

WEG April 2017

The Wood for the Trees by Professor Richard Fortey.

Following semi-retirement from his TV and academic work, friend of WEG, Professor Richard Fortey embarked on a new project - the subject of April's talk and a recently-published book of the same name.

Having purchased a 4 acre patch of ancient woodland near Henley 5 years ago, Richard began assembling an inventory of all biological organisms present, alongside a study of the woodland's history. The woodland is mostly a mix of beech and cherry, plus some ash and wych elm, and is part of an SSSI within a larger woodland.

Beginning with the species groups he is most familiar with, then exploiting his network of contacts to help with the more obscure groups, impressive totals have already been reached, for example, c300 species of fungi and c150 of moth. His sampling forays have included trips into the canopy in a cherry-picker, and groups as unfamiliar as fungus gnats are in the frame for the future!

More profound has been the research into the wood's history and cultural use.

The term "ancient woodland" is generally used for woodland that has been present since reliable records exist. This doesn't imply that it has been woodland "for ever" – indeed an excavation of part of Grim's Dyke, an ancient boundary that cuts through the woodland, indicates it was created in a grassland landscape. Richard hypothesises that the first clearances were on the hills, with the lower land left wooded (the reverse of today), and that this probably remained the case through Roman times. It was only in the "chaos" and population crash that followed the departure of the Romans that trees would have recolonised. Subsequently, the Saxons "got a grip" and established the parishes, settlement and farming patterns, that, in the Chilterns, have probably persisted with little change since (c.f. the Vale of Aylesbury).

For most of the documented period, Richard's woodland has formed part of the Greys Court Manor estate, and so has had to earn its keep. Being on the outer fringes of the estate, it has probably experienced periodic phases of clearance for farming. As woodland, use for multiple purposes in the medieval period was followed by export of wood to London for fuel; then when this was superseded by coal, furniture-making began with a lot of the processing taking place in situ by bodgers – indeed the woodland is peppered with sawpits. Then when this industry soon declined, the woodland was "relegated" to the production of brush-backs (lasting around a hundred years), then tent picks, used in both World Wars. Nowadays, there is no use for beech, other than for firewood, so such woods are probably less used now than any period since the conquest. The cessation of commercial use of Richard's wood is evidenced by a predominance of 80-year old trees. It was not only the biological resources that were made use of historically, but also the minerals. The geology is mainly clay with flints, plus some glacial deposits. Using these materials, a Dutch ceramicist has been able to make serviceable tiles, pots and glass; Richard thinks this will undoubtedly reflect what will have happened in the past, because the historic cost and difficulty of transport would always trigger the use of local materials whenever available.

Richard finished his talk with an image of a marvellous cherry-wood cabinet, gradually being filled with gathered and created items from the woodland, and itself constructed from that woodland.

In answer to questions, Richard said that his plans for future management of the woodland were uncertain, the lack of an economic value for their products posing a problem for all such woodlands – charcoal production might be one way forward.

On a positive note, natural regeneration is quite good compared to many woodlands; ironically this is due to a greater level of disturbance from dog-walkers as a result of its proximity to Henley, which seems to discourage deer. Grey squirrels, though, remain a serious threat to the long-term health of the trees.

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