So, you own a woodland?

7. A brief history of British woodlands

10,000 – 3800 BC

The modern climate first became suitable for tree growth at the end of the last glacial period, about 12,000 years ago. Trees and plants re-colonised Britain from Europe in waves of different species from around 8200 BC. Birch was the first pioneer, followed by pine and then hazel, elm, oak and alder. Woodland spread over most of the land. It is not certain exactly how this 'wildwood' covered Britain – it may have been one huge, dense forest that covered the entire area; alternatively, grazing by wild oxen and deer may have created a mosaic of large areas of grassland and woodland. In any case, there was certainly substantial woodland cover. During this period, small areas of managed wood are likely to have been created by Mesolithic people as they made use of wood products.

3800 BC – 40 AD

Neolithic people were the first to have a major impact on woodland cover. Land was converted to agriculture, with areas of woodland cleared for crops or to create grassland for domestic animals. Woodland cover was reduced to about half of the land area of England during the Bronze Age, at around 2000 BC. The remaining wildwood began to be managed much more actively, and there is strong evidence of woodmanship from this period, with wood used to create a wide variety of timber structures.

40 – 410 AD

The Romans brought greater infrastructure to Britain, and agriculture greatly expanded. Woodland cover was reduced and became much more managed to supply the wood and timber that supported the Roman settlements and industries.

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410 – 1086 AD

The Dark Ages that followed the Roman period was not the period of complete neglect that people often imagine. Although woodland cover probably increased, there is no evidence of a huge return of secondary forest, as people continued to manage the land. The Anglo-Saxons were skilled carpenters, building mostly in timber rather than stone. They kept permanent woods (which were managed to deliver timber and poles of different sizes), as well as wood-pastures, non-woodland trees and hedges. By the eighth century, woodland covered about a quarter of England.

1086 – 1349 AD

The Domesday Book records wood-pasture and woodland covering about 15% of England. However, the following two and a half centuries saw an expanding population and further clearance of woodland, halving woodland cover to about 7%. The remaining woodland was managed more intensively, and timber began to be imported. This was abruptly halted by the Black Death, in 1349, which dramatically reduced the population and released the pressure on woodlands.

1349 – 1500 AD

Woodland continued to be used and managed, but the human population stayed low. Timber was increasingly used in building and industries requiring fuel (e.g. iron and brick) once again expanded.

1500 – 1800 AD

Following the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, many woods taken by the Crown fell into neglect. Deer-parks were revived. Short periods of intensive agriculture at various times throughout this period saw some woods grubbed out (cleared with their roots fully removed); however, small patches of new woodland also appeared. Wood became much more valuable during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with timber rising in price. Colder winters and higher heating standards increased the demand for fuel, increasing the price of underwood by about 75% in the mid-sixteenth century, when its price was held due to competition from coal. An increase in shipping from the end of the seventeenth century demanded good quality timber, particularly oak. At the same time, the rise in the leather-tanning trade put high demand on oak bark. Agricultural improvement in the eighteenth century made agriculture possible where previously woodland had been spared, and clearing once more took place.

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1800 – 1900 AD

The advancement of the railways enabled coal to be transported to previously inaccessible areas, reducing the need for wood as fuel, although timber was required in the construction of coal mines. At the same time, both the shipbuilding and leather-tanning markets collapsed. There followed a period of intense woodland clearance, only to be followed by an agricultural depression that saw new woodland planted and the beginning of the rise of plantations.

1900 AD – present

By the start of the twentieth century, woodland covered just 5% of Britain. Coppicing had declined and conifers had begun to be planted in estates. Throughout the twentieth century, coppicing further declined and populations of native and introduced deer hugely increased. During the First World War, timber felling dramatically increased to supply the war and sustain the economy. The Forestry Commission was founded by the state in 1919, tasked with reafforestation to ensure that timber demands of the future were met. As such, large areas of non-woodland sites were planted. Woodland cover also increased during the Great Depression (1930s), as land fell out of cultivation. Huge felling once again accompanied the Second World War. After the Second World War, woodland was destroyed at an unprecedented rate, to make way once more for agriculture and to support modern forestry. Plantations replaced ancient woodland. However, by about 1990, plantation forestry was less lucrative, and agriculture became more efficient, reducing the need for land area. The general public became much more interested in woodlands, and conservation became a new focus for forestry. Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) began to be converted back to their broadleaf origins.

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