

The loss of woodland in the Dunsmore area of Warwickshire A study of 19 parishes by Ruth Moffatt 2019-2021

The research for this study for the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (WWT) was begun in 2019 by Ruth Moffatt, a volunteer in the Ecology Team at Warwickshire County Council, at the County Record Office. The area of Warwickshire involved had been defined by WWT for a funding bid for landscape scale conservation in the Dunsmore Living Landscape project area, based on the mapping data of the Habitat Biodiversity Audit. Further research at the Warwick Record Office was carried out by Alec Ross (Stretton-on-Dunsmore Millenium History Group) in 2020. The transcription of Ruth's original notes into prose was initially drafted by Charlotte Knight (De Montfort University) in 2020 and completed by Ruth in 2021.

This Geographic Information System visualisation of the history of the woodland of the Dunsmore area was created by Alec Ross in 2020-2021. It shows 81 woods covering 908 hectares, of which 880 hectares is woodland over 100 years old, much of it identified as 'ancient', i.e. pre-1600 (Rackham, 2006, p.24). However, we can conclude from Domesday Book 1086 that some of this woodland is much older; although the book does not name woods, it states that under certain manors there was some '*silva*', usually giving linear measurements, although converting these to areas can be misleading depending on their shape (Wager, personal communication). '*Silva*' was probably wood-pasture, a type of woodland characterised by trees and kept open by grazing; the percentage of '*silva*' to coppiced wood throughout the Domesday survey was 5-10 times greater, suggesting a surplus of woodland that could be used communally and less intensively (Rackham, 1986, p.121). Where evidence of age is not available (either because no records were made at the time or such records as were made have been lost) it is possible to argue by comparison with the ecology of better documented woods that a wood which is rich in ancient woodland indicator species is probably much older than the first documentary record of it (Sarah Wager, personal communication).

At Domesday 19% of Warwickshire was estimated to be woodland; by 1895 this figure had become 3.5% (8,500ha) and included several new plantations; by 1920 only 5,000ha of ancient woodland remained which was reduced to just 2,400ha by 1985 (Michael Slater, personal communication). Alex Ross' map also marks 25 ancient woods, and parts of 9 other ancient woods, known from Estate and Enclosure Award maps to have gone, showing that the Dunsmore area was not exempt from this loss of woodland. Victorian maps show that almost half these woods had disappeared before 1888, either through conversion to agriculture between 500-1500, as a result of the Enclosures of the 1600-1800s, or later through urban development and further agricultural change. These 'lost' woods constitute a total area of 523ha, over a third of the known area of ancient woodland in the Dunsmore area. More serious is that 9 woods over 30ha comprise 66% of this 'lost' woodland, half the total number of large woods that exist now and once existed in this part of Warwickshire. It is known that woodland biodiversity increases with area because a larger wood is likely to have more habitats, and therefore more niches, for wildlife so this level of loss of ancient woodland represents a significant reduction in biodiversity in the Dunsmore area (Forestry Commission, 2015).

It is suggested by Wager (1998, p.38) that pre-1597 the '*bruillum*' of **Wetherley** (now Waverley Wood) once extended both east of the present wood, and west continuous with the '*bruillum*' of **Echealls**, an area of woodland and fields. That Wetherley was much larger in the past is supported by the record in 1597 of fields being brought into cultivation from the '*bruillum*' including fields called **Bradley** on its western edge and **New Brocken** to the north-west. In the parish of Weston-under-Wetherley, and also part of the '*bruillum*', are **Weston** and **Wornouks Woods** (possibly once part of Wetherley) and an area of land called **Stewards Piece**, east of Wetherley. The term '*bruillum*' is rare, found only in the south-east of Warwickshire, distinct from '*boscum*' (wood) and with three meanings - thicket, covert and game-park. Wager suggests that this large tract of land from Stoneleigh to Weston, measuring approximately 4 square miles, was perhaps an Anglo-Saxon hunting ground, based on Stoneleigh's status as a royal estate before the Conquest, held by Edward the Confessor.

Until 1800 there was another large area of woodland further east in the parishes of Bubbenhall, Ryton, Stretton-on-Dunsmore, Princethorpe and Wappenbury, measuring approximately 3.5 square miles. Substantial parts of this tract of woodland have now gone: **Neather** and **Upper Woods** in Bubbenhall, **Burnthurst**, **Coppice** and some of **Bull & Butcher Wood** in Stretton and **Stanes Chamberlayne** in Princethorpe. There is good reason to think that the medieval woods of **Bubbenhall**, **Ryton**, **Princethorpe** and **Wappenbury** all adjoined each other but there is no evidence that this block of woodland adjoined the '*bruillum*' of **Wetherley** (Wager, 1998, p.22).

In the parish of Binley and Brinklow, in the north of the Dunsmore area, a third large area of woodland, covering approximately 1.2 square miles, is likely to have existed, from **New Close Wood** and **Birchley Wood** further south and east towards Brinklow village. It seems that Birchley Wood was once much larger, as records of *assarted* woodland (*cleared for cultivation*) up to the 14th Century are listed by Wager (1998, p.44), both between the wood and the boundary with the parish of Brandon to the south and between the wood and the 'lost' medieval wood of **Monks Riding** to the east.

References:

Rackham, O. (1986) *The History of the Countryside*.

Wager, Sarah J. (1998), *Woods, Wolds and Groves: the woodland of medieval Warwickshire*, *British Archaeological Reports British Series* 269

Rackham, O. (2006) *Woodlands*.

Forestry Commission (2015) *Biodiversity*.