

AREA 3: COVENTRY CITY COUNCIL: WHITLEY GROVE, WILLENHALL WOOD, BINLEY LITTLE WOOD ROCK SPINNEY, COPSEWOOD SPINNEY AND STONEBRIDGE MEADOWS CARR

ECOLOGY (1)

Whitley Grove is an ancient wood with oak, some 20ft in girth, dating from the 1600s, with hazel coppicing in the past. It was a larch plantation between 1885 and 1923. There are records of goldcrest.

Willenhall Wood is a small ancient semi-natural woodland, with a good shrub layer and evidence of past coppicing. Ancient indicators include bluebell and stitchwort. It is the only Coventry site for grass vetchling and is also a site for the hoverfly *Didea fasciata*.

Stonebridge Meadows Carr is a local nature reserve with a range of habitats including old alder coppice.

Binley Little Wood is a severely disturbed remnant of ancient woodland, consisting mainly of birch, also field maple, wild cherry and crab apple; a ground flora is mostly absent. A former history of grazing has strongly influenced the structure of the wood and probably also the composition, despite more than two centuries since grazing ceased and the wood was enclosed.

HISTORY

In the mid 12th Century lands in Whitley were granted to the Benedictine monks of Coventry by the Earl of Chester; a 'ley' was a clearing in ancient woodland. The Manor of Whitley is first mentioned in 1371 when it was granted to Thomas de Whitley. The estate had several owners during the 15th and 16th Centuries when it was then outside the town walls. Later it was called the Hall and was not referred to as Whitley Abbey until the 19th Century. **Whitley Grove** contains a sunken walkway with steps, and remnants of quarrying before 1600 for a greyish-white sandstone used for local churches (12).

The Manor of Willenhall was held by Coventry Cathedral Priory but there is no mention of it in Domesday Book 1086. There are references from c.1200 to the **Priors Wood** of Willenhall which adjoined the lands of Coombe Abbey (see **Area 1**); the exit from the wood adjoined a heath in Binley and the park of Brandon (see **Area 4**). In 1411 the Priory's register records an enclosed wood called **Wilnehale Close**, separated from the rabbit warren of Coombe Abbey by a pasture of wood and plain. A Coombe Abbey lease of 1538 shows **Wynall Wood** adjoining Binley Heath (4:p42), of which the current **Willenhall Wood** is presumably a remnant.

Around much of the periphery of **Binley Little Wood** is the remains of a moderate wood bank up to 4m across, although in part, notably the western corner and along the entire east edge, there appears to be no bank. Within the wood is ridge and furrow, probably throughout, although faint in the western half and clearest in the eastern; this, together with the apparent absence of a complete wood bank and the regular shape of the wood, suggest that the wood may not be ancient. The ridge and furrow dictates the shape of the wood, with its south-eastern end sloping to follow the curve of the ploughing; the south-east edge, with no wood bank and a slope to the outside of the wood, may be the remains of the headland where the plough was turned (5).

The former ridge and furrow, relatively poor ground flora and wood banks suggest that **Binley Little Wood** may be secondary growth on the site of a former medieval grove, described as 'a grove in Bynley called **Comeners Grove**' and leased to John Gardener and his wife in 1538 (4:p44). The name may imply that the wood was originally land set aside as compensation to the commoners for the enclosure of part of the common by the landlord. The first certain documentary evidence of the wood's existence is the 1746 Craven Estates Survey in which it called **Gardner's Wood**, of the same shape and size as the present day wood. With a curved track running from the western corner to the eastern corner of the wood, it sits amongst a cluster of small fields and, without the tree symbols, would appear to be yet another small field itself. This is unlike many ancient woods which are irregular shapes to which the field pattern around them conforms, showing that the wood came first. It was probably a grazed common wood until enclosed and converted to coppice in the mid-18th Century (5).

By 1834 it was called **Buttons Wood** and later in the 19th Century became **Binley Little Wood**. Maps of this time show the field pattern around the wood completely reorganised from the 18th Century pattern,

with many former hedges removed and the wood isolated within a larger field unconnected to the hedgerow pattern. It became surrounded by the expansion of Coventry between 1962 and 1973 (5).

Rock Spinney is shown on the 1888 Ordnance Survey map and part remains today. Totally gone are **Little Wood** to the west of Willenhall Wood, and **Copsewood**, but both shown on the 1888 OS map; also gone is **Whitmore Wood**, historically in the parish of Baginton and not shown on the 1888 OS map. **Copsewood Spinney** is a new wood, along the R. Sowe (16).

Stonebridge Meadows Carr, once osier beds, was planted with alder in 1850 and coppiced until 60 years ago (1).

Sources of information:

1. *Ecosite notes (Habitat Biodiversity Audit, Warwickshire Wildlife Trust)*
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 (Ph.D thesis).*
12. *Coventry City Council leaflet.*
16. *Ross, A. (2020) Dunsmore Woodlands GIS project*