

Celebrating the Tradition of Managing Trees in the Forest of Dean

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On June 18th 2008, an event at the Cyril Hart Arboretum in the Forest of Dean marked the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Dean Forest (Timber) Act 1808. Having spent a lifetime involved in forestry, it was satisfying to be able to mark this long history of managing trees in the Forest of Dean.

But the story starts with mismanagement. Centuries ago, in 1633, John Broughton was appointed as the first Deputy Surveyor for Dean Forest. The prompt for his appointment was concern about the state of the Forest. His first task was to survey the trees in the Dean, and he established that many trees and much timber had been destroyed, with the notable exception of Lea Bailey.

A few years later, this situation was exacerbated when the whole forest was effectively sold to John Wintour in 1640 and subjected to exploitation of the resources, particularly iron ore and timber for charcoal.

Concern was raised, and in 1668 the Dean Forest (Reafforestation) Act was passed with the intention of enclosing and planting 11,000 acres. The Act established commissioners to oversee this enclosure. Since that time, responsibility



Rob Guest, Deputy Surveyor, addresses participants at the event.

for ensuring healthy tree growth has been shared by the Inclosure Commissioners, the Verderers, and the Deputy Surveyor and his staff. The Queen's Remembrancer, who was also present at the event in June 2008, and his predecessors have been involved in forestry in the Dean for some 350 years in appointing the Inclosure Commissioners.

It is clear that through the 1700's increasing the timber resource was not an easy task, at a time when demand for timber for the navy was increasing. By the time of Nelson's visit to the area in 1802, it was recorded that only 676 of the 11000 acres had been enclosed.

Nelson's visit was a landmark. He talked to concerned locals and prepared a strong report for parliament in 1803 urging the planting of more trees in the Dean for the benefit of the nation. This led to the important legislation in 1808 which was to have such a big impact on the Dean.

The first thing the Act did was to reinforce the legality of enclosures already made – specifically Stapledge, Speech House, Birch Wood and Buck Holt. It also introduced penalties for breaking down fences and enclosures. And it laid the foundation for a planting boom.

Inclosing and planting began in Autumn 1808. Over the next ten years, some 100 miles of new fences were formed including 25 miles of stone walls and 70 miles of earthen banks with gorse hedges. These banks were 5' high and 4'6" wide at the base with an outside ditch. They were completed with 3 rows of gorse, one on top, the others at the bases.

Before 1811, trees were established quite densely at 2722 to the acre – but because of the time delay in producing sufficient seedlings, the establishment was mainly with acorns with every 10th being a 5 yr old oak seedling and every 100th being a sweet chestnut seedling. On sites less favourable for oak, other species including elm, sycamore, Norway spruce, European larch and Scots pine were planted

After 1811, year old oak seedlings were favoured over acorns. These were supplemented with large oaks (up to 30 feet high) transplanted from Acorn Patch. By 1820, a fifth of the planting was with European larch and Scots pine as conifer nurse crops to draw the oak up.

This was all not without difficulty. There were sheep, cattle, rooks, and oak leaf roller moth to name a few of the problems....

From autumn 1813 and through much of 1814 there was a plague of mice. It is estimated 200,000 seedlings and acorns were destroyed during that time. Several plans to control the mice failed. Eventually a Mr Simmons from Edge Hills (a miner) recounted how mice fell into his mine and he developed a pit – 2' square and deep with a slightly wider base into which the mice fell and couldn't get out. These were dug 20 yards apart across the Forest, and Simmons and his mates were paid a bounty on mice tails - the Deputy Surveyor at the time paid out on over 100,000 tails. Various animals came to exploit the mice – e.g. polecats, and the first record of little owl in the Forest was noted.

Ten years on in 1818, the 10324 acres (to bring the total enclosures to 11,000 acres) had been established – an impressive achievement which would be a challenge even today. It is interesting to speculate who to credit most for this achievement – there are a number of possibilities: Glenbervie (the Surveyor General), Price (brought in as special advisor when Glenbervie was suspended), Machen (the Deputy Surveyor at the time), the Drivers (the planting contractors),



Senior Master Whitaker (the Queen's Remembrancer) and Rob Guest, the Deputy Surveyor, with the unveiled boundary stone.

Billington (their local supervisor) or Slead (their agent). In discussing this with Dr Hart we have together concluded that it is likely all played a significant part – although it is interesting that in the records of the time they rarely acknowledge each others' contribution.

A feature noted at that time that still prevails today was the real lack of any very old trees in the Dean. With the exception of the Newland Oak outside the Forest, the only others noted were Jack of the Yat and the Crad Oak - both located near the Big Hill. Today, the Crad Oak still exists, and a number of trees

planted after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 are also now considered to be veterans.

Contrary to common perception, the enclosures were made with very little opposition. Controversy only surfaced a decade or so later - the commoners felt aggrieved by 1831 when they considered the trees had become established and the enclosures had not been thrown open. In June 1831, Warren James and about 2000 others threw open most enclosures by destroying nearly a third of the fences. The Deputy Surveyor called in the Royal Monmouthshire Militia (with their caps!) and the Third Dragoons to quell the riot.

This all helped to precipitate the 1831 Commission which looked at a range of issues and traditions including encroachment and freemining – but that’s another story.....

By 1841 the process of throwing open and enclosing new areas on a rolling basis had begun, and this continued through to about 1872. The last significant loads of timber for the navy left in 1855 with small amounts till 1874. After that, the oak was mainly used for mining timber with particular demands during the two war efforts in the 20th century, but there were still significant areas of oak left unexploited.

This has left us with a legacy. The Dean is now considered to be Britain’s premier oak forest - and this is down to the foresight of the legislators who pushed through that Act of Parliament in 1808.

I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr Cyril Hart OBE - it is through his scholarship that we have such a good understanding of the history of the Forest and the nature of its management and I much appreciate having been able to discuss these issues with him.