

## The National Pinetum at Bedgebury, Kent by William Dallimore

During his time working as curator of Bedgebury Pinetum, William Dallimore kept detailed diaries, describing his work and the challenges he faced establishing the conifer collection. He gives a glimpse too of the people he worked alongside and the working practices and social attitudes of the time. This excerpt from his diaries during the years spanning the Second World War shows how Bedgebury and its people were affected by the country's upheaval and struggles. They also show the opportunities for women to step into forestry roles and play a valuable role in keeping the timber supply going.

### Wartime excerpts from Dallimore's diaries

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In 1936, the question again arose as to whether a man would be appointed to take charge of the Pinetum. I had reached the age of 65 and, after 45 years' service at Kew, was due to retire under the age limit. There were difficulties about making an appointment and as I had decided to retire to Bidborough, a village between Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells, Sir Arthur Hill asked me – although I would be about 17 miles distant from Bedgebury – to continue in charge of the Pinetum as Honorary Curator with a small annual honorarium, for another three years. I agreed and the arrangement was approved by H. M. Treasury. At the end of three years the international situation was so disturbed that I was asked to continue for the present, and it was not until the end of March 1946, that I relinquished the post, and it was then by Doctor's orders.

For most of the ten years I paid a weekly visit and during the war years, when labour was very scarce, I helped with some of the manual work. I am still a member of the Bedgebury Committee but at the end of March 1946 I ceased to carry out work for the Kew staff after 55 years and two months connection. I entered Kew thinking to stay about eighteen months or two years. It proves what I have often said that when a young man enters Kew as a student gardener it is more than likely that his preconceived view of his life's work will be entirely altered.

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War years at Bedgebury were a difficult period. Trained men were drafted to the Timber Production Department of the Ministry of Supply. In 1939 I was asked to take over the supervision of 40 acres of Experimental Forest Plots in addition to the Pinetum, which by that time was 60 acres in extent. I was left with Castle as a regular workman, and had two others, untrained and often changed young men who were waiting their turn to join the forces. I tried to get a man who had turned 60 years of age to settle down in the Pinetum

for the duration of the war and he would have done so had it not been for his wife. She found out that some of his late colleagues in the forest were getting overtime pay from the Ministry of Supply, and she made his life very unhappy until he asked to be transferred to similar work.

Eventually we took on two girls of the Women's Land Army and a third at times. Castle was not very favourably disposed to having them at first. He is a widower, and I think that some of his friends had been pulling his leg and telling him that if any of the girls were sent to work with him one of them would marry him... in the end. But once he had the girls and they became used to the work, he looked upon them in a favourable light and said that they were very dependable. He never made a complaint about them and on one occasion he took me through several larch plots they had brushed to point out the excellence of their work, then to a plot that had been brushed by men two or three years earlier, and the contrast was decidedly in favour of the girls. I never saw those girls up to nonsense and whenever I went, I found them at work. Castle was a strict disciplinarian, but he was careful not to give them work that was beyond their strength or work that was unsuitable for women.

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After a year or two one was married and she soon left us to make preparations for a nursery of her own. Her leaving relieved us of a difficulty, for recent wage increases would have made it necessary for the return of one girl to the forest and neither of the three wanted to move. Later a second one married but she stayed with us until she went to live too far away to cycle over and back in reasonable time. The third one remained until the summer of 1946, then, on the death of her father, left the Pinetum to help her sister with work on the home farm. She was a very capable and hard-working young woman.

With this labour we carried out the work on 100 acres of land given over to scientific collections of trees. Of course, some of the work that should have been done was neglected; we had to concentrate on essentials. I gave up trying to keep labelling and checking identification up to date and helped where I could with manual work. For about two years I carried a letter signed by Sir Arthur Hill to make sure of admittance into the military controlled area. People travelling by car or bus were never sure whether they would be stopped at Bewl Bridge - between Lamberhurst and Kilndown Corner on the Hastings Road - and asked to show their identity cards and state their business. Should the answer be unsatisfactory, they were turned back.

In 1944 I asked to be relieved of the forest plots. I could not get the work done as I desired with the labour at my command, and I was beginning to feel that I could not continue to help with manual work, therefore the care of the plots was handed back to a Forestry Commission officer.

Numerous girls were employed by the Forestry Commission and the Ministry of Supply on timber work in various parts of the Bedgebury Estate, but they had little contact with those in the Pinetum. Some of them measured timber, others burnt rubbish behind the timber fellers.

On several occasions serious fires had been narrowly averted during the process of burning branches, but until the end of April 1942 nothing alarming happened. Then a girl employed in the forest, quite against regulations, lighted a fire to boil water for her midday meal. There had been a long spell of dry, sunny weather and the previous year's ground vegetation was tinder dry. Instead of lighting her fire on a bare piece of ground or on a road, she built it amongst dry grass. A strong wind was blowing and before she knew what was happening surrounding dead bracken and grass had been set alight. Within a short time, the fire spread to a small plantation of coniferous trees, and before she could get help the fire was out of hand. To make matters worse the forester was ill in hospital and the acting man, although he did his best, was handicapped by not knowing the place very well. As soon as he heard about the fire, he got into touch with his District Officer, and he, recognising the seriousness of the situation, applied to a nearby military camp for help. A large number of soldiers came, and they were stationed along the roads and rides to try and prevent the fire spreading into other blocks of trees, but as a strong wind was blowing that was difficult. The fire started about 12 o'clock and although the National Fire Service had sent a large number of firemen and firefighting appliances by six o'clock it had travelled well over a mile and was getting dangerously near the Pinetum.

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The position was reported to me by telephone soon after six, but it was too late for me to go that evening, and I said that I would get there as early as possible the following morning. I arrived about 10 a.m., to find a large number of firemen, engines and pumps, and about 60 soldiers about the place. There were also the Divisional and District Officers of the Forestry Commission who had been about throughout the night. The firemen were sure that there was no further danger and that the fire had been extinguished, and most of them were ready to depart. The Divisional Officer was less sure and thought that the firemen were premature in removing hoses and pumps. We went over the burnt area together and found several patches of burning peat, so asked the officer in charge of the soldiers to allow them to remain for a few more hours.

On the previous evening, in order to stop the fire spreading into the Forest Plots, a wide drift of trees had been cut through a plantation, and that we thought to be still a place where a new outbreak might occur. A few firemen were left but we decided that two of our own men should patrol this area. About 2-2.30 p.m. they saw signs of a new outbreak and took what precautions they could, but there was no water available, and trees were soon alight with the strong wind blowing blazing branches towards the plots. About three o'clock the first plot caught fire. Meanwhile we had collected what firemen were left and

also succeeded in stopping the last of the soldiers who were ready to leave. There were enough hoses left to reach about a quarter of the plots and those were saturated with water while more firemen and appliances were sent for. All that we could do was to beat out the fire on the rides as it attempted to spread from plot to plot. We saved the greater number but 29 were destroyed. Once fire touched a quarter acre plot of conifers it was gone in five minutes. There was a half-acre plot of *Picea Omorika*, perhaps the most important plot of all, and about 4 o'clock it was arranged that I should concentrate on that while the District Officer sought out the most dangerous places elsewhere. When I arrived at the plot, I found a bank of peat about 10 feet away well alight and smoking from at least twenty points. I got Castle and two men to try and dig the fire out but as fast as they gained the mastery at one point another started. I then got six soldiers and set them to dig a trench between the bank and the plot, and at the same time had several rows of trees cut out of adjoining plots to make a wider gap.

In one way or another we held the fire in check until we got an abundant supply of water about 5 o'clock. The trench we had dug was filled with water and so cut off the fire from the worst point. An hour later the fire was under control. Men were kept on duty all night and for several days and nights, and firemen with appliances remained for a week but there was no further trouble.

Fortunately, an abundant water supply was available in Marshall's Lake although it was not very near the worst of the fire, in fact the firemen told me that part of the time during the first night they were pumping water through two and a half miles of hose to reach one distant point. The fire was checked less than 100 yards from the Pinetum fence. There was a little danger during the first afternoon from blown burning branchlets, but Castle was on the alert and put them out before harm could be done.

That was our worst experience during the war for although numerous bombs fell and several planes were destroyed in the forest and its vicinity, none fell in the Forest Plots or Pinetum. A flying bomb fell in a field to the north of the Pinetum, about 100 yards from the fence. Bomb fragments were found widely spread in the Pinetum, but blast went the other way, and while we had not a tree damaged, a lot of harm was done to the farmhouses and farm buildings of the Home Farm about 250 yards away, and to a house and greenhouses belonging to Bedgebury House.

Timber fellers and timber extractors made us a lot of work by breaking down and not repairing fences, thereby letting in rabbits which were difficult to clear. Grey squirrels have been troublesome creatures, and they are as difficult to control as rabbits.

For a meeting of the Committee held in June 1945, I prepared a long report on the Pinetum during the first 20 years of its existence, giving instances of successes and failures with suggestions for future management. This was published in the *Quarterly Journal of Forestry* in January 1946, with a foreword by Sir W. L. Taylor, and it was later made available for general distribution. I continued in charge for another nine months and then retired through illness.

# Dallimore's diaries

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Find out more about William Dallimore and how we are celebrating 100 years of Bedgebury National Pinetum in 2025 [here](#).