

**AREA 2: PARISH of BINLEY WOODS: BINLEY COMMON FARM WOOD, BIG and LITTLE ROUGH,
PILES COPPICE, NEW CLOSE WOOD and THE GROVE
PARISH OF BRINKLOW: BIRCHLEY WOOD**

ECOLOGY (1)

Binley Common Farm Wood has oak with sycamore invasion, understorey of hazel, hawthorn, holly and rowan, with little evidence of management. A dry ditch runs through the wood south-west to north-east.

Big Rough and **Little Rough** woods both have wood anemone, suggesting a possible continuity with ancient woodland.

Piles Coppice is a predominantly small-leaved lime coppice with sessile oak standards and scattered hazel. Trees associated with ancient woods are present including wild service tree, both species of hawthorn, wild cherry, wych elm and alder. Ground flora includes black bog rush, wood anemone, primrose, wood sanicle, goldilocks, bluebell, yellow archangel, wood rush, wood millet and wood sorrel. The sandy conditions of the coppice, with central heathy areas, make it rare in the county. Undisturbed for a long time, it is valuable for birds (redpoll and siskin), invertebrates and fungi. Since the 17th Century the wood has been ignored apart from the planting of exotic species in the south-east corner and along the 'wedge' for game. The few available ring counts on large lime tree stems suggest that the wood had a last major felling of underwood around 1930, although there may have been further felling in the south-western part of the wood around 1948. Little seems to have been done with the wood since then and the boundaries were apparently not maintained. A Mr Chattaway remembered cattle getting into the wood in the 1960s when his family farmed in Binley.

New Close, The Grove and **Birchley Wood** are all ancient woods dominated by birch and mature oak with small-leaved lime. Nightingales were recorded in the past. There is a general absence of really mature trees. The alder and hazel coppice with oak standards is neglected. Ground flora in Birchley is poor due to the dense canopy.

HISTORY

PARISH OF BINLEY WOODS

It is recorded in Domesday Book 1086 that the '*silvas*' (probably wood pasture, 18:p121) of Binley's two manors amounted to perhaps 100 acres. By the end of the 12th Century Binley's woodland is thought to have been further divided as Henry de Rokeby gave Coombe Abbey half his 'wood' (see **Area 1**). This is thought to have been **Binley Woods** since the Hundred Rolls of 1279 (an inquiry into landholding in England by Edward I) stated that the Abbot of Coombe had a 'foreign' wood (*a wood outside the bounds of a manor*) of 53 acres in Binley (4:p44).

Binley Woods remained part of the estate of the Lord Cravens of Coombe Abbey from the 17th Century but in 1921 after the death of the fourth Earl the whole estate was bought by local businessmen and then re-purchased by John Todd, a retired auctioneer from Yorkshire for £213,000. In 1923 he sold the estate off in 166 lots, much to outsiders. The majority of the land around Coombe Abbey was sold to John Gray, a Coventry builder and developer, who within a year had felled the ancient **Binley Woods** and offered building plots for sale (13).

Documentary evidence suggests that there were several small woods in medieval times with stretches of heathland in between, some primary and others secondary as evidenced by the fact that they overlie broad ridge and furrow marks, i.e. a curved pattern of ridges and troughs created by ploughing in the Middle Ages (13).

Binley Common Farm Wood, a 4ha remnant of **Binley Woods**, formerly extended south-west to Willenhall judging from field names to the west of the wood. It was probably a grazed common wood until the middle of the 18th Century when it was finally enclosed and coppiced. The northern edge of the wood is defined by a straight bank and external ditch, around 3m in width. The northern quarter of the wood has straight, relatively narrow and therefore probably late-18th Century to early-19th Century, ridge and furrow throughout, with a large pond cut through it and thus post-dating it (5).

The wood banks dividing this section of the wood from the southern three-quarters, and along the southern edge of the wood, are straight, 5-6m in overall width (including the wood ditch) and currently not dateable. It is possible that the northern wood bank represents the edge of a 13th Century 'trench', a clearing cut back from the wood to protect travelers using the road to the north, but this cannot be proved. The presence of coppice ash stools up to 1.5m in diameter on both wood banks, delimiting the southern three-quarters of the wood, suggests that they are likely to be at least of 18th Century origin (5).

The western edge of the wood has a ditch but no bank; up to at least the mid-20th Century there appear to have been two parallel ditches along this edge of the site. The eastern edge of the wood has no boundary features, apart from a metal fence erected around 1998/9 (5). Of particular historical significance are three coppice stools of small-leaved lime in the south-west corner and a clone of wild service tree, both largely relict species confined to ancient woods. The presence of extensive old small-leaved lime coppice supports a medieval date for the woodland and may indicate a direct link with the prehistoric wildwood (13).

Both woods constituting **The Roughs** may derive from former common woodland (5) since they correspond to an area called **Westwood** where tenants of Binley, Brandon and Brinklow 'inter-commoned' (*enjoyed right of pasture together*) with their animals around 1550 and probably much earlier. Part of the wood was taken into the park of Coombe Abbey (4:p44).

Big Rough is possibly semi-natural woodland, later modified by the planting of Scots pine (5). The oldest ash stools on the wood bank, and also visible within the inaccessible eastern half of the site, are 1m or more in size; they may result from the apparent spontaneous increase of ash in woods locally in the past two centuries. The north-west edge of the surviving wooded portion has a straight, relatively acute, bank and ditch while the accessible part of the north-east edge near the north tip of the wood has a smaller bank; the size and structure of the banks and ditch suggest that they are probably not ancient. A shallow ditch leads from the interior of the site to the north-west edge and has the appearance of a 'grip' (*a type of drainage system*) possibly contemporary with the bank (5).

The first known reference to Big Rough is in 1746 when it was called **Slemakers Ruff**, fitting a possible origin of **The Rough** as part of Binley Common, the name Ruff (alias Rough) suggesting that it is unlikely to be ancient woodland. Coombe Abbey accounts of this date show that it was by then a coppice wood (5). A map of 1823 calls it **Slaymakers Ruff**, with an area of '19 acres, 2 rods and 35 poles' (3); on the Ordnance Survey map of 1834 it is called **Big Rough**. It was sold in 1923, and by 1939 at the latest, the southern half of **Big Rough** had been destroyed for housing; by 1962 the central area was completely treeless (5).

Little Rough was first recorded in 1746 when it appears in the Binley Survey as **Coney Currow Ruff**, the name 'coney' implying a rabbit warren on or near the site. It does not appear in any document but is shown on all existing maps after 1746 (8). At some time between 1906 and 1919 an oblong extension of 825 acres was added to the south-west edge, recorded in the 1923 Coombe Abbey sale catalogue as 'plantation' and distinguished from **Little Rough** proper, which was a wood 'in hand' and not for sale (3).

Piles Coppice is defined by wood banks and a former deer-park bank, suggesting possibly no change in size since 1086 (5). Noted in the Hundred Rolls, and well-documented between 1086 and 1279, is a wood of around 50 acres, almost certainly on the site of the present **Piles Coppice** (3). It is likely to have been approximately the same size as both the Domesday Book woodland and the present wood (5). The wood's proximity to **Binley Common Wood** suggests it might have been enclosed from the medieval wood of Binley and may have been the **Bynley Copies** of Lord Harington of Coombe Abbey (see **Area 1**), recorded in the 16th Century (4:p44).

The large area of small-leaved lime coppice in **Piles Coppice** suggests a wood of great antiquity for reasons including the fact that small-leaved lime can produce huge stools up to 400 years old where coppicing has been continued for centuries (2). Lime is very sensitive to grazing in early years so this must have been prohibited or carefully managed here (4:p44). The wood is probably at least 700 years old for a further number of reasons (7):

- the irregular pattern of trees makes it unlikely to be semi-natural
- the name coppice implies a form of management going back to the Norman period
- on the northern edge is a ditch 1.5m deep and a bank 0.5m high and a hedge containing wild service tree
- on the eastern edge is a smaller ditch and bank 0.5m high and a hedge with the same species

- there is a bank along the southern edge and a ditch and stream on the inside
- all along the western edge is a 1m high and 2m wide bank and a 1m wide ditch, followed by a second lower bank
- the banks and ditches, usually with wavy boundaries, are evidence of a medieval form of enclosure,
- the presence of pits perhaps for charcoal making in the drier parts of the wood, one of which is 1.5m³, suggest a history of coppicing

For the period up to 1746, there are a few references to woodland in Binley that might be **Piles Coppice**, but none can be established with certainty (5). **Binley Coppice** occurs in a list of woods in a deed of sale in Latin of the Coombe estate to the Craven family (see **Area 1**) who followed the Haringtons (3). If none of these refer to **Piles Coppice**, it is unaccountably absent from the record for this period. The evidence of earthworks and large coppice stools, especially lime, strongly supports the claim for the continuity of **Piles Coppice** as coppiced woodland through the medieval and post-medieval periods (5).

In 1746 a survey of the Manor of Binley produced the earliest known detailed and accurate map of Binley, and the first unambiguous documentary record of **Piles Coppice** for nearly five centuries. It was by then isolated from **Binley Common Wood** by a large area of arable land, although many hedges remained in this area. By this period all the woods of Binley were isolated from each other and, within Binley, formed separate islands of semi-natural habitat. North and west of **Piles Coppice** was also arable land except for an area of grassland in Binley next to the Brandon boundary near the south-west tip of the wood. North of the road between **Binley Common Wood** and **Slemakers Rough** the land was entirely arable, apart from a small area of grassland near the north-west tip of Slemakers. **Binley Common Wood** itself had remains of common pasture to its west, north and east, and its south-east edge abutted on **Brandon Wood** (see **Area 4**). Only where the parish met Brandon to the south was the isolation of the woods broken but by 1778 this was increased by the removal of hedges (5).

In 1923 **Piles Coppice** may have been in the ownership of Binley Common Farm as it was not included in the sale of the Coombe Estate (5). It was later owned by a timber merchant in Coventry and seems to have been sold on several times before being bought in 1951 by Coltman Brothers, timber merchants of Claybrooke in Leicestershire, who sold it to the Woodland Trust in 1987 (3). It is now a Warwickshire Wildlife Trust Reserve.

New Close Wood and **The Grove** in the east of the parish are medieval, possibly earlier, managed woodland with wood banks, recorded since the 12th Century when all woods seem to have been subject to common grazing rights (5). The Grove is marked as **Swynstie Grove** in 1538, and both woods were part of Coombe Abbey's lands in Wood Grange in the parish of Binley, by Brandon Heath (4:p45). These two woods were progressively enclosed for coppicing from the 14th Century as grazing rights were restricted or abolished. Much of **The Grove** has a complex of pits and ditches which may be undated brickworks. By the 18th Century both were conventional coppice woods although **The Grove** may have produced timber only. **New Close Wood** is almost entirely surrounded by an 8m, almost wavy, wood bank, probably constructed in 1355/6, replacing an earlier bank. The outer wood bank of **The Grove** is also of this date, although has an inner, probably earlier oval, enclosure (5).

PARISH OF BRINKLOW

Brinklow appears in Domesday Book only as a 'hundred' name (4:p44). A 'hundred' is a unit of English local government and taxation, intermediate between village and shire, which survived into the 19th Century; it probably referred to a group of 100 hides, the units of land required to support one peasant family. The term first appears in the laws of King Edmund I (939–946) but it seems that it was already a long-established institution (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Bosco de Burlegh (later called **Birchley Wood**), separated by a heath from the wood and heath of Brandon (see **Area 4**), was given to the Abbey at Coombe in 1150 (see **Area 1**). In 1501 Coombe Abbey and named freeholders in Brinklow agreed that the northern part of **Birchley Wood** near the Abbey's Grange could be enclosed and made into a coppice, presumably the **Byrtley Copies** recorded a few decades later (4:p44).

Suggesting that **Birchley Wood** was once far more extensive are records of 'assarts' (*parts of a wood cleared for cultivation*) in the 12th Century in an area to the south of the wood adjoining the parish of Brandon later called **Brinklow Heath**; there are more records of assarts in 1262, 1272, 1351 and 1384. On a Coombe estate map of 1838 fields called **Birchley** are marked east of the wood, also perhaps 'assarts' of the original woodland; further east still is a large area of woodland called **Monks Riding**, not marked on Victorian maps so it had gone by then (4:p.44/45).

The recently reconstructed Enclosure Award Map of 1742 for the parish of Brinklow shows the boundary of **Birchley Wood**, marked 'in lordship of Comb' (i.e. Coombe Abbey). A 'terrier' (*record of payment*) and a survey of 1838 show the area as 106 acres, the same as the current area. A map of the Leigh estate of 1767 shows that the strip of land north-west of **Birchley Wood** was also in 'Comb lordship' (3).

Sources of information:

1. Ecosite notes (*Habitat Biodiversity Audit, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust*)
2. Tasker, A. (1990) *The Nature of Warwickshire*
3. Local Record Office, Warwick (Moffatt, R. 2017/18)
4. Wager, S. J. (1998) *Woods, Wolds & Groves: the woodland of medieval Warwickshire, British Archaeological Reports British Series 269.*
5. D.R. Morfitt (2000) *The Historical Ecology of the Woods of Binley, Warwickshire (PhD thesis).*
7. Barton, J., (1983) *Piles Coppice - Remnant of an ancient forest? (B.Sc dissertation)*
8. Warwickshire Wildlife Trust survey (1985)
13. WCC website 'Our Warwickshire'
16. Ross, A. (2020) *Dunsmore Woodlands GIS project*
18. Rackham, O. (1986) *The History of the Countryside*