LOUGHTON & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

No 152 MARCH/APRIL 2002 Price 20p, free to members

The early history of Epping Forest

RICHARD MORRIS

The primaeval forest

The woodland history of Epping Forest begins for practical purposes at about 11,000 BC when the last Ice Age ended and the British Isles became suitable for tree growth. The first trees to recolonise Britain were birch, aspen and sallow, followed by pine and hazel, then alder and oak. Lime, beech, ash, elm, wild service and hornbeam, followed as the climate became warmer. The lime was the commonest tree in lowland England.

The Essex landscape is the creation of glacial drifts that penetrated the uplands in the north west of the county, before gliding southwards to produce the rugged contours of Epping (Waltham) Forest in the south west corner and, less dramatically, the gently rounded hills along the Thames Estuary.

We have evidence of the activities of man in Epping Forest in mesolithic times (10,000–4,500 BC) at Hillwood near High Beach. These men were forest dwellers and hunters. Their tools and weapons consisted of tiny pieces of worked flints that were mounted on bone hafts. Samuel Hazzeldine Warren, who lived in Loughton, was a pioneer in discovering the remains of prehistoric man in Essex.

Gradually Neolithic, or new Stone Age, people came with more advanced technology. They had now discovered how to cultivate their own crops and so started to fell trees to make clearings. There is also evidence of trackways through the Forest. A pollen analysis in the Lodge Road peat bog, near the gates of Copped Hall, Epping, indicates that the bog must have been formed around 2,340 BC, possibly by the creation of a path on a wooden causeway. However, there is scanty evidence of human occupation in the deep woodlands. The late Stone Age farmers preferred the higher and more fertile chalklands to the north and south of the Forest areas.

Iron Age camps

By the time of the Iron Age (750 BC to AD 40), human activity is growing in the Forest. At about 500 BC Celtic invaders from Western Europe were arriving in Britain. These were the peaceful farmers who became the Trinovantes tribe who lived in the Lea Valley and surrounding area. It is believed that they constructed the two Iron Age earthworks in the Forest at Ambresbury Banks and Loughton Camp.

Ambresbury Banks, just north of the Wake Arms roundabout, was built high on the Epping Forest ridge, and, if the trees had been cleared from the whole area, it would have commanded a magnificent view, both southwards to the Thames and north west almost to the Chilterns. Excavations have shown that the 'camp' covered an area of 12 acres and was surrounded by a bank and ditch, which can still be seen. The ditch was 26–30 feet wide and 6–10 feet deep. The bank was some 10 feet high, with a timber palisade and walkway at the top.

Loughton Camp is of similar construction and still lies hidden in the Forest near Monk Wood. The excavations have given us very little evidence of regular human occupation and it seems clear that the camps were not used as permanent living quarters. It is more likely that they were used as temporary hilltop retreats, easily reached by means of the side valleys. Here the valley farmers could have hidden with their families and cattle during times of danger, such as a raid by an adjoining tribe.

Apart from their historic significance, both areas are very attractive and are scheduled ancient monuments.

The Roman influence

The Roman influence in Essex started with Caesar's second expedition to Britain in 54 BC. At that time, the Trinovantes were one of the strongest tribes in the region, but their King had recently been murdered by the leader of a neighbouring tribe, the Catuvellauni. The heir to the Trinovantes came to an arrangement with Caesar under which the Trinovantes would support Caesar if he restored them to their fiefdom. Following Caesar's return to Gaul, Britain was left to her own devices for the greater part of a century.

An abrupt change came in AD 43, when the Emperor Claudius implemented his campaign to conquer Britain.

The impact of the Romans on the Forest was limited. They did not establish large settlements within the Forest, whose deep and dark woods were considered dangerous. However, the Forest was a major source of timber for the Roman network of roads, as Essex had no stone as a building material. The main road from London to Dunmow, passed between Epping and Hainault Forests, and on it was an important settlement, or at least a large villa, at Woolston Hall in

Chigwell. Other settlements have been identified at Leyton, Harlow, Waltham Abbey and Wanstead.

The Romans did, however, introduce to Britain pig breeding and this meant that great herds of swine roamed through the Forest to feed on beech mast and acorns. This would have an increasing effect in clearing the 'waste' and restricting new growth.

All did not run smoothly, for Roman greed and maltreatment of the subject natives of Essex caused widespread discontent that culminated in open revolt in the winter of AD 60, while the legions were campaigning in Wales. Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni, the tribe whose territory covered much of Norfolk and Suffolk, led the revolt and savagely destroyed centres in the south east, at Colchester, London and St Albans. Legions were summoned from Anglesey and brought Boudicca's followers to battle. The tactical superiority, experience and discipline of the Romans prevailed and the tribal army was decisively defeated.

Local tradition asserts that the dramatic counter-blow by Suetonius took place at Ambresbury Banks in Epping Forest and that Boudicca is said to have poisoned herself at Cobbins Brook on the Warlies estate. Unfortunately there is no evidence to justify the claim that Boudicca's final battle took place in the Forest. At least another half-dozen towns in England claim the site, and the consensus now is that a location near Milton Keynes is most likely.

The Saxon and Viking invasions

When the Romans left Britain in 410, England presented an inviting place to those northern tribes who were roving about various parts of Europe, notably the Angles, the Jutes and the Saxons. Successive hordes of the northern tribes invaded different parts of the coast and ultimately the Kingdom of East Saxony, or Essex, was founded, probably in 527.

Essex at this time was still densely covered by woodlands. We have little information about affairs in the fifth and sixth centuries, although we know that London replaced Colchester as the capital of the new Kingdom. However, in the ensuing two centuries, there was a selective clearance of the Forest and a dramatic decline in the lime tree, and its place taken at first by birches and then the oak. Areas under cultivation increased and the period, it seems, saw the establishment of wood-pasture management in a system of intercommoning that lasted until the nineteenth century, and was to be of vital importance in determining the future of Epping Forest in the 1870s.

At the end of the eighth century Saxon England came under pressure from the plundering Vikings. The next 150 years saw sustained campaigns during which the Viking forces were driven from Essex but subsequently regained their ascendancy. In 896 the Vikings hauled their ships up the River Lea and made a military base near Hertford. King Alfred countered this move by diverting the main channel of the River Lea so that the Danish force, with its vessels upstream, was stranded. No doubt the village dwellers in the Lea valley at this time took their families and cattle deep into the Forest to seek protection.

By the eleventh century Essex had been divided into administrative areas called Hundreds. Within each Hundred, each village had its own boundary and many of these still exist as parish boundaries today. Apart from the small, scattered villages, there were a number of isolated lodges and one of these was at Waltham, which means 'forest homestead' or enclosure.

The Norman Conquest

Although the Saxon Kings had enjoyed a passion for the 'chase' and had established a prerogative to hunt deer in the forests of Essex, no formal laws of the Forest then existed. This was all to change with the arrival of William the Conqueror. The people of the old Saxon Kingdom bore the full severity of the measures taken by William to reward his followers, and to buttress his own position in his newly won realm.

The ruthless confiscation of Harold's lands and those of the Saxon Thaneage, and subsequent grants to William's followers were probably made soon after the Conquest. New landowners in the Forest parishes appear: Robert Gernon, Peter de Valognes, Geoffrey de Mandeville and they and their descendants were to play an important part in owning and administering the Forest over the next five hundred years, together with the ecclesiastical landowners.

The great Domesday survey of 1086 in which: 'Not a single hide nor rood of land . . . an ox, or a cow, or pig passed by that was not set down in the accounts', so wrote the chronicler, was to provide the first detailed explanation of life in the Forest parishes.

For example in 1086 the canons of the Holy Cross of Waltham held Alderton (Hall) as a manor and this consisted of:

4.5 hides and 10 acres (about 500 acres)
2 ploughs on the demesne (the Lord's own land)
2 ploughs belonging to the men
9 villeins, 6 bordars and 3 serfs
Woodland for 400 pigs and 15 acres of meadow
2 cattle, 8 sheep, 10 pigs and 15 goats
Value £4

All the Forest villages are quoted in Domesday: Epping, Waltham Holy Cross, Chingford, Loughton, Woodford, Leyton, Walthamstow. This also indicates the progress that the Saxons and Danes had made in cultivating the lands near rivers.

It was William the Conqueror who first introduced the definition of a forest, by which is meant a tract of land where special bye-laws operated which were ostensibly concerned with protecting deer belonging to the King. Within the boundaries were the farmland, roads, villages and hamlets of the ordinary countryside, as well as towns like Waltham Abbey and Epping. The distinc-

tion between the physical limits of the woodland and the legal limits of the Forest was to be an issue of contention for the next 800 years.

William no doubt hunted in Epping and Hainault Forests while staying at Barking Abbey, prior to the Tower of London being ready for his occupation. Although there is little documentary evidence, it was William I who created the first real forest administration. His successors were to extend their rights in developing a system of forest laws which, to the ordinary villager, were harsh and oppressive.

Forests are the most complex example of the medieval multiple land use. Normally there were at least three parties in a forest:

1.The Crown as owner of the 'forestal rights'. (The right to keep deer and to hold forest courts.)

2. The lords of manors and other landowners, which could include the Crown, who were owners of the soil of the physical forest, of the timber growing thereon, and of part of the wood and grazing.

3. The commoners, having rights to grazing and wood but not usually to timber.

(Wood=coppice, pollard, poles, branches, firewood; timber=trunks of large trees.)

Deer and other livestock could roam over the whole of the physical forest (intercommoning), but timber and wood could be cut only on the territory of a landowner's or commoner's particular manor. In Epping Forest the Crown only owned the forestal rights, but in a major part of Hainault Forest they were also the landowner, i.e. they owned the soil.

(To be continued.)

Working for Winston

MURIEL WILLIAMS

Early in 1943 my office in Gerrard Street telephoned to tell me to report to 10 Downing Street. I knew that No 10 was not in use for the duration, although the policemen were still on duty there. I asked where it had moved to. 'I cannot tell you', was the answer, so I went round to No 10. On showing my pass to the policeman, I asked 'Where is the No 10 telephone room?', whereupon he banged on the door and passed me on to the policeman inside. On asking yet again I was directed to go round to the Foreign Office and then go down to the basement which runs the length of Whitehall, and another basement below that, and then turn to the left and I would come to the Cabinet War Rooms.

There were seven of us girls and, as only one of us could be spared to go to Chequers, one of the girls from the Treasury would also come along. We would travel in Winston Churchill's car and we would be the first to go as we were on 'communications'.

We were often asked to contact a certain person and would have no idea where they were but eventually we would track them down.

The Prime Minister was concerned that his car should run smoothly enough to enable the girls to take dictation while travelling and he would quite naughtily ask us what we thought of it. We would ask the girls concerned and report back to him. The chauffeur was an army sergeant known to us all as Bill. Bill's rifle stood between the two front seats – I often wondered how Bill would have time to use it if we were attacked.

Churchill could not bear to see any of his staff looking sad. Of course, if we had lost family or friends in the bombing, we would look sad at times. If that was the case he would put on one of his two brightly coloured dressing gowns, given to him by American admirers, and dance along the corridor to cheer us up.

Mrs Churchill was very nice and would often stand in the doorway and chat away when we were not busy. We nicknamed her 'old chatterbox', but we were very fond of her.

At Chequers the Prime Minister made it known that he would like us to go to Church and also, when we were off duty, we had the use of his car. He would often come to Church, if his work permitted, and sit at the front with the vicar's children. After Church we would go the nearby pub but back at Chequers there was always whisky and soda in the hall to help ourselves to when off duty.

ATS girls would come to help in the kitchen at weekends. One Christmas they served corned beef for our Christmas Dinner. We took the law into our own hands, found where the turkeys were kept and pulled off the legs, creating havoc. Churchill was very cross when he found out – not with us but with the ATS girls! They were told to put on a special Christmas Dinner next day, much to their dismay. They always looked down on us because we were not in uniform.

When an admirer sent Churchill some venison he ensured that we all had some and, although he liked beef, if there was not enough on the ration for all to have some, he would not have any.

There was a film show each evening at Chequers, in the Long Gallery, which was a long, book-lined room with a secret door made to look like shelves of books.

There were many soldiers in Nissen huts in the surrounding woods. These men had been on active service, had had their leave and were now on light duties before returning to the front. One of them would shoot rabbits and come into the kitchen to skin them for any of us who would like to take them home to supplement our meagre rations.

Off-duty soldiers were always welcome in the house to watch the films. There used to be about 60 of them each evening and if Churchill came on in the newsreel they would throw their hats in the air and cheer. It was a real mad-house! One evening I was standing between the two men showing the films. At the end, when the Prime Minister got up to leave, he saw me and winked. Not thinking, I winked back. From then on whenever he

saw me he would wink and I would wink back! His security men were convinced that I knew him out of the office which I did not. They noticed everything, even the winking.

The senior security man, Walter Thompson, had been with Churchill for years and later wrote a book called *I Was Churchill's Shadow.* He was not liked by any of us. We always had two local policemen on duty: one at the entrance to the grounds and the other at the house and there was always a password for getting into the grounds. One evening the password was 'orange' and Thompson had not checked what it was, expecting that everyone knew him. However, the village policeman made out that he did not know him and, much to our delight, locked him up for the night!

One another occasion Walter Thompson caught one of the soldiers taking coal from the back of the house and reported him to the Prime Minister. All Churchill said was 'Don't get caught again'. He could not have cared less. The boys in their Nissen huts needed warmth as much as he did.

Our telephone room was near the side door of the house. They were very heavy doors and not easy to open. When an army dispatch rider arrived late at night or in the early hours, whoever was on duty had to deal with these doors. I reported one dispatch rider for arriving very late from London – he had stopped for drinks on the way! After that we timed their arrivals and departures.

At the War Rooms in London, Mr Rance, our office manager, had two notices in the corridor which would show 'Fair' if all was clear or 'Windy' if an air raid was on.

Mr Churchill would never go to bed without knocking on our door then putting his head round it and saying: 'Good night, girls. Thank you. I am sorry to have worked you so hard.' Then in about 20 minutes or, if we were lucky, two hours he would be up, having thought of something, and have us all working again. There were only mobile toilets and the security men had to remove the chamber pot from the Prime Minister's bedroom.

There were always two marines on duty, seemingly not very alert, for they never did discover that what they thought was Mr Churchill's toilet (a small room with an old type toilet sign for 'engaged' or 'vacant') was actually fitted with a desk and telephone and was where he used to have long conversations with President Roosevelt.

Lord Ismay (nicknamed 'Pug'), who was our Chief of Staff, said that civil servants should be pleased to be able to work in the Cabinet War Rooms. I replied that I was happy to be there because life was so interesting. On two occasions I showed him letters from my husband who was stationed in India, blowing his top about the 'B—— army'. Lord Ismay would show the letters to the Prime Minister who would ask him to look into the problems.

I saw Churchill cry over heavy loss of life but our intelligence said that Hitler referred to their losses just as numbers.

There were five men in the Defence Map Room whom Mr Churchill had known since the First World War and had personally asked to come back to help out. One of them, Commander Jackson, was always bringing huge bunches of flowers for our offices. They certainly brightened the place up but, as the War Rooms were underground with no proper air conditioning, they did not last long. There were just ventilation pipes with air holes which we closed during air raids to stop the noise.

When the Prime Minister returned from a trip abroad he would bring back chocolates and fruit for us, asking whichever security man was off duty to see what he could get. One year two security men brought back tights from the US. They said they had bought one leg each!

The Prime Minister had a flat above the Cabinet War Rooms and two lovely cats that he adored. 'Smoky' and one-eyed 'Nelson', as they were called, were usually to be found in his study or bedroom.

At the end of the War, when he was kicked out of office, we all felt that no one else could have worked so long and so hard for victory. On that last day we all went in, one by one, to say goodbye and to shake hands with him. We were all upset and in tears, even the great man himself.

Loughton: 25 October 1901

'There are now, I think, six automobiles or motorcars kept in Loughton, - viz. Dr Butler Harris', Dr Astin's, Mr H M Fletcher's, Mr H Baring's, Liddell (at Brackenhurst), and a butcher's tricycle in Smarts' Lane. It will be interesting to make a similar observation later on. Bicycles have ceased to be "the mode", and many people who used to ride, have quite given them up: this applies of course to those having horses, in the main.'

SOURCE

Waller, William Chapman, *Odds and Ends*, vol II

LOUGHTON & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Registered Charity No 287274
President: The Rt Hon The Lord Murray of Epping Forest, OBE
Chairman: Dr Chris Pond, Forest Villa, Staples Road, Loughton IG10 1HP (020 8508 2361)
Secretary: John Howes, 97 Staples Road, Loughton IG10 1HR (020 8508 0776)
Treasurer: Mrs Eve Lockington, 19 Spring Grove, Loughton IG10 4QB (020 8508 4995)
Membership Secretary: Ian Strugnell, 22 Hatfields, Loughton IG10 1TJ
Newsletter Editor: Ted Martin, 34 Hornbeam Road, Theydon Bois CM16 7JX (01992 814445)