



Wyre History



Ancient forests

From the ice age to mediaeval times, Britain may have been one wild mass of trees and bushes. 'a (red) squirrel could cross Britain without touching the ground'

Early settlers would fear the endless forest where they could easily become lost - what creatures might hide in it at night?

The Wyre Forest itself is steeped in history.

There have been trees growing here for 10,000 years. We think that people may have been living here too from around the same time, the Mesolithic period.

Neolithic - Stone Age man began to chop clearings to create farms, mainly on higher ground.

After 700 BC the climate cooled, the fertile soils on high ground (now unprotected by tree cover) were eroded by winter rains, forcing people down into the woodland.

Bears, wolves, beavers and bison lived the in the forest.

During the Iron Age, Celts introduced the first iron plough which accelerated the clearance of the forest.



The Romans and Wyre

There is evidence of Romans having settled in the area - Town Wall Camp is the best researched Roman period site associated with the Forest.

Romans - enjoyed roasting the dormice that lived in the woodland!



A royal forest in the middle ages

After the Norman conquest at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Foresta de Wyre was passed to the Mortimer family, as a Norman Chase - managed for hunting, leading to the creation of well-stocked deer parks (but leading to much loss of trees).

Roger de Mortimer may have been a king of England for a while, so Wyre technically became a Royal Forest. It was held by the Mortimers until 1461 when it passed to Edward IV. It was of similar size to today, but bordered by more open common land.

In the Middle ages, large scale tree felling occurred nationally in order to build the great cathedrals (1,000 oaks for Salisbury Cathedral!)



Deforestation and the end of the deer parks

Hunting continued in the forest right up until the early 1500's, when even Henry VIII may have hunted here.

During the Tudor period, trees were felled nationally on an even larger scale for ship-building, trade and war. From 1550-1600, Wyre was deforested and the deer parks fell into disuse.

The 1610 John Speede map of Worcestershire shows that the area covered by Wyre Forest was broadly similar to that of today, although its character will have changed considerably. There was a need for managed productive forest with oak coppice produced in strict rotation for bark (for the leather tanning industries) and charcoal production.

Although hard to believe now, this forest was once a centre of enormous economic activity, with the production of charcoal fuelling many local industries (eg the salt evaporation works in Droitwich and the local iron furnaces). Much of the forest was managed as coppice rotation enabling many woodland crafts to exist.



Coal, too, was extracted in the post mediaeval period. Woodland management for coppice and timber production probably reached its peak throughout the 17th to 19th centuries and would have had a significant impact on Wyre's landscape.

The presence of watermills dating from the 17th and 18th centuries imply that other subtle historic features from this period are waiting to be discovered.

The effect of the Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution, from the 1800's, saw an end to the need for charcoal and bark. Coppice rotation periods became longer as pit props became of more use for coal mining.

During World War II charcoal burning for commercial purposes disappeared from the Wyre Forest.

Ownership of Wyre was split between various private owners and estates - Skeys, Blount and Baldwin Childe for example.

In the 19th Century the Bewdley to Woofferton and Severn Valley railway lines, serving the Great Western Railway, were constructed.

In 1870 significant areas of land were purchased by the Birmingham Quaker group, to establish fruit growing in the area on an industrial scale to serve the needs of Birmingham and the Black Country. These were significant events in the area.



Recent history

In 1919 the Forestry Commission was set up in response to the lack of timber during the First World War. In 1925/6 the Forestry Commission bought parts of Wyre. Wyre Forest was slowly cleared of oak woodland and was replaced by new conifers, leading to decreased biodiversity but increased timber production.

Between 1945 and 1975 the construction of houses and roads, forestry, and changes in agriculture led to widespread destruction of woodland and hedgerows across Britain.

1963 saw last clearance of broadleaves to plant conifers in Wyre. During the 1970s there was a rise in multipurpose forestry (forests managed for timber, wildlife and recreation).

A Visitor Centre was built at Wyre in 1976 and refurbished in 1996 and 2011.

By the 1990s the decline of open space as a result of growing conifers was serious for light demanding species (particularly insects) and coppicing became a conservation tool in Wyre, to enable light to reach the woodland floor, encouraging woodland flora and associated wildlife to flourish.



The Wyre Forest today

Today, some parts of Wyre are still managed primarily for timber production from native oaks and faster growing coniferous trees. However, as Wyre is recognised as one of the top 3 most important areas of ancient semi natural oak woodland in England, its conservation value underpins everything we do here.

The reason that you are able to enjoy the forest today is that it is also a valuable resource for recreation and education, offering opportunities for relaxation and enjoyment and a deeper understanding of the natural environment.

Conservation



Recreation



Education



Timber Production



A day in the life of Stewart, a Forest Worker



Clearing the pond of excess vegetation to ensure it remains as a pond, and to benefit the pond wildlife.



Checking the woodpecker play tree for safety



About to have a go at the GoApe (high wire adventure) course in Wyre!



Work doesn't stop just because it's snowing!



Sometimes I have meetings in the office even with my waders on!



Looking round a forestry show



A trip to the West Midlands safari park to see the animals who eat fodder (tree branches) we supply from the Wyre forest!



A visit to learn how some of our coppiced oak from Wyre is made into rustic furniture.



On the cherry picker surveying orchard trees for insects for the Wyre Forest Study Group - I hate heights!



High pruning forest trees to remove dead branches above waymarked trails.



Starting to fell an oak tree - knocking in wedges so it falls in the right direction when felled with the chainsaw.



Cross-cutting a fallen oak tree



I'm proud to have felled this lot!

(What should Stewart be wearing?)

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