

Providing protection

Time for a rethink regarding ancient woodland

CLASSIFICATION of woodland as ancient brings with it no particular responsibilities for stewardship and management of the natural heritage asset. We need a revised system which corrects this glaring anomaly and extends such stewardship and management to important individual trees in woodland and the countryside, says **Patrick Mannix**.

The Woodland Trust and the Ancient Tree Forum have done much to raise the profile of old and important trees. In July 2018, as a result of lobbying, the Government, in its response to consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework, agreed to extend the protection that ancient woodland has regarding planning applications, to individual trees. In the Framework, which addresses housebuilding, the earlier wording was 'development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats such as ancient woodland should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons'. The Government has now proposed amending the wording to 'ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees'. However, the importance of a particular tree may not be limited to the habitat it provides; it could be historical association, or age compared to others of the same species. The importance of some ancient woodland may lie in its soil rather than its trees. Unfortunately, the ancient woodland designation does not bring with it any responsibility for proper management and care of the natural heritage asset. The definition of ancient, veteran and other trees warranting protection needs further review as proposed later in this paper.

I own and work, and hence am the current steward of, Sandhurst Copse and Sheepwalk, 84 acres of part ancient mixed broadleaf in the Surrey Hills AONB. Sandhurst Copse is largely scheduled as ancient and divided into compartments delineated by earth banks. Sheepwalk is described as 'wood and rough' on the 1846 tithe map. Most of the older and more interesting trees are not in the ancient woodland, but in Sheepwalk! The sweet chestnut pictured above is c.220 years old. It has the form of a tree grown in the open rather than in a confined wood. Many of our oldest trees are ones that grew in wood pasture, which preceded enclosed and dense woodland. Encroaching silver birch has been removed to enable the tree to develop as if in wood pasture.

The second tree, shown left on the next



page, is also sweet chestnut c.290 years old. It also started growing as if in wood pasture but subsequent encroachment of oak, Scots pine and other sweet chestnut has driven its height to an extent that might not have occurred in more open wood pasture.

If these trees were buildings, they could be listed and have some protection. I wish to provide protection for such trees so that in several hundred years' time they may be ancient for their species; but there is currently no process by which I can do so. Protection of such natural heritage assets is not restricted to limitations on planning applications. Protection is also required to avoid damage as a result of ignorance or neglect. Deliberate damage needs to be deterred by meaningful penalties, e.g. withdrawal of any relevant planning application approval and maybe a bar on approval of applications of a similar nature by that individual in future.

I have no problem with part of my woodland being scheduled as ancient, but I have been frustrated that the classification doesn't bring with it any requirement to define what features are important for the specific site, nor any requirement for good management of those features. The ancient woodland classification system was hurriedly introduced in the late 1970s to establish the extent and quality of ancient, semi-natural woodland remaining in England and Wales, at a time when there was concern that

much had recently been grubbed up for agriculture or overplanted with conifer. The system of classification included a number of compromises, in order that the task could be completed, e.g. the 1600 cut-off date. Those who worked on the original system never thought that it would continue unaltered.

I have an area of woodland, shown right, opposite, with dense bluebells and other indicator plants, overstood by mature oaks – characteristics of ancient woodland. On the 1846 tithe map it is labelled as 'poor arable'. It was classified as ancient, until I pointed out the inconsistency with the tithe map.

The Government's 25-Year Plan to Improve the Environment makes several references for the need for improvement to the processes for protection of woodland and trees:

- Beyond the economic benefits, the Government recognises the significant heritage value and irreplaceable character of ancient woodland and veteran trees. We are committed to ensuring stronger protection of our ancient woodlands, making sure they are sustainably managed to provide a wide range of social, environmental, societal and economic benefits. [P. 25]
- The Tree Champion... will also explore opportunities to further strengthen protection for ancient woodland. [P. 50]
- We will assess the potential role of conservation covenants to enable landowners to create a legally binding obligation with respect to their land that delivers lasting conservation benefits for future generations. Covenants would be overseen by a responsible body to maintain standards, and could allow landowners to protect treasured features on their land such as trees or woodland for purely altruistic reasons. [P.62]

It is important that whatever system is put in place, its focus is the management and care of trees as natural heritage assets, with the necessary expertise to ensure that only worthwhile cases are pursued. It is important that trivial cases raised simply to obstruct planning applications do not proliferate and damage the integrity of the system.

The trees and woodland to be considered for protection might include:

Ancient and veteran trees: Individual ancient and veteran trees, above a threshold as appropriate for the species, whether isolated or within woodland, e.g. 400+ years old for sweet chestnut. Most woodland is the result of enclosure and planting. As mentioned above, many of the oldest trees, however, are from wood pasture which



preceded enclosed woodland. Veteran trees are ones that have distinct characteristics of ancient ones, but may not be old enough to be classified as such.

Historic trees: Trees of importance because of their historic association.

Old woodland: Woodland exhibiting the characteristics of old established woodland, with trees/coppice stools over a particular age, say 100 years, or containing archaeological features, e.g. old boundary banks. This would encompass the current Ancient Woodland inventory; but without the artificial constraints of the definition. Research associated with identification of genuinely ancient woodland would continue to be carried out by interested parties and owners. It may be important to identify those sites that have no record of chemical contamination, e.g. deliberate or inadvertent application of herbicide or pesticide, or military occupation. The soils of these may turn out to be as important as the arboreal assets.

Potential ancient or veteran trees:

Trees with the potential to become ancient/veterans and worth protecting as such, maybe selected trees over a threshold age appropriate for the species, eg. 200+ years for sweet chestnut.

New woodlands: New woodlands planted with long-term intent. These should be surveyed at, say, 30 or 50 years to judge whether they are progressing sufficiently well to be the subject of long-term protection.

Such categorisation would make clearer what is important. The Forestry Commission should extend their range of management literature to cover the specific management recommended in each case.

Recreational activities in protected woodland areas, or in the vicinity of ancient or veteran trees, should be restricted. If footfall is heavy then boardwalks can confine and reduce the impact. Activities such as mountain biking should be restricted to less important woodland and areas of commercial monoculture forestry. Silvicultural activities

in the vicinity should also be carried out with due care to avoid compaction and other damage.

The term 'woodland' is overused and lacks precision. It can refer to anything from a 500-hectare site of monoculture conifer planted for commercial gain to a one-hectare isolated scrap of very old woodland, with no conceivable future as such. It is particularly lacking in precision in the current debate on the amount of 'unmanaged' woodland.

Use of the generic term should be challenged: 'What sort of woodland are you talking about?'

There are many ways of answering the question: ownership, species, age, size... but I suggest the first level of categorisation should relate to the main output or benefit from the woodland. What does it provide to others? This could lead to a primary categorisation of:

- Production of timber for revenue. Unmanaged woodland of this type should be brought back into production and contribute to the national inventory.
- For other benefits, e.g. conservation, education, health, sporting. The need for obligatory management in this sector is less clear; some should be left to nature

Production of timber for revenue does not preclude provision of other benefits. A large conifer timber forest can host mountain bike trails, camping sites, etc. A smaller, mixed broadleaf woodland can aspire to revenue production to sustain itself, by production of added-value products on site, e.g. picnic tables for the local pubs, rather than selling the timber itself, as I have demonstrated with Sandhurst Copse and Sheepwalk.

[The assistance of Dr David Lonsdale, Editor of *Ancient and other Veteran Trees: Further Guidance on Management* (2013) and a member of working groups in the Ancient Tree Forum, in commenting on the draft of this article, is greatly appreciated.]

AMR

Heavy Duty Professional Log Splitters

- ▶ Heavy duty splitters from 7-28 tonne capacity
- ▶ Horizontal, vertical & combi types available
- ▶ Hydraulic, PTO, engine & electric power options
- ▶ Heavy duty, robust build quality
- ▶ Incredibly fast, double pump action



FUELWOOD