THE CHILTERNS AND BISHAM WOOD

www.chilternsaonb.org/about-chilterns/woodlands.html

The Chilterns is a heavily wooded landscape, with the famous beechwoods the jewel in the crown. The changing colour of these woods – through spring green above carpets of bluebells to rich autumn golds – adds variety and beauty to the Chiltern Hills.

The area has been well wooded for hundreds of years and today is still one of the most wooded parts of England with over one fifth covered by woodland; ash, cherry and oak are widespread as well as beech. The Chilterns used to support a wide range of woodland industries including chair-making. Today, the woods are still harvested for timber but management for amenity, recreation and wildlife value has become equally important.

BEECH FOREST

The English Lowlands beech forests are a terrestrial ecoregion in Northern Europe, as defined by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the European Environment Agency (EEA). It covers 17,600 square miles of Southern England, approximately as far as the border with Devon and South Wales in the west, into the Severn valley in the north-west, into the East Midlands in the north, and up to the border of Norfolk in the north-east of its range.

The difference between the English lowlands beech forests and the Celtic broadleaf forests lies in the fact that south-eastern England is comparatively drier and warmer in climate, and lower-lying in terms of topography. Geologically, something of the distinction can be found in the dominance of the Southern England Chalk Formation in this ecoregion.

Historically, much of this lowland and submontane region was covered with high-canopy forests dominated by European beech (Fagus sylvatica), but also including other species of tree, including oak, ash, rowan and yew. In summer, the forests are generally cool and dark, because the beech produces a dense canopy, and thus restricts the growth of other species of tree and wild flowers. In the spring, however, thick carpets of bluebells can be found, flourishing before the beech leafs out and shades the forest floor.

A bluebell wood near Ivinghoe Beacon in early May

River systems, the most significant of which is the Thames, were historically host to lower-canopy riverine forests dominated by black alder, and this can still be encountered occasionally today. Also included in this ecoregion are the distinctive ecosystems associated with the rivers themselves, as well

as their flood-meadows and estuaries. The soils are largely based on limestone, and the climate is temperate with steady amounts of rainfall. Temperatures can fall below freezing in the winter.

Nowadays, much of this ecoregion has been given over to agriculture – with the growing of wheat, barley and rapeseed particularly common – as well as to the raising of livestock, especially cattle and sheep. In places it is very heavily populated, with towns, suburbs and villages found nearly everywhere – although the plateau of Salisbury Plain remains largely wild. The most significant centre of population is London, at the head of the Thames estuary, one of the largest cities in the world. Due to this high population density, and to a certain amount of depredation caused by the non-native grey squirrel, edible dormice (in the Chilterns) and deer, this forest ecoregion is considered at high risk, with a critical/endangered conservation status accorded it by the WWF. Air pollution may also be leading to a reduction in beech numbers, through increased susceptibility to disease.

History

At the end of the last glaciation, about 10,000 years ago, the area's ecosystem was a largely treeless tundra. Pollen studies have shown that this was replaced by a taiga of birch, and then pine, before their replacement in turn (c. 4500 BC) by most of the species of tree encountered today – including, by 4000 BC, the beech, which seems to have been introduced from mainland Europe. This was used as a source of flour, ground from the triangular nutlets contained in the 'mast', or fruit of the beech, after its tannins had been leached out by soaking. Beechmast has also traditionally been fed to pigs.

However, by 4000 BC, the dominant tree species was not the beech, but the small-leaved lime, also known as the pry tree. The wildwood was made up of a patchwork of lime-wood areas and hazel-wood areas, interspersed with oak and elm and other species. The pry seems to have become less abundant now because the climate has turned against it, making it difficult for it to grow from seed. Nevertheless, some remnants of ancient lime-wood still remain in south Suffolk.

Clearance of forests began with the introduction of farming (c. 4500 BC), particularly in the higher-lying parts of the country, like the South Downs. At this time, the whole region, apart from upland areas under plough, and marshy areas (e.g. Romney Marsh in Kent and much of Somerset), was heavily forested, with woodland stretching nearly everywhere.

BISHAM WOODS

(from Wikipedia)

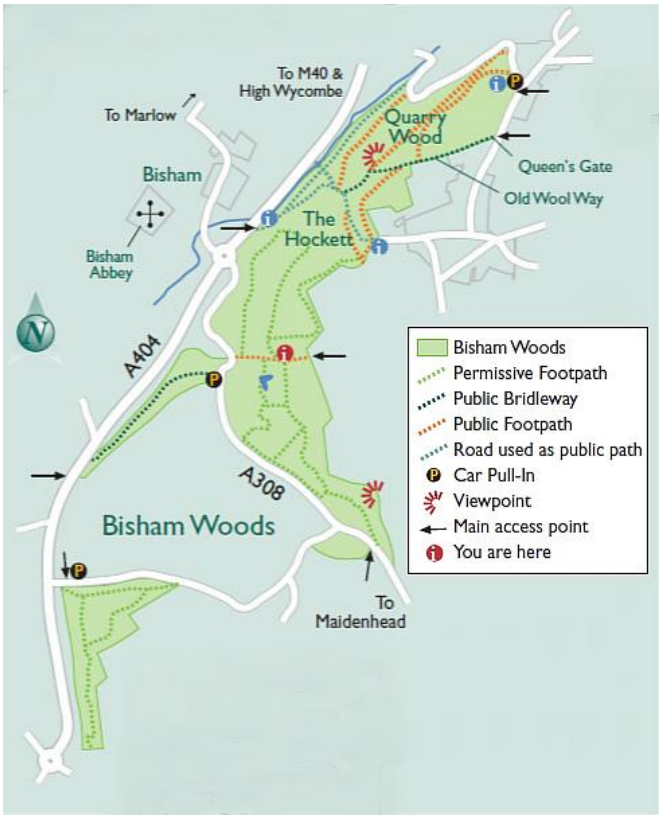
Bisham Woods are a series of woods between Bisham Abbey and Cookham Dean. They include an 83.7 hectares (207 acres) biological Site of Special Scientific Interest, notified in 1970, with a claim to be 'the richest ancient woods in Berkshire'. It is also a Local Nature Reserve.

The woods have been owned and managed by the Woodland Trust since 1990 and consists of several sections, covering a total of 153.2 hectares (379 acres). The northern part is the ancient woodland SSSI, with compartments known as Quarry Wood, Fultness Wood, High Wood and Inkydown Wood. With

the River Thames just to the north, and views across the Chiltern Hills, they include beech woods, with rare woodland orchids. The remaining compartments, including Park Wood, High Wood, and Goulding's Wood, Carpenters Wood and Dungrovehill Wood are areas of 19th and 20th century planting noted for bluebells. These are nearer Maidenhead, near the A308 and A404. The woods are open to the public, and are well served with paths and bridleways, with parking nearby.

Quarry Wood is the site of Bisham Quarry, an important medieval source of stone, much of which was used to build Windsor Castle. From medieval times the woods were part of the extensive Bisham Estates of the Earls of Salisbury. An ice house, built in the 1760s to provide ice for Bisham Abbey is within the woods, and opened to the public four times a year.

The woods are said to have been the original 'Wild Wood' in Kenneth Grahame's Wind in the Willows, which he wrote in the nearby village of Cookham Dean. Percy Bysshe Shelley composed *The Revolt of Islam* in the area of Bisham Woods in 1817 when he was living at Marlow.



Bisham Woods was once part of the great Bisham Estate, owned by the powerful Knights Templars of Bisham Abbey in the 13th century, before passing into the private ownership of the Earls of Salisbury in 1308, and then the Hoby family 200 years later. Part of the site was once in the Royal Forest of Windsor – one of Queen Elizabeth I's favourite rides – and Lady Hoby often accompanied the Queen in the woods between Bisham and Windsor. It was towards the end of the Hoby's occupancy that the ice house was constructed in the 1760s.

This could have stored winter-gathered ice for up to three years, so reducing dependency on successive cold winters. Food wasn't kept in it though as constant opening would have compromised its efficiency. Instead, blocks of ice were transferred to the abbey's kitchens and cellars or a nearer food store as required. The impure ice was not used directly, but aided in preparing desserts, chilling wine and preserving meat and dairy produce.

The storage chamber was designed to maintain the constant temperature and dry atmosphere, essential for preserving ice. Egg-shaped and lined with bricks, it forms a perfect dome over a sharply tapering shaft. At the bottom a well-like sump disappears to unknown depths, allowing meltwater, which would have speeded the thawing process, to escape. The end of a barrel supported by solid timber beams probably sat over the well's entrance with the chamber's shape helping to support the enormous

weight. Blocks of ice, collected from the river or abbey moat were pounded into fragments, thrown into the ice well and beaten back into one solid lump. Saltwater poured over the mass made it firm as rock and kept it up to three times longer, salted ice having less capacity for heat. Barley straw stuffed in the entrance passage lining the chamber, and layering the ice, further improved insulation from summer heat.

This Grade II listed building was restored in 1984 by Christopher Wallis who also donated the doorway's keystone from Effingham Manor's ice house. The old man's face represents an 'effigy of good living'.

WOODLAND TRUST – management plan

The woods are a diverse complex of woods with a National Vegetation Classification (NVC) type ranging from Pedunculate oak +bracken +bramble woodland on the higher acid plateaus to Beech and Dogs Mercury woodland on the steep chalk scarp slopes. Hence, on the chalk slopes beech and ash are the dominant trees together with sycamore.

The mature beeches were severely affected by the 1990 storm, leaving large canopy gaps which have since been filled with abundant ash, sycamore and some beech. Yew, field maple, whitebeam and hazel are also present.

Due to the storm damage the age structure of the trees is now quite diverse.

The plateau woodland on the top of the slopes is a mixture of oak and beech, together with some birch, hazel, ash and field maple. The oak is known to be suffering from acute oak decline (AOD). There are small blocks of conifers scattered over the woods as well (European larch, Corsican pine, Scots pine, western red cedar and Norway spruce) which occupy no more than 5% of the woodland as a whole. The conifer stands were all thinned or ring-barked in the period 2009 to 2013 and all are in advanced stages of restoration to mainly broadleaved woodland.

There are many woodland archaeological features throughout the wood from relatively recent features like quarries and sawpits, as well as much older features such as sunken lanes and woodbanks.

The deadwood habitat is also very rich, and this is supported by the fungus survey from 1999 and a stag beetle record.

Bisham Woods was purchased by the Woodland Trust in 1990 from a private owner with the help of the Nature Conservancy Council, the Countryside Commission, the Royal Borough of Windsor and Chilterns AONB.

The woods are believed to be at least 500 years old but may date back much further and could have once been part of Britain's original wild wood – a diverse, patchy, woodland habitat providing its feudal communities with timber, fuel, minerals, game and coppice rods and valuable grazing.

Pigs were kept and pannaged (grazed on acorns and beechmast) throughout the woods by the many local cottagers, and wood banks marking out the component wood boundaries portioned off the forest between its different users.

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Plane crash at Carpenter's Wood

Early in the morning of 18 July, 1944, a Halifax bomber, LK-Q of 578 Squadron RAF, was on its way from Burn in Yorkshire to Caen in Normandy to join operation Goodwood, aimed at helping Montgomery's troops to break the German lines.

Sadly, the plane developed an engine fire on route and its flight ended with a crash and massive explosion in Carpenters Wood near Burchett's Green.

Of the crew of seven, only the rear gunner escaped by parachute and the rest perished in the crash. Their bodies were never found.

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In BCL Vol 5, 578 Sqn, Halifax III, LK794, LK-Q, T/O Snaith at 0411 to bomb fortified positions at Caen. It crashed 2 miles S of Bisham at 0520 apparently following a fire in or near one of the starboard engines when it exploded. The crew was ordered to bale out but only the Rear Gunner F/Sgt H C Sloan RCAF was able to do so before control of the a/c was lost. There cannot have been much left as the rest of the crew is commemorated at Runnymede. The memorial at Bisham may have the names: F/O V Starkoff DFC RCAF; Sgt G T Nicholson; P/O J F Fink; F/Sgt I Morgan; P/O L H Hopper RCAF; F/Sgt J E Claque.

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From: www.578squadron.org.uk/memorials/c_wood.html

'Early on the morning of 18 July 1944, 21 Halifax bombers of 578 Squadron took off from Burn to attack fortified villages near Caen in France. On the outward flight, LK-Q developed a fire which the crew was unable to control. In his anxiety to avoid the heavily populated areas of Reading, Maidenhead and

Windsor, the Pilot steered into open country before the fully fuelled and armed aircraft lost altitude and exploded in mid-air over the dense wood near Pinkney's Green. Miraculously, the Canadian rear gunner Flt.Sgt. Hugh Sloan, was blown upwards out of his turret and managed to parachute to safety and return to duty but the rest of his crew perished without trace. Their names are recorded on panels of the Commonwealth Air Forces Memorial to the Missing at Runnymede.'

Half a century later Hugh Cawdron, a member of the 578 Burn Association, became aware of this tragedy and made reference to it in his book 'Based at Burn' a history of 578 Squadron, published in 1994. Determined to research the matter further and in detail, he initiated a programme of discovery with the intention of creating a memorial, to place on permanent record for subsequent and largely unknowing generations, the true circumstances of the tragedy.

The Woodland Trust, owners of the land, generously gave permission for the area to be used for such purpose. Assisted by a small group of local volunteers, the immediate task was to clear matted undergrowth, including that in the largest of three craters in the Carpenters Wood which, after fifty years of erosion, still measured 30 yards wide and six yards deep.'

A memorial (pictured right) marking the event can been seen to the left of the 14th fairway at Temple, approaching the green, in front of a commemorative cornelian cherry tree (cornus mas), a native of central and southern Europe which has small yellow flowers that appear in February from the bare stems putting on a stunning display of colour in an otherwise gloomy month of the year.

BACKGROUND TO TEMPLE

The area name is derived from the Knights Templar who owned Temple Mill Island, the mill and the surrounding lands. The mill once boasted the largest millwheel on the entire river, but it is no longer here. It was demolished to make way for the development of a marina towards the end of the 1970s. The mill had a complete working history until then. Originally built as a flour mill, it changed to a copper foundry in about 1710. This was made possible because the opening of the Thames and Severn Canal enabled copper to be carried by barge all the way from Swansea. The foundry then turned the copper into pots, pans and kettles in both copper and brass. In 1848 the manufacturing switched to brown paper and this continued until 1969 when the mill finally closed.

The Templars were also largely responsible for the next major building along the opposite bank, Bisham Abbey. There is evidence that the Templars occupied a building here from at least 1139. The building was considerably expanded around 1260. When the Templars were suppressed in 1307 the preceptory and its surrounding lands were confiscated by Edward II and granted to his various relatives. In 1310 the Priory was used as a place of imprisonment for Elizabeth Queen of Scots, the wife of Robert the Bruce. Elizabeth had been captured, along with her along with her stepdaughter Princess Marjorie and sister-in-law Lady Christine of Carrick, during the Scottish Wars of Succession. All three were placed in custody under the direction of the King's Yeoman, John Bentley. They stayed at Bisham Abbey for two years before being transferred to Windsor Castle.

In 1335 the manor was purchased by William Montacute, the Earl of Salisbury, and it became the Salisbury family home for many years. Montecute founded Bisham Priory immediately next to the house, and the foundation stone was allegedly laid by Edward II. William Montecute was buried at the Abbey, as are several of his ancestors. Another key figure from history is also buried here. Richard Neville, probably better known as 'Warwick the Kingmaker' was also buried here in 1471 shortly after the Battle of Barnet.

The Priory was dissolved in July 1537, but only six months later was revived as a Benedictine Monastery by some monks who had been displaced from Chertsey. These monks were hopeful of being left in peace because they were dedicated to praying for the late queen, Jane Seymour. However, this was not to be, and they were forcibly evicted after only six months.

The manor house was given to Henry's fourth wife, Anne of Cleeves, as part of her divorce settlement. Anne in turn exchanged the house with Philip Hoby for his house in Kent. The house remained in the Hoby family for many years.

Seen right is the front facade of Temple House, with its classical entrance, built on the banks of the River Thames in the late 18th century by Samuel Wyatt for Thomas Mills, a wealthy mill owner. The house was demolished in 1932. Some of the land of that estate had been used for the construction of the Temple golf course.

Source: www.thamespathway.com