

Fieldwork in the forest: Mill Wood site

An example of a forest that can be used for Geography fieldwork



Mill Wood, Blenheim Estate, Oxfordshire

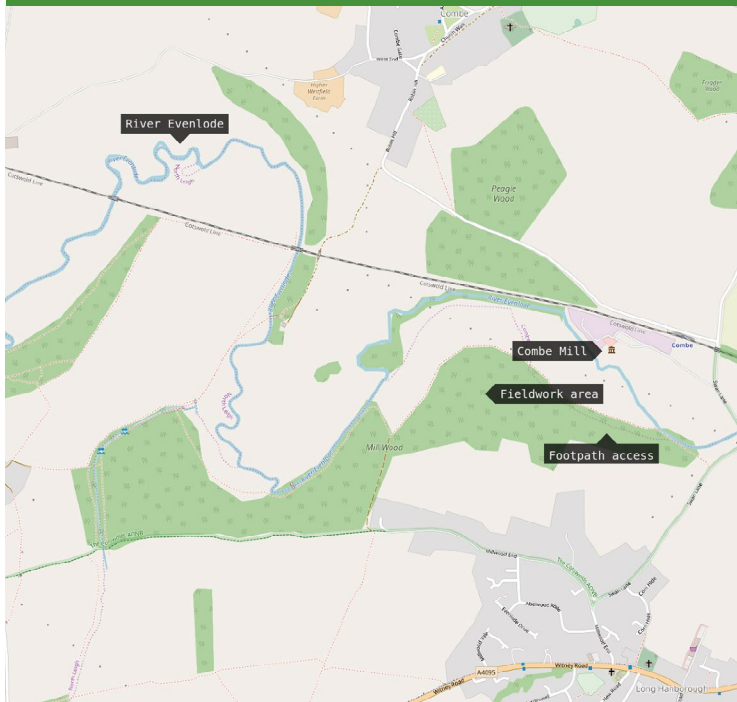
Mill Wood is located in rural West Oxfordshire, within the River Evenlode catchment (a tributary of the River Thames), and is 10 miles from Oxford.

With permission from Blenheim Estate, Sylva Foundation and partners regularly use this woodland for education as its location and mixture of woodland types are ideal for Geography fieldwork and forest education for all ages.

Mill Wood is:

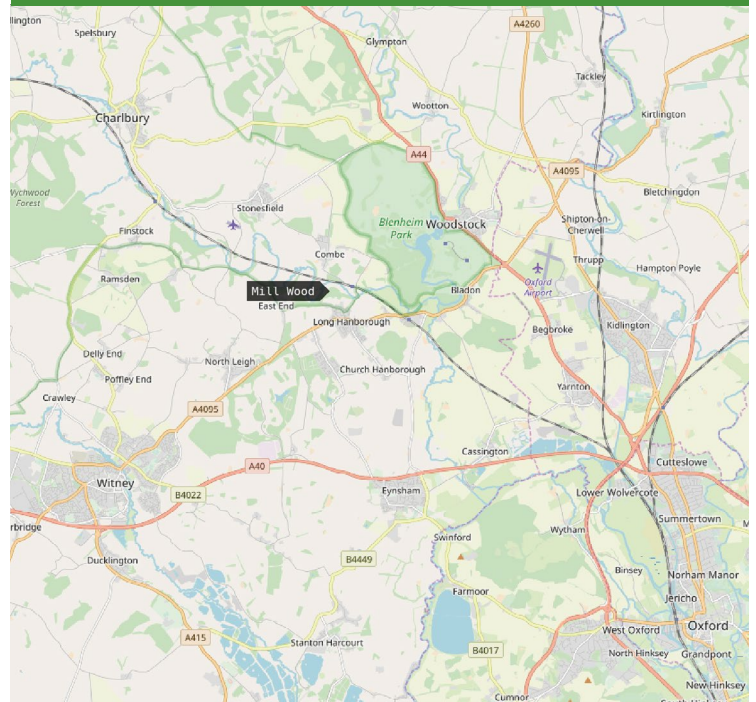
- Owned and managed by Blenheim Estate, part of Blenheim Palace.
- One of many woodlands and forests managed by Blenheim Estate for a variety of aims such as forestry, wildlife conservation, recreation, education and beauty.
- Located near several villages, towns and local amenities
- Open access via public footpaths and is well used by local walkers, cyclists, families and youth groups.
- In the past Mill Wood was managed primarily for timber production, but over the last forty years the management aims have shifted towards recreation, education, and conservation.

Mill Wood local area



Scale 1: 20,000

Location of Mill Wood in Oxfordshire



Scale 1: 200,000

What makes a good woodland for Fieldwork in the Forest?

If you are looking for a woodland for fieldwork, it is helpful to know what to look for. Mill Wood provides an example of a woodland that has many favourable features for Geography fieldwork and educational activities such as:

- being accessible via public footpaths
- close to roads and car parking
- contains a diversity of native tree species, both broadleaved and coniferous
- has a variety of habitats in close proximity to each other, including semi-natural ancient woodland, plantation forest, coppiced and pollarded trees, pond, wetland, meadow and river
- contrasting woodland management types taking place on different parts of the site
- close to local amenities that can be hired out by groups

What is the history of Mill Wood?

Mill Wood is a remnant of the ancient Wychwood Forest, which was a Royal hunting forest stretching across West Oxfordshire over 1000 years ago. Clues to the management history of Mill Wood can still be found:

- Oak trees in Wychwood Forest were managed by foresters to grow tall and straight with lower branches cut so that they could be used for ship building. Some of these Oak trees still stand and are 300-400 years old.
- Coppiced hazel trees growing under the oaks have large 'stools' (bases) which show that people cut the hazel over hundreds of years to use the poles for building, fencing and their livelihoods. This type of woodland management is called 'coppice (hazel) with standards (oak)'.
- Willow trees show signs of pollarding as people in the past cut the branches of willow to feed their livestock.
- There are some conifer plantations in Mill Wood. These were established in the 1970s using grants provided by the Forestry Commission, in order to plant faster growing conifer species for timber such as Western Red Cedar, Douglas Fir and Scots Pine.
- Currently Mill Wood is being managed for recreation, education and conservation. No large trees are felled, and local volunteers keep some hazel and willow coppice under management and use the wood harvested to make bean poles and reindeers to sell at Christmas. The wood is also used by the local Forest School and Scout camps.



What is the future for Mill Wood? *Opportunities and threats*

A woodland management plan for Mill Wood for the next 50 years needs to consider opportunities such as increasing biodiversity on the site, as well as threats such as settlement expansion and climate change. Possible management actions could include:

- Hazel coppice restoration to prevent mature coppice from getting too heavy and toppling over (called 'overstood hazel').
- Thinning out of trees in conifer plantations to let in more light and create space for natural regeneration and vegetation.
- Monitoring and reporting of tree diseases such as Chalara ash dieback threatening ash trees.
- Increasing foot paths and maintaining them as settlements expand and more people move into the area and use Mill Wood.
- Inviting local schools in the area and Oxford to use the woodland for forest education, Forest School and fieldwork. Trees will need to be safety checked and groups will be managed to reduce any impacts on the oak woodland such as wild flowers and animal habitats.



Images

1. Semi-natural ancient broadleaved woodland
2. Conifer plantation
3. Coppiced hazel
4. Pollarded willow
5. Chalara on young ash trees
6. Education activities in Mill Wood