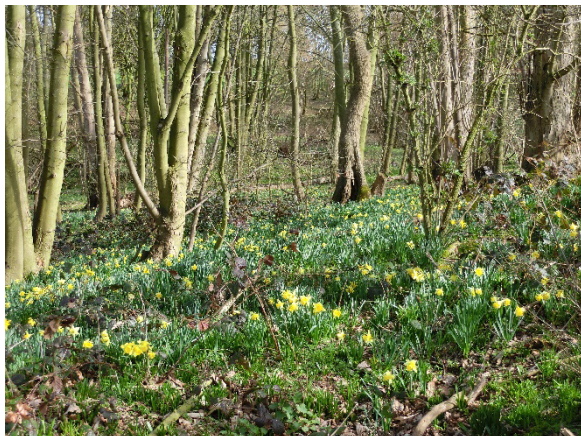


Failure to manage woodland can lead to stagnation, with sunlight unable to reach the ground and with the consequence that new tree growth, shrubs and flowers are unable to survive. We are fortunate that the Wildlife Trust has been entrusted with responsibility for managing many of our local woods. Most of their work is carried out by volunteers. Over time, their work can bring neglected ancient woodland back to life with an abundance of flowers and wildlife. The work of these volunteers is no longer seen as primarily benefitting mankind through the provision of wood, but more as benefitting wildlife with an incidental spin-off of producing small timber.

One element of wildlife that is not welcome in woods is deer. Their numbers continue to increase steadily, despite culling, and their appetite for young foliage prevents trees and other plants becoming established. Managed woods tend to combat the problem by installing high fences, albeit at a considerable cost.

One of the Hundred Parishes Society's trustees is Tricia Moxey, a botanist who for many years has helped to administer Epping Forest, a little south of the Hundred Parishes.

Woodlands throughout the Hundred Parishes put on a spectacular show of flowers in springtime, especially older woods where flowers have spread over many years, if not centuries. Bluebells can be seen in many of our woods; the view on the right is of Howe Wood in Littlebury parish, a private wood but with an extensive display that can be enjoyed from the road.



The photo on the left was taken in March of wild daffodils in Bogs Wood, Albury.

There is no public path through the wood but the early spring flowering can be enjoyed from the footpath which is used in our longest route, station walk 18.



Woods are inspiring places to visit at any time of year, sometimes enhanced by the magical effects of nature. The photo on the right was taken of Prior's Wood, Takeley after a heavy hoar frost.

The photo on the right was taken in Hatfield Forest early one morning during the 2022 drought before the temperature rose to almost 40 degrees. It was a place of sanctuary from the extreme heat.



Those who study long-term trends are concerned about the warming of the atmosphere: this manifests itself in hotter summers and an increase in the frequency of storms which can cause serious flooding, damage to trees and property, and loss of power.

In 2019, the UK Government declared a Climate Emergency with ambitious plans to plant 50 million trees per year across the country to help soak up carbon. To ensure that this project is successful, consideration must be given to the location of plantings and the most appropriate species, with maintenance plans so that these new trees thrive. In addition to soaking up carbon, groups of trees can modify the local climate by providing shade, cooling the air and making urban areas more attractive.

At the time the Climate Emergency was declared, trees covered only about 6% of land in the Hundred Parishes, so any new trees could bring significant benefits as well as visual changes to the landscape.

In a relatively small way, the SSE Wood in Broxted illustrates how woodland can become established. Volunteers from Stop Stansted Expansion (now Stansted Airport Watch) planted about 400 saplings in 2004; this is what it looked like 15 years later.



We are already beginning to see the effects of additional planting along major roads and as a result of community initiatives.

Please see our separate articles on Trees, Orchards, Bluebells, Snowdrops and Spring Flowers.

This article, last updated 30 October 2023, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk. Copyright rests with The Hundred Parishes Society. The article may be copied and passed on freely but may not be reproduced for commercial purposes.

Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.