

The Leicestershire and Rutland Ancient Woodland Inventory update and a call for volunteers

Ancient woodland is defined (in England) as a site which has been continuously wooded since 1600. It was once a dominant habitat but now only covers about 2.5% of the UK land area. The locations of these remaining fragments relate to settlement patterns, land use and ownership, and environmental constraints on farming and woodland clearance throughout history. The conditions created by centuries of undisturbed woodland growth and decay have created a rich and complex habitat. The species that have evolved to live in these environments are often slow to colonise, unable to survive in other conditions and are subsequently increasingly rare. It is therefore important to identify and protect the remaining ancient woodland for the future.

Leicestershire in particular has historically been one of the least wooded counties in the country. At the time of the Norman Conquest the Domesday Book of 1086 records only about 3% of the county was woodland (O. Rackham 1986, *The History of the Countryside*). (The figure for Rutland was higher at around 10%). This situation is thought to have existed since at least the time of the Roman occupation if not earlier. Many parishes were entirely without woodland. Woodland continued to be lost throughout the Middle Ages as the open field system of cultivation expanded. However with end of this system through parliamentary enclosure in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries, there was an increase in woodland cover as new landowners planted woodlands across their estates, both for aesthetic landscaping reasons and for timber. The rise in popularity of foxhunting from 1750 onwards also led to the creation of many smaller fox coverts throughout parts of the county – as can be seen in North-east Leicestershire from Rutland up into the Vale of Belvoir. Woodland cover has continued to increase particularly in the National Forest and Charnwood areas of Leicestershire and in parts of the county there is probably more woodland now than at any time in the past 2000 years. However, the proportion of woodland defined as ancient is very small.

As stated above, to be classified as ancient, an area of woodland must have been ‘continuously wooded’ since 1600. However, woodlands do not have to have been entirely tree-covered throughout the period. Open spaces, both temporary and permanent, are an important feature of woodland. These might occur as natural clearings or due to tree felling and coppicing, which have been part of the use and management of woodland throughout much of history. Since virtually all woods have been harvested many times in the past, an ancient woodland may not appear to have a high number of ancient or veteran trees. It can even contain plantations of non-native species. What is important is that the area has not been cultivated at any time since 1600 or that there have been no prolonged periods without tree cover, and that the woodland soils remain relatively undisturbed. Plantations on ancient woodland sites can still retain ancient woodland features and they can respond well to restoration management.

The original Ancient Woodland Inventory was compiled in the 1980s as a provisional record of ancient woodland over two hectares across the country. It was originally produced as reports and paper maps on a county basis, and these have since been digitised to create a national dataset. It is a valuable resource for conservation and planning but has some inaccuracies arising from the initial mapping and the later digitisation process, as well as from woods being lost to development and agriculture. While areas of the inventory have been intermittently updated, the widening gap between the standards of the data and its use in determining the outcome of development or woodland management proposals

can create significant problems for the authorities involved. The inventory is therefore in the process of being updated.

The aim of the update is to standardise and update the data held by the Ancient Woodland Inventory across the country. Since its creation, the availability of evidence, understanding of ancient woodland, and potential mapping detail have increased considerably. The update will include a revision of the current inventory to check that known ancient woodlands are still present, correctly mapped, and that their status is supported by historical evidence. Previously undesignated ancient woodland will be added to the inventory. The latter are predominantly smaller woodlands down to 0.25 hectares in size which fell below the 2ha cut-off used in the original inventory. The Ancient Woodland Inventory update has also been expanded to include Wood-Pasture and Parkland. Wood-Pasture and Parkland is grazing land with scattered scrub and trees which are often traditionally managed through pollarding. Probably the best local example can be found in Bradgate Park north of Leicester, a rare surviving medieval deer park. Few parks have this continuity, and the vast majority remaining are the creations of 18th and 19th century landscaping.

The initial stages of the Ancient Woodland Inventory update process involved using modern aerial photographs, MasterMap, and 1st Edition Ordnance Survey maps (Epoch 1, published 1843-1893) to identify areas shown as woodland in both the late 1800s and the present day. These are considered to be 'Long-Established Woodland'. The Long-Established map layer was compared with the existing Inventory to identify woods which may be additions to the inventory and to check the previously designated areas. This initial process for Leicestershire and Rutland was undertaken by the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust with funding from Natural England.



The Freewoods – potential woodland to add to the Ancient Woodland Inventory. From left to right: current aerial image; 1824 OS 1" 1st series; c1880 25" maps. The Freewoods is a 4.1ha wood in Essendine, Rutland. It doesn't appear on the current Ancient Woodland Inventory. Frewode is named in a 1417 document. Its name derives from Free Wood –indicating a wood with commoners rights and thus predating enclosure. On the 1845 Tithe map it is called Free Wood and is listed as coppice woodland. The wood is now larger and has seen some planting. The part labelled Lei_1083_2 is ridge and furrow when viewed on Lidar (remote sensing images) and may be secondary if cultivated after 1600. The part Lei_1083 shows no ridge and furrow and could be a fragment of the original Frewode and thus ancient.

(Google Imagery c 2022, Getmapping plc, Infoterra Ltd & Bluesky/Copernicus/Maxar Technologies, The GeoInformation Group, Map Data c2022)

The current task is to track each area identified as Long-Established Woodland through time to establish its 'ancient' status using historical maps (OS drawings, tithe maps, estate maps etc.) to trace each area back in time towards the 1600s. Also using more recent maps and photographs to ensure that the areas were not cleared and replanted at a later date. While some larger areas of woodland are easy to track through history, new additions to the inventory are likely to be smaller areas (since the original inventory only went down to two hectares and the update to 0.25 hectares) and those with a sparser historical record. Other types of evidence are therefore required to help support the inclusion of these woods on the inventory. This can be provided through woodland surveys.

Woodland often has physical indications of age, such as coppiced trees, banks and ditches to mark boundaries or signs of buildings and settlements in more recently established woodland. The species found within a woodland can also provide additional evidence. Certain species ('Ancient Woodland

Indicators') naturally occur in older woodland and colonise new areas slowly, therefore the presence of a number of these indicator species would suggest that an area of woodland is more likely to be ancient. We will be undertaking surveys of potential Ancient Woodland sites next spring and summer. Across Leicestershire and Rutland over 500 areas of woodland have been identified for further investigation. With limited time and resources, we would like volunteers to help with these surveys so that we can gain information on as many as possible.

We are asking volunteers to visit woods and look for ancient woodland features and indicator plant species and enter the information on a simple recording form. You are able to select woods from a list and carry out surveys whenever it is convenient. We will provide guidance on what features to look out for as well as maps showing the location of woods which require a survey. Because of the short time frame for the project, we will not be able to get permission to visit private woodlands, so we will be asking volunteers to restrict their surveys to woods with permissive access or accessible by public rights of way, or where the surveyor has themselves gained permission to visit from the landowner. Surveys only require limited botanical knowledge – the ability to recognise a selection of woodland plants and trees. However, if you do not feel confident doing this, it would still be useful to us if you can visit sites and take photos of representative parts of the wood.

If you would be interested in undertaking some basic woodland surveys in your local area, please get in contact: Andy.Lear@wildlifebcn.org

The Leicestershire and Rutland Ancient Woodland Inventory update is being hosted by The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire working in conjunction with LRWT.

Andy Lear is a former LRWT Conservation Officer who lives in the area and has extensive knowledge of the woodlands of Leicestershire and Rutland.

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The Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI) Update project is a countrywide, multi-partner funded project with an estimated cost of £2.5 million, over 3-5 years. The project has received funding from The Woodland Trust, DEFRA, Natural England and MHCLG (now DLUC).

View the current Ancient Woodland Inventory:

[Natural England map](#)