

Mediaeval Woods in the Oxfordshire Chilterns

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SUMMARY

On the Oxfordshire Chilterns are many scattered woodlands interspersed with small clearings. They have never been part of a royal hunting forest, and have mostly been worked as crop-producing woodland, providing a variety of products for local use and for transport to London by river. By combining documentary evidence with field work it is hoped to examine the composition and history of these woods, their management, and products.

THE LANDSCAPE

The Oxfordshire Chilterns, an upland region in the south-east of the county ranging from 50 to 230 metres in height and covering an area roughly 15 miles by 10, contain numerous woods, many with the curving outline indicative of ancient woodland, and interspersed with small fields and farms which are mostly the result of mediaeval assarting. The area lies in a large loop of the Thames, so that none of the woods are much more than 6 miles from the river, which from early times has meant that transport from them has been relatively easy (Fig. 1). As a result the woods have been a valued source of income to the owners.

Roden¹ suggests that assarting – clearing of woodland for cultivation – occurred in this region mostly in the 200 years following Domesday, although the presence of prehistoric earthworks, amongst them Grim's Ditch, suggests some clearance much earlier, which presumably continued during the Anglo-Saxon period. Domesday Book suggests that there was less woodland in the area in 1086 than later, but the evidence is difficult to interpret. Woodland in Caversham,² for example, was estimated at 1 league and 2 furlongs by 1 league, although it is uncertain whether this referred to one wood or several, and whether the measurements were equivalent to modern ones. Places now heavily wooded were listed as having no woodland, amongst them Mapledurham, Harpsden,³ Swyncombe,⁴ and South Stoke.⁵ South Stoke parish later included the upland settlement of Woodcote, which may have been excluded from the survey.

The very name Woodcote, meaning a dwelling in a wood, recorded first in 1109,⁶

¹ D. Roden, 'Enclosure in the Chiltern Hills', *Geografiska Annaler* (ser. B), lvi (1969), 115–26.

² J. Morris (ed.), *Domesday Book Oxon.* (1978), 20,1.

³ *Ibid.* 22,1; 35,8; 35,26.

⁴ *Ibid.* 35,33.

⁵ *Ibid.* 6,1c.

⁶ H.E. Salter (ed.), *Eynsham Cartulary*, i (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xlix), p.36.

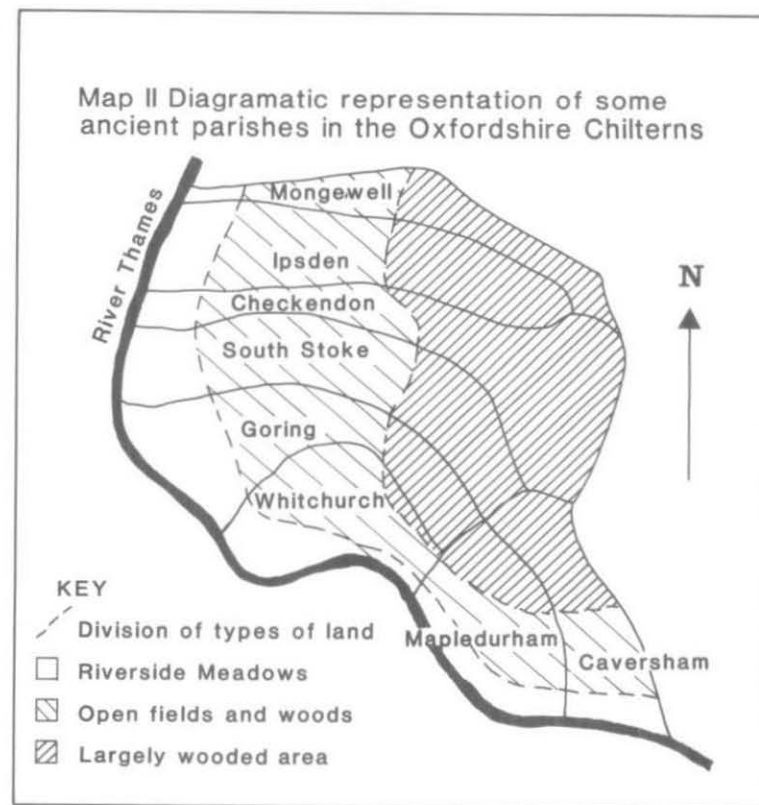
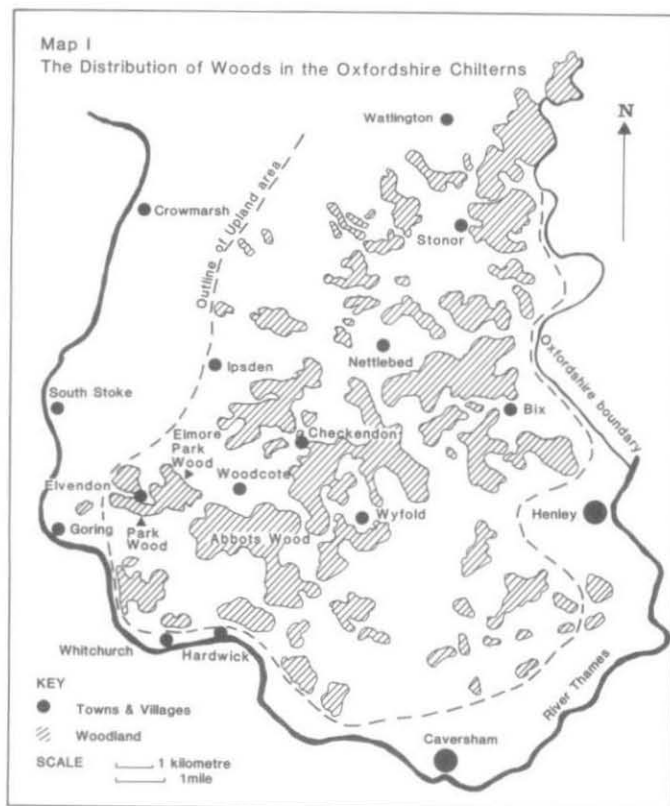


Fig. 1. Woodlands and parishes in the Oxfordshire Chilterns.

suggests that woodland was being cleared and colonised. Other place and field-names similarly reflect assarting. 'Stocking', meaning an area of felled trees, occurs in Stockings field in Checkendon,⁷ where Stockings Shaw is probably a remnant of the original woodland. Ridings field⁸ in North Stoke may denote a ridding or clearing, and there are also several 'Grubbings' and a 'Grubbed Ground' at Checkendon⁹ near Horsalls wood; these are probably of a later date, 'grubbing' meaning to dig up tree roots.

A description of the various landscape features of the Oxfordshire Chilterns is found in the 1375 dower award of Lady Isabel Bardolf, who received 'certeyn londis, shawys, grovys, crofts, wodys, lesuris and heggerewys callid Bardolfys' in Mapledurham.¹⁰ Shaws, in the Oxfordshire Chilterns, were strips of woodland left as field boundaries after the clearance of woodland, and are still understood as such by the older local inhabitants and woodmen. Where a large wood is called a 'shaw', the probability, therefore, is that much of it is new woodland. Waterfield shaw and Eastfield shaw in Checkendon, both appreciable woods, still retain wood banks defining the former shaws, while Ruscroft wood in Goring (Fig. 4), which contains similar banks, was presumably unwooded when it was described as a 'croft' in 1359.¹¹ This type of landscape is suggested by an unusual entry for Wyfold in the Hundred Rolls of 1279.¹² Normally land held by tenants was given in virgates, coppices being mentioned only in connection with woodlands belonging to the demesne. In Wyfold, tenants' holdings were described in terms of crofts, nearly all of them held with one or more coppices (*gravas*) or small pieces of woodland, which were possibly shaws between the crofts or small fields. Coppices were more usually kept in demesne, and although they may have been leased to woodmen by the acre for cutting, it seems unlikely that this would be entered in the Hundred Rolls, which were presumably concerned with long-term tenancies. While shaws served as divisions and boundaries of fields they could, in fact, extend to several acres, thus providing a valuable source of wood for the tenants. Presumably rules were laid down by the manor courts about the use of this wood, but the only references found are in later estate papers, which state that the tenants had the right to underwood and the lop and top, while the lord had the timber in the shaws.¹³ The crofts themselves, of which the Wyfold tenants held between 3 and 7 apiece, were probably small enclosed assarts in the woodlands for which rent was paid, Wyfold being a wooded estate on the hills with, unusually, no common fields of its own. By contrast most estates and parishes in the Chilterns were long and thin, sloping up from the Thames and incorporating riverside meadows, open fields on the rising ground and, finally, wooded country with small fields on the hills (Fig. 1), which meant that tenants, even where they lived in upland hamlets, may sometimes have had strips in the common fields. Nevertheless, by the time of the Hundred Rolls in 1279 there must have been many assarts in the wooded uplands; Andrew atte Wode in Ipsden, for example, held ½ virgate, probably in the common fields, and an assart of 3 acres, while Philip Coleman, a free tenant, had 1 virgate and 3 acres of assart for which he paid 5s.¹⁴ Their names incidentally

⁷ Oxon. R.O., Checkendon tithe award, no.87.

⁸ M. Gelling, *Place Names of Oxon.* i (E.P.N.S. xxiii, 1953), 50.

⁹ Oxon. R.O., Checkendon tithe award, no.87.

¹⁰ A.H. Cooke, *Early Hist. of Mapledurham* (Oxon. Rec. Soc. vii, 1925), 29, 205-6.

¹¹ T.R. Gambier-Parry (ed.), *Goring Charters* (Oxon. Rec. Soc. xiii-xiv, 1931-2), i, p.123.

¹² *Rotuli Hundredorum* (Record Commission, 1818), ii, 764.

¹³ Oxon. R.O., Cooper and Caldecott papers, Estate Book accounts, Harpsden 1764: 'Allowed to Mr Champion for the wood that was upon his shawses and which he had the right to cut'.

¹⁴ *Rot. Hund.* (Rec. Com.), ii, 781.

indicate the nature of the countryside – one living by or in a wood, and the other, if not a charcoal burner, then presumably descended from one.

As a result of assarting, presumably due to population increase,¹⁵ there seems little doubt that the period when there was least woodland in the Oxfordshire Chilterns was the later Middle Ages, and several existing woods were planted later. A possible example is Horsalls wood in Checkendon (SU 672825), apparently unwooded in 1339 when John Marmion quitclaimed 'the land called Horshole', and in 1459 when 'Horsole field' was mentioned.¹⁶ The wood may have been planted in the 17th or 18th century, perhaps for the firewood trade to London,¹⁷ the first mention being in 1749 when it was assessed for poor rate.¹⁸ This implies that it was then coppice, as poor rate was not levied on timber trees: in the Chilterns, where by custom beech was considered to be timber, unlike in other areas, there were several disputes over the issue in the 19th century, for example at Goring in 1843.¹⁹

OWNERSHIP OF THE WOODLANDS

Ownership of woodlands in the region cannot be treated in detail here. Woodlands were usually kept in demesne, among them Abbot's wood in Woodcote, comprising 348 acres, and given to Eynsham abbey in 1109.²⁰ Smaller woods in South Stoke were probably let to tenants during the 15th century, but the abbey retained Abbot's wood, which first appears under this name in 1536,²¹ until the Dissolution, when it was given to Christ Church College and became known as Abbot's or College wood. Place-names occasionally point to the ownership of smaller woods, which from the 12th century onwards seem to have changed hands fairly frequently, often to small landowners. Chazey wood and Bardolfs wood in Mapledurham were named after two mediaeval families: the Chauseys who in the 12th century owned the manor of Mapledurham Chazey, and the Bardolfs who held Mapledurham Gurney manor in the 13th and 14th centuries.²² Wroxhills wood in Goring was perhaps named after the Wroxhale family who owned land in the vicinity in the 14th century.²³ Dean wood in South Stoke appears to have been owned by the de la Denes in the 13th and 14th centuries and possibly earlier.²⁴ An example traced by the writer is Elmorepark wood, described in a 1409 court roll as 'Elynore Parke' and apparently named after Eleanor à la Beche, who inherited part of Applechanger manor in 1358.²⁵

¹⁵ J.L. Bolton, *Medieval English Economy 1100–1500* (1980), 82–3.

¹⁶ H.E. Salter (ed.), *Boarstall Cartulary* (Oxf. Hist. Soc. lxxxviii, 1930), pp. 8, 39.

¹⁷ P.G. Preece, 'Firewood from the Oxfordshire Chilterns', *Arbor. Jnl.* ii (1987), 227–35.

¹⁸ Berks. R.O., D/EB T13.

¹⁹ Oxon. R.O., PL xviii/6.

²⁰ *Eynsham Cart.* i (O.H.S. xlix), p.36, ii (O.H.S. li), p.127.

²¹ *Ibid.* ii, pp.241–2.

²² Cooke, *Mapledurham*, pp.17–42.

²³ Gambier-Parry (ed.), *Goring Charters*, i, pp.xxviii–xxix.

²⁴ *Eynsham Cart.* ii, p.136.

²⁵ Gambier-Parry (ed.), *Goring Charters*, i, pp.122–23; Oxon. R.O., PL xix a6.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE WOODS

Mediaeval woods consisted mostly of coppices with standards, coppicing being the practice of cutting back the growth to ground level every few years, the standards being usually oak trees allowed to grow normally. Many Chiltern woods today are mostly tall beech planted in the 19th century for the furniture trade, with some surviving coppice on the edges. Some traces of division into separate coppices in the form of banks and ditches can be found (below, Fig. 4), and often such banks are discernible as land divisions marked on modern Ordnance Survey maps. There are banks of a later date in the woods, but the older and possibly mediaeval ones are 3–4 metres wide and 1½ metres high. While the coppice was growing up after cutting and needed protection from animals the banks would be topped by fences, probably of wattle similar to those in Hatfield Forest described by O. Rackham,²⁶ particularly as woodmen were accustomed to making hurdles and had the raw materials to hand (see Fig. 3). The periphery of the woods was surrounded by further banks, which often survive, and were surmounted by probably more robust fences or stock-proof hedges, the ditches being on the outside. Tenants were required to maintain these banks, ditches and fencing, and references to their upkeep are common. In an Elvendon court of 1407 the woodward presented John Stokenet for not maintaining his fence, so that animals entered Astlych wood (Ashlee?) and did damage.²⁷

The underwood (*subboscus*), or coppiced trees, was possibly mainly beech, which seems to have been a favourite fuel for domestic and industrial use and may have been taken by river barges to London and other towns along the Thames. In an Eynsham abbey account for South Stoke the woodward recorded sales of underwood called 'bechenwood' from Abbot's wood for 60s. 6d. in one year, a great deal of beech coppice,²⁸ and it is possible that some of the huge beech stools still found in many woods are of mediaeval date.²⁹

Hazel was a common form of underwood and had many uses; ash was also coppiced, and Wroxhall wood in Goring contains many huge ash stools, possibly of mediaeval date, which are distinctive in growing what appears to be a low 'trunk' (Fig. 2). While O. Rackham suggests that it was the custom to cut ash high, on being questioned a local woodman, who still works the coppices as his ancestors did, doubted that this was so, since a mixed coppice (as most were) would all be cut at the same height. He also reported that ash stools seem to grow a 'trunk' at the approximate rate of an inch every cutting, which suggests that some surviving stools in this wood, with large 'trunks' and of great diameter, must be very old.

Pure oak coppice is rare in the Oxfordshire Chilterns, although there is one of uncertain date at Burnt Platt Peppard (SU 693834), and there are occasional stools amongst the hazel and beech. Hornbeam is very rare, although along the boundary bank between Goring and Woodcote, which passes through several coppices (SU 633815 to 645811), is a line of very old coppiced hornbeam presumably planted for a specific purpose. Hornbeam was used for cogs of water wheels, of which there were several in the vicinity, as well as for beetles or wooden mallets and firewood; it is a brittle wood and so cannot be used as timber. Other trees coppiced included cherry, maple, and wych-elm, and even several service-tree stools have been found in Nuney wood, Mapledurham (SU 670787). Any broad-leaved tree can be coppiced, and most probably were.

²⁶ O. Rackham, *The Last Forest* (1989), 122.

²⁷ Oxon. R.O., PL xix a6.

²⁸ P.R.O., SC 6/961/20.

²⁹ O. Rackham, *Ancient Woodland* (1980), 15.



Fig. 2. *Top*: Cutting coppice wood with a billhook; an ashstool is visible (on the left) among the hazel. (Ph. P. Preece). *Bottom*: Medieval billhook. (Ph. Oxfordshire Photographic Archives, Oxfordshire County Museum, Woodstock; reproduced by permission).

The standard trees among the coppice stools were mainly oak, but sometimes beech or ash; beech was always considered a timber tree in the Oxfordshire Chilterns. Elm is rarely found in woods, being mainly a hedgerow tree. Stands of tall trees, oak, ash, beech, even poplar, were most probably grown, as now, planted closely together to draw them up to the light, thereby producing long straight trunks.

Management of a wood is reflected in an indenture of 1355,³⁰ by which Thame abbey sold the crop of coppice wood and timber of 'Notepotegrove' in Wyfold manor, Checkendon. The purchasers agreed to fell the wood 'by reasonable pieces' (separate coppices?), but were allowed to fell the 'great trees' (standards) when they pleased during the term granted. The abbot and convent reserved the right to enclose those parts of the wood cleared, after the crop (underwood) was taken away, to prevent animals from entering, saving the purchasers 'free entry and issue'.

PASTURE AND GRAZING

One of the uses of woodland that frequently appears in mediaeval documents is pannage for pigs, and pasture (or right of common) for beasts. Pannage, the right to feed pigs in the woodland on autumn falls of beech nuts or acorns, was commonly granted to tenants in the Chilterns; the beech nuts occurred irregularly, sometimes only every 5 to 7 years. In 1279 tenants in Woodcote paid dues for rights of pannage 'when the wood carries it' (*dabit pannagium quando boscum portaverit*).³¹ At Whitchurch and elsewhere the tenants had to pay 1d. for pannage for pigs over one year old and ½d. for pigs under a year.³² (See Fig. 3).

Woodland in the mediaeval Chilterns was also valued as pasture, although it must have been of poor quality. In Abbot's wood in Woodcote grazing was allowed in 1366 to Eynsham abbey's tenants from South Stoke and Woodcote, but to 'no foreigners' (*non forinsecis*) except the canons of Notley abbey, who had a grange in Caversham and paid 2 lbs. of wax a year for common rights.³³ In 1297 the inhabitants of Whitchurch paid 6s. 8d. a year for pasture for any animals except pigs and goats, both of which might do damage in the woods; possibly when pigs were in the woods for the nuts they would be accompanied by a swineherd, so preventing too much damage. In 1252 the knight Roger de Hida successfully claimed rights of common pasture for his cattle in 'the village, fields and woods of South Stoke and Woodcote' against Eynsham abbey, although the basis of his claim and whether he was actually living in the parish is unclear.³⁴

Apart from the herbage of the coppices, the foliage of the trees was used as cattle feed, possibly in the late winter or early spring. In 'Gangulvesden', a manor near Nuffield, the woodward had the right to pasture and foliage in the lord's wood in 1279.³⁵ Holly was often used to feed cattle when hay supplies were exhausted; unfortunately no references to this practice have been found in this area.³⁶

³⁰ *Cal. Close Rolls 1354-60*, 178.

³¹ *Rot. Hund.* (Rec. Com.), ii, 750.

³² *Ibid.*, 775.

³³ *Eynsham Cartulary*, ii, p.127.

³⁴ *Ibid.* i, p.206.

³⁵ *Rot. Hund.* (Rec. Com.), ii, 771.

³⁶ M. Spray, 'Holly as Fodder in England', *Agric. Hist. Review*, xxix pt.ii (1981), 97-110.



Fig. 3. *Left*: Pannaging. The swineherd is beating down acorns for the pigs. *Right*: Making hurdles, 15th century. (Bodl. MS Douce 8, p.viii; *ibid.* MS Auct. D. inf.2.11, f.11; reproduced by permission of the curators of the Bodleian Library.)

Unlike the royal forests where pollards were common and grazing could be allowed without too much damage to the trees, much pasturing in the Oxfordshire Chilterns seems to have been in the coppices. In Mapledurham in the 17th century newly cut coppices were enclosed for at least 7 years, then thrown open for grazing, as is indicated by a court roll entry in which Chazey wood and Dudsom coppice were to 'lie common with the feildes seaven yeares after it is feld'.³⁷ Young coppices with their 'spring' were probably protected with wattle fencing on the banks. The woodward's task was to govern the grazing and see that no animals entered the cut coppice, as Evelyn makes clear in *Silva*:

'... of his continual duty; which is to walk about and survey his young plantations daily and see that all gaps are immediately stopped, trespassing cattle impounded ...'³⁸

At Elvendon in the 15th century several people were presented to the manor court for allowing their beasts to enter coppices, amongst them Thomas de Anne, who in 1409 laid waste the lord's wood with his bullocks and cows.³⁹

DEER PARKS

Although deer parks existed in the Oxfordshire Chilterns, few exceeded 200 acres and several belonged to very minor gentry. Their purpose must have been supply of food rather than recreational hunting, the hunting being done by a warrener, woodward or forester. Besides the 10 parks at Caversham, Ewelme, Henley, Huntercombe, Heymer

³⁷ Cooke, *Mapledurham*, 196.

³⁸ John Evelyn, *Silva* (1776 edn.), 479.

³⁹ Oxon. R.O., PL xix a5.

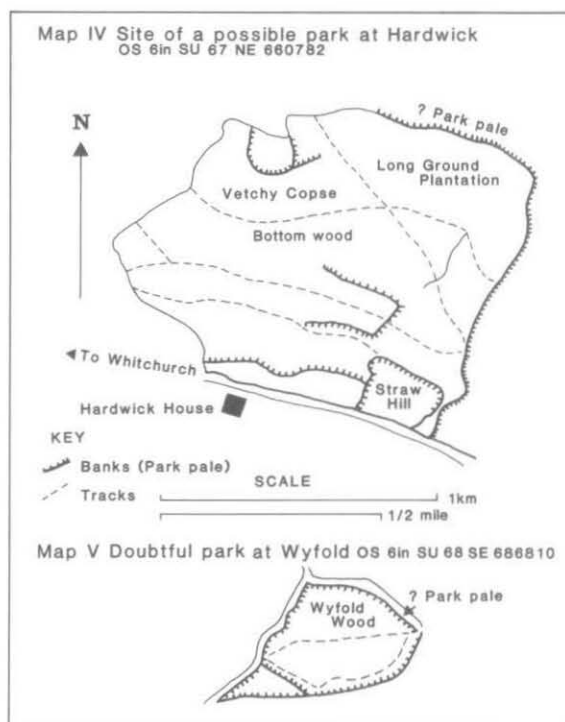
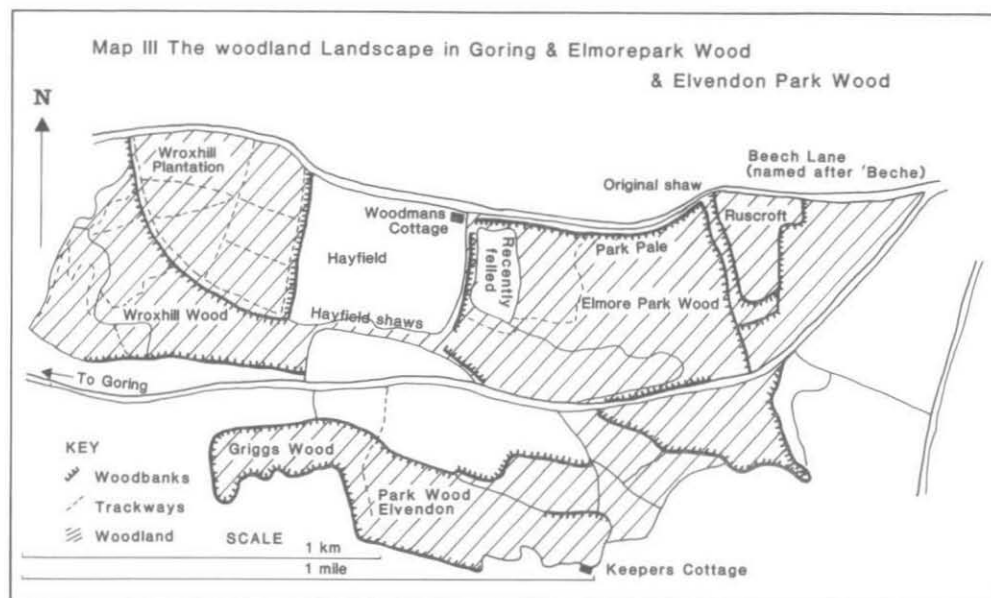


Fig. 4. Woodlands and possible parks.



Fig. 5. Elmorepark wood: park pale (Ph. P. Preece).

(Highmoor), Mapledurham, Rotherfield Greys, Shirburn, Stonor and Watlington mentioned in Frank Woodward's *Oxfordshire Parks*,⁴⁰ there may have been others at Applehanger (or Elmore park), Elvendon, Hardwick (Whitchurch), and Wyfold. At Elvendon (in Goring) John Loveday was granted a licence for a park of 200 acres in 1356, which was to include woodland and pasture.⁴¹ A Park wood survives in Elvendon with associated wood banks, although nothing resembling a mediaeval park pale has been found. The wood is mixed, comprising an area of hazel coppice with a few surviving standards, a large stand of tall beech and a plantation of conifers. In the lost manor of Applehanger, Elmorepark wood, formerly Elynore park, comprises 76 acres, probably the park's original size (Figs. 4–5).⁴² A large bank on the northern boundary and remnants of banks on the other sides are probably the remains of the park pale, although inexplicably the ditches are on the outside; it is feasible that at some time the bank has been reconstructed as an ordinary wood bank. Poachers were presented at Elvendon manor court for hunting in 'the lord's wood called Elynore park' in 1409, so possibly by then it had ceased to be considered a park.⁴³

There is no documentary evidence for a park at Hardwick, where the de Hardwicks

⁴⁰ F. Woodward, *Oxon. Parks* (Oxon. Museum Services publ. 16, 1982).

⁴¹ Gambier-Parry (ed.), *Goring Charters*, i, 121.

⁴² P. Preece et al., 'In Search of Applehanger', *South Midlands Arch.* xix (1989), 59.

⁴³ Oxon. R.O., PL xix a5.

owned an estate in the 14th and 15th centuries;⁴⁴ a good-sized bank around part of Bottom wood with a ditch on the inside, however, seems to indicate that it may have been a deer park. At Wyfold, a manor belonging to Thame abbey, the woods similarly have a possible park pale on their northern borders (Fig. 4).

The woodland in such parks may originally have consisted of pollards instead of coppice. These are a form of high coppice, the trees being cut off at a height of between 4 to 8 feet and allowed to shoot; examples can be seen in Burnham Beeches in Buckinghamshire.

THE MANAGEMENT OF THE COPPICES

In this area coppices were allowed to grow for at least 7 years, but sometimes longer depending on the quality of the soil and the growing conditions; at Bix, for example, where woodland was in a frost pocket, the growth would take longer to mature. The use to which the wood was put also influenced the time between the cuttings. If bark was required from coppice trees the time between would be at least 10 years.

Most of the woods have a network of tracks along which the wood was removed. In more recent coppices they tend to have a geometrical pattern, but as O. Rackham has pointed out the mediaeval track-ways are probably less regular, having been altered many times over the years; this certainly seems to be so in the Oxfordshire Chilterns. Wood was often removed by the tenants as one of their customary duties. At Whitchurch in 1279 tenants had to carry 2 cartloads of wood for the lord before Christmas, while in Ipsden some had to carry 2 cartloads and others had to carry wood for two days.⁴⁵ In 1386 the tenant of a house and 44 acres in Checkendon had to carry 5 cartloads of 'buche and bowes', each drawn by four horses.⁴⁶ It is possible that 'buche' could mean bush, but the reference to horses suggests that beech was meant; since, according to local woodmen, one horse can pull 50 cubic feet of timber or half a ton of wood, the service may have involved up to 200 cubic feet of timber, and it is unlikely that four horses would be used to pull carts containing bush and boughs. Horses seem to have been universally preferred to oxen for pulling wood and timber in this area, being more flexible along the narrow woodland tracks.

Coppices were cut with a bill hook similar to those used today.⁴⁷ Woodmen probably made hurdles, besoms, wattlework and faggots actually in the woods, and may have had small temporary huts in the woodland as in the 19th century. In 1279 Robert Luvkyn of Huntercombe had to make from the rods (*virgis*) cut from the lord's coppice four crates (*crati*), probably either sheep hurdles or chicken crates, besides carrying wood for one day as part of his customary duties; Robert son of Simon the smith of Ipsden, who held 3 acres of woodland, perhaps a shaw, had to cut 1 (?score) of faggots for the lord.⁴⁸

Coppices were often let for cutting, sometimes to a tenant, to procure firewood or wood for the repair and maintenance of their premises and farm equipment. In 1483 John Bland of Henley bought the growth of a coppice for an unspecified amount from William Stonor: he was to cut ash and withy (or willow) underwood and fell some aspens (or

⁴⁴ Gambier-Parry (ed.), *Goring Charters*, i, p.xlv.

⁴⁵ *Rot. Hund.* (Rec. Com.), ii, 775, 781.

⁴⁶ Berks. R.O., D/EH T64.

⁴⁷ See above, p. 60, Fig. 2.

⁴⁸ *Rot. Hund.* (Rec. Com.), ii, 759, 782; in the 18th century faggots were generally counted in scores.

poplar), giving Stonor the lop (or branches).⁴⁹ In an earlier charter of 1368 John James of Wallingford rented a coppice in Applehanger (in Goring) from Henry de Aldrynton for roughly 10s. a year per acre, being required not to cause too much disturbance on moving the wood and to preserve the value of the coppice.⁵⁰ When we consider the 'disturbance' caused by timber wagons this was a necessary edict.

USES OF COPPICE PRODUCTS

A primary product was firewood, which in this area was mainly beech: in 1448 the woodward for Abbot's wood obtained 60s. from the sale of underwood called 'bechenwode', presumably a large quantity of beech coppice-wood which may have been used for firewood.⁵¹ Underwood was cut at different times according to requirements: for billet, which required wood 10 inches in circumference, the beech might be 10 years old. The 'spray' or twiggy tops were made into faggots or bavins, the smallest of which were used for domestic firing; a bavin was a large faggot which according to a Statute of 1542 should be 3 feet long with a circumference of 24 inches.⁵² Faggots were bound with 'withs', thin strips of split hazel or willow rods which were also used for binding besoms.

Tenants usually had different 'botes' or rights of wood, including firebote, the right to firewood. In 1482 the dean and chapter of St George's Chapel, Windsor, allowed Robert Rolfe of Pyrton 20 loads of wood annually from 'Kynges Wood',⁵³ while in 1279 in South Stoke 23 villeins were allowed a cartload of wood for the 'cooking of their meat'.⁵⁴ The ordination for the vicarage of South Stoke in 1399 entitled the vicar to 8 cartloads of firewood from 'Egslade' wood (Abbot's wood in South Stoke);⁵⁵ as it was to be pulled by three horses this was probably billet, suggesting that the vicarage house had a large hearth since billet was meant to fit on the andirons of the fireplace. A charter of 1175 mentions cart service to Goring church, carrying brushwood and firewood for its use⁵⁶ – presumably for the vicar, since the church is scarcely likely to have been heated.

A record of wood sales at Stonor in 1482 mentions sale of wood 'to my master's nailer'.⁵⁷ This may have been firewood for a forge, although the nailer could equally have been making 'trenails' or wooden pegs for holding wooden structures together; in the same sale, various tenants were given loads of coppice-wood to their 'fyre' or for their 'fuell'. The same sale mentions firewood being sent from Stonor to the lord's household in London, probably by barge from Henley; a load of 2,500 beech faggots was certainly sent to London from Henley in 1299.⁵⁸ The only reference found to the transport of wood in barges in this neighbourhood is in 1210, when the bishop of Winchester was paying £14 16s. 8d. for 5 barges to transport corn, firewood and timber from Wargrave to London.⁵⁹

An important use of faggots, often defined in 18th-century accounts as 'large' or 'huge'.

⁴⁹ P.R.O., C146/7094.

⁵⁰ Gambier-Parry (ed.), *Goring Charters*, ii, 187.

⁵¹ P.R.O., SC6/961/20.

⁵² 'Act for the Assise of Fuel', *Statutes of the Realm*, iii, 34–5 Hen. VIII, c.3.

⁵³ J.N. Dalton (ed.), *The MSS of St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle* (1957), Pirton xv.16.1.

⁵⁴ *Rot. Hund.* (Rec. Com.), ii, 750.

⁵⁵ *Eynsham Cart.* ii, p.184.

⁵⁶ Bodl. MS. Chart. Oxon. d 1(2).

⁵⁷ P.R.O., C47/37/5.

⁵⁸ 'Mediaeval and Tudor Henley' (Henley Arch. and Hist. Group, 1978).

⁵⁹ N.R. Holt (ed.), *The Pipe Roll of the Bishopric of Winchester, 1210–11* (1964), 82.

faggots, was for firing the many kilns in the Chilterns. Most were small and local, frequently situated on the edge of woodland and preferably with a pond nearby. In Woodcote, Claypit wood adjoins Potkilm Lane near two ponds (SU 643810), and there are clay workings in several woods in the vicinity. John Marten, a tiler, worked in Woodcote in the late 15th century; as part of his rent he was to provide 1,000 tiles and take them to 'Wodecotechappelle', possibly for reroofing the chapel. In the same period the Stonor estate sold wood to a tiler, probably from Nettlebed.⁶⁰ Woodland on the former Stonor estate at Bix is full of huge beech stools, and according to local information the woods supplied beech firewood to the Nettlebed kilns until they stopped functioning in the early 20th century. In 1456-7 three men had a 'tylehous' and two a 'pot hous' at Nettlebed, and no doubt cartloads of large faggots struggled across country to them.⁶¹ Thomas Stonor was one of the customers at Nettlebed, purchasing 200,000 bricks for £40 from Crocker End (part of Nettlebed) in 1416-17.⁶²

Charcoal, by contrast, seems to have been one of the lesser products of woodland in the Oxfordshire Chilterns, probably because apart from local blacksmiths (and perhaps the 'nailer') there was little demand for it. Certainly coppice was not grown specifically for charcoal, as it was elsewhere, and although charcoal burners may have cleared surplus wood after felling, much of it was probably used for firewood – for example the felling faggots mentioned in 18th- and 19th-century accounts. Local prejudice against charcoal burners is suggested by the stipulation in an indenture of 1482 that 'colliers . . . destroy not the young sp[r]yng with stopping of their salls', meaning either that charcoal burners were not to cut the coppice growth, or alternatively were not to put their fires on top of the coppice stools, thereby stopping their growth. There were, however, charcoal burners in the Stonor district in 1482, when 'XXX qtrs cole' were sold. Withy Copse in Kidmore End is said to have been partly destroyed by charcoal burners and replanted with conifers in the mid 19th century,⁶³ and there were still charcoal burners in Mapledurham woods in the 1970s after the felling of some tall beech.

Tenants were entitled to other 'botes', amongst them 'heybote' or wood for fencing, 'housbote' for the upkeep of their houses, and 'ploughbote' to provide wood for essential agricultural equipment. In 1536 Walter Barton, lessee of the manor of South Stoke under Eynsham abbey, which had kept possession of Abbot's wood, was entitled to 30 loads of hardwood for fuel 'with sufficient hedgebote, cartebote and plowbote'.⁶⁴ The hardwood may have been oak or, more likely, beech, which was both more common and less valuable; the cartbote and ploughbote was probably ash. Walter Garstone and Thomas Broune of Checkendon in 1383 granted common of pasture in local woods to John Hawman with housbote and heybote from the underwood, but not firebote; firewood he presumably obtained from the shaws around his fields.⁶⁵ The wood concerned, later granted to Hawman, is still called Hammond's (i.e. Hawman's) wood; adjoining are Browns wood and Garsons.

Ash from the coppices was used for the handles of tools, parts of ploughs and notably for the products of wheelwrights.⁶⁶ No explicit references have been found to local

⁶⁰ Gambier-Parry (ed.), *Goring Charters*, ii, 228; P.R.O., C47/37/5.

⁶¹ P.R.O., SC6/1097/4.

⁶² C.L. Kingsford (ed.), *Stonor Letters and Papers*, i (Camden Soc. 3rd ser. xxix), 29-30.

⁶³ J.E. Smith-Masters, *History of Kidmore End* (Priv. print., Leighton Buzzard, 1933), 57; P.R.O., C47/37/5.

⁶⁴ *Eynsham Cart.* ii, pp.241-2.

⁶⁵ *Boarstall Cart.* (Oxf. Hist. Soc. lxxxviii), p.31.

⁶⁶ John Evelyn, *Silva* (1776), 156.



Fig. 6. Yew Tree Cottage, Chazey Heath, Mapledurham, possibly a former woodman's cottage, before restoration, showing use of coppice poles and wattle-and-daub. (Ph. P. Preece).

wheelwrights taking ash, although the Stonor wood sale of 1482 refers to 'exul' (axle) and 'plowyere' taken by a Henley man – perhaps John Joye of Henley, who later owed money for an 'exultre'. In Wroxhills wood are several acres of huge ash coppice-stools, some of which have been cut recently, though the wood may similarly have supplied ash in the Middle Ages.

Coppices also provided wattle for houses and sheep hurdles, brooms, and wood for fences. Hazel, one of the most commonly coppiced trees, was used for most of these. Wattle and daub used as an infill in most timber-framed houses consisted usually of hazel stakes interwoven with split hazel rods or 'ethers', although willow was also sometimes used; it was then daubed with a mixture of clay and manure. Small areas of wattle and daub survive in numerous timber-framed houses in the Chilterns, amongst them Mill Farm in Mapledurham, Forge Cottage in Checkendon, and Yewtree Cottage in Chazey Heath, Mapledurham (Fig. 6). Wattle hurdles, besoms, rakes and thatching spars are still made in woods near Harpsden using traditional techniques, which have probably changed little since the mediaeval period, the thatching spars being employed as today to pin the thatch. The besoms are usually of hazel twigs or 'spray' bound by a 'with'.

TIMBER

Compared to the coppices which produced so many of the necessities of mediaeval life, timber was cut much less frequently, although trees were perhaps felled earlier than today because of the constant demand for beams and other timber for building. The longer, better quality wood was probably saved for more important buildings and sometimes transported as far as London by river, while cottages were constructed with smaller and more crooked wood.⁶⁷

There were two sorts of timber trees, one grown amongst the coppice stools, sometimes called great timber, and the other tall timber. Standards in the coppices had branches starting fairly low down, were comparatively short, not necessarily straight, and because of the side branches had a good number of knots, and were therefore unsuitable for buildings requiring long, straight, good quality timber. Crucks, however, were cut from coppice standards, the tree trunks selected having a suitable curve and being cut longitudinally; the curved wind braces were cut from small trunks or large branches. Mill Farm at Mapledurham has three crucks, of which one pair has been cut through to allow the chimney to be inserted, indicating that it was probably an early hall-house; there are several crucks in Checkendon, including those in the Four Horse Shoes inn, although none are very obvious from the exterior. Almost certainly the timber came from local woods. The elderly descendant of a family of local wheelwrights has described to the writer how his father would walk round a wood choosing ash, noting any with suitable curves for shafts of carts or ploughs, and no doubt this was done in the mediaeval period with all types of timber.

Tall timber was probably cultivated locally in Anglo-Saxon times; a Pyrton charter of 774 mentions 'timberslaed', apparently indicating a valley with a stand of tall timber.⁶⁸ The term itself was probably used in mediaeval times, and was certainly current in 1573, when a bargemaster's account referred to 10 loads of 'talle wood' fetched from 'Floyeres

⁶⁷ Cf. P. Stamper, 'Woods and Parks', in G. Astill and A. Grant (eds.), *The Countryside of Mediaeval England* (Oxford 1988), 136–7.

⁶⁸ G.B. Grundy, *Saxon Oxon.* (Oxon. Rec. Soc. xv, 1933), pp.44,50.

wharf at Whichchurch . . . to Scotland [Yard London]⁶⁹ – an indication of the presence of small timber wharves along the Thames, although it is difficult to imagine the quiet riverside at Whitchurch as a bustling timber wharf. Such timber was cultivated for long beams and planks, the trees being planted close together so as to draw them up to the light without coppice. Traditionally, the young side branches of the tall trees were removed to prevent the formation of knots, a technique known as 'shragging' or 'scragging',⁷⁰ and practised into the 19th century. Special 'shragging ladders' were used and are mentioned in 19th-century accounts.⁷¹ In modern times beeches and oaks grown locally by this method have been felled with trunks exceeding 100 feet of usable timber. In 1338 the 8 acres of woodland in Nettlebed held by Dorchester abbey, and said to be worth only 4s. a year because there was no underwood, may have consisted exclusively of tall trees, possibly a mixture of beech and oak,⁷² which in the 19th century were planted in a ratio of about 10 to 1 as can be seen in the present woods.

Timber can be felled by one of three methods: clear felling, compartmental felling, which is the commonest today, and selective felling. An early example of the latter occurs in an indenture of 1482, stating categorically that '... alle that ys 20 ynche and under at brest heythe he schalte leve stand and never do fell',⁷³ the wood concerned has not been identified. The stands of tall timber may have been of small extent as at Nettlebed. Large scale felling was employed in 1481 for the repair of the mills at Caversham, held by the king, when timber contractors were hired to fell and hew timber in one of the king's woods; the 'hewing' may have been done over a shallow saw pit in the woods, a method used up to the beginning of the 20th century, and the pits can still be seen in some woods. Other contractors carried 46½ loads (i.e. 2,300 cubic feet) from the wood, which must have been local, otherwise the timber would have come by river. This was to be sawn into planks in the wood yard, probably in a permanent deep sawpit.⁷⁴ Five hundred beeches were sold from Watlington in 1479, though the use was not specified, while in 1231 40 timber beams (*copulas*) were given to the earl of Chester and Lincoln from Henley wood, probably conveyed by barge.⁷⁵ Both oak and beech timber was used for furniture, and amongst other uses beech was employed in shoemakers' lasts: in 1482 wood from Stonor was sold to a 'corviser'. Saddle wood, for which the finest beech timber was used, was employed in making moulds for saddlery.⁷⁶

BARK

Mature oaks were mostly felled in the spring, when the tannin content of the bark – used by tanners for curing leather – was highest; it was then stripped on the ground using special tools.⁷⁷ Coppices of oak were also grown for their bark, the oak coppice in Rotherfield Peppard, mentioned above, perhaps being an example. The period between cutting in such coppices was longer than usual, sometimes involving a 24-year rotation, and bark may sometimes have been stripped off the living tree.

⁶⁹ M. Prior, 'The Accounts of Thomas West of Wallingford', *Oxoniensia*, xlvii (1981), 86.

⁷⁰ O. Rackham, *Ancient Woodland*, 159.

⁷¹ Berks. R.O. D/EH e25.

⁷² P.R.O., C142/244/6.

⁷³ Ibid. C47/37/5.

⁷⁴ M.T. Pearman, 'Historical Notices of Caversham', *Oxf. Arch. Soc. Trans.* xxii (1894), 24.

⁷⁵ *Cat. Ancient Deeds*, vi, 168; *Close Rolls, 1227–31*, 544.

⁷⁶ Local information.

⁷⁷ L.M.C. Babb, 'Bark Peeling and Tanning in the Forest of Wyre', *Folk Life*, xviii (1980), 49–53.

THE MEN OF THE WOODS

No account of woodland management would be complete without some reference to the men who through the centuries looked after the woods. The primary officers were the woodwards, who organised cutting of coppices, felling of timber and banking and fencing, controlled the pasture, oversaw sale of products, hired the men, made up the accounts, and even, in some cases, culled and managed the deer in the parks. The accounts of the wood sales were probably notched on tally sticks; a woodward's account of 1448 mentions underwood sold by tally, and as late as 1721 a woodman measuring timber at Shirburn described how 'Wee have a knife and cuts a nock in a stick for every 20 feet'.⁷⁸ In the records of wood sales at Stonor in the 15th century, the statement 'Saunders seith' refers probably to the woodward accounting before the bailiff, perhaps from such notched tally sticks.⁷⁹ Woodwards were free men, who sold their services usually for a retaining fee, though 18th- and 19th-century references to 'wood money', roughly 1s. in the £1 on wood sold, suggest a long tradition of receiving a 'cut' which made the job worth while. Houses were sometimes provided: in Cookham (Berks.) in 1558 the woodward was entitled to a house and 9 acres of land,⁸⁰ and a building excavated on the edge of Park wood at Mapledurham may have been a woodward's dwelling.⁸¹

Eynsham abbey's woodward in South Stoke, Thomas Passelewe, was receiving 6s. 8d. annually in 1448.⁸² The abbey always kept Abbot's wood in demesne but leased the manor in the 15th century, and in 1470 the tenants had to contribute 7s. 8d. to the woodward, either the same Thomas Passelewe or his son, presumably for his care of the other woods in South Stoke such as Northgrove, Woodcroft and High wood.⁸³ He may have worn a uniform, as the tenants had to subscribe 4s. annually for his clothes. He may also have been woodward for Elvendon in Goring, since an ancestor, John Passelewe, acted as woodward and warrener with responsibility for Elvendon Park as well as 'Elynors' or Elmore park, from whence came most of his presentments in 1407-15.⁸⁴ He seems to have been a working woodward and warrener, though the royal bailiffs appointed in the 15th century for 'the keeping of the park' at Watlington and some woods at Nettlebed from 1442 to 1494 included a sergeant of saucery and a yeoman porter of the gate in the royal household; they were paid 2d. a day, but the actual day-to-day management of the woods was probably done by local woodmen.⁸⁵ Another instance of a woodward working for more than one lord was at Gangulvesden (near Nuffield), where he was woodward for William Barentin and Margaret de Plesset in 1279.⁸⁶

Beneath these managers were the men who did the actual cutting, felling and making of the coppice-ware, cottagers and freemen presumably living on the edge of the woods as they continued to do until the 19th century. Some were employed by woodwards and others by timber merchants such as the 'contractors' mentioned in the accounts for Caversham mills, who employed men to hew and fell at 4d. a day. In 1349 Nicholas

⁷⁸ Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon. c206, f.173; P.R.O., SC6/961/21.

⁷⁹ P.R.O., C47/37/5.

⁸⁰ S. Darby, *Chapters in the History of Cookham* (1909), 61.

⁸¹ Excavation by South Oxon. Arch. Group, of which the writer is a member; cf. Woodward, *Oxon. Parks*.

⁸² P.R.O., SC6/961/21.

⁸³ B.L., Harl. Roll G2 (1).

⁸⁴ P. Preece, 'Woodmen of the Oxon. Chilterns', *Folk Life*, xxvi (1987-8), 70-76.

⁸⁵ *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1485-94*, 17, 292.

⁸⁶ *Rot. Hund. (Rec. Com.)*, ii, 771.

Passelewe of South Stoke, probably an ancestor of the woodwards, was a timber merchant, and purchased a great deal of timber from the king from woods south of the Thames, presumably employing many men for the felling.⁸⁷

In essence this way of life continued uninterrupted until the beginning of the 19th century, when the introduction of coal and iron, and the easy transport of it by canal and, later, railway, meant that some of the woods were neglected. There followed a short lull in the activity in the woods of the Oxfordshire Chilterns, until the beginning of the furniture trade about the middle of the 19th century; but that is a different story.

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⁸⁷ P. Preece, 'A Family of Mediaeval Woodmen', *Oxf. Local Hist.* vol. 3, no. 1 (1988), p. 14.