

# *Trouble in the Woods*

The new 'Locust Years' & the destruction of ancient woodland heritage in the UK

Chaired by Ian D. Rotherham and Ken Smith

A 2-day seminar with the Landscape Conservation Forum Thursday 25 – Friday 26 April 2024



Tracks through a major monument in Whitwell Wood described as 'acceptable' as they only went through it twice

**Conference overview:** This two-day event begins in **Day 1** by **celebrating the remarkable and unique heritage** of ancient woodlands. To do this we introduce recent and current research in woodland archaeology & management and update on progress since the landmark publication of the 'Woodland Heritage Manual' in 2008. **Day 2** will focus on the **threats to this irreplaceable heritage** and ecology posed by current forestry policies & woodland management prescriptions. We will consider the challenges from the various perspectives including the views of enthusiastic & passionate foresters & owners charged with caring for today's ancient woods for tomorrow's generations. The argument presented by some of us is that the current guidelines & practices, often foisted onto owners, managers, & practitioners are causing unnecessary, permanent, & costly destruction of a unique & irreplaceable resource. Most damage is unnecessary, almost always unknowing, & certainly not deliberate.

**Conference primary aims:** Our aims are twofold **1)** to celebrate our wonderful ancient woodland heritage & to raise awareness of this; **2)** to seek a shared understanding & manifesto to help owners, managers, & practitioners better understand 'heritage' (writ broad) & to develop & share good practice to safeguard the precious resource whilst enabling appropriate economic production.

**Modern Mechanised Forestry:** Modern machine-driven management of ancient woodlands is causing widespread damage, erosion, degradation, and destruction of a unique heritage resource. This is on a scale not witnessed since the so-called 'Locust Years' (Oliver Rackham) of forestry in the 1960s and 1970s and which peaked with recognition of forestry-led damage to woodlands, peat bogs, and other habitats in the 1980s and 1990s. The latter caused massive public outcry whereas the present demise of what remain of our ancient woods is passing with barely a murmur. This event asks why this major degradation of our most valuable and valued landscapes is allowed, and how come nobody seems remotely aware or concerned. In many cases, centuries of unique heritage (sometimes thousands of years) and associated ecology are being destroyed in just a few days or even hours. These are the remarkable eco-cultural landscapes so treasured and cherished by the late Oliver Rackham, and about which he did so much to raise public and professional awareness. Yet, almost overnight, much of his legacy is being actively erased from the countryside, and not even the organisations that foster his memory take effective action to halt the process.

**Archaeology of the woods:** Most trained archaeologists recognise archaeology *in* the woods but not *of* the woods. There is almost no guidance available on the identification and recognition of the woodland resources, and even when they are noted, there is very limited awareness of the extreme vulnerability of the heritage. There are no effective guidelines on how to work on site to safeguard the resource and to conserve the woods. What guidance is accessible is full of weasel words where there is talk of 'sustainable' management and 'sustainable coppice working' – but with huge mechanical excavators.



Early industrial North Derbyshire charcoal hearth

**Unique Eco-Cultural Landscapes:** Ancient woods are not pristine 'natural' landscapes, but eco-cultural systems 'worked' for countless centuries by men and women with oxen and horsepower

alone. The communities of woodmen and women left their mark but it was as palimpsests of humanity ingrained into the long-term patina of the ancient countryside. When we walk through an ancient woodland today, we do so in the footsteps, and shadows of the ghosts of these people. The modern 'worked' woods involve few people passing through as itinerant machine-drivers before moving on to their next assignment. Great tracked vehicles rip through earthwork heritage, through ecology, through soils, and ancient working trees. Both types of woods are '**worked**' but the first are '**traditionally worked woods**' and are now '**ancient woods**'. The latter are '**worked**' but industrially and are no longer 'ancient woods' but '**industrial woods**', **different, distinctive, and degraded**. Once the antiquity of soils, heritage, worked trees, and vegetation are compromised, then clearly the woodland is no longer an 'ancient wood'. Oliver Rackham compared this to the ancient medieval wood being like an antique illuminated manuscript on parchment with the notes, scribbles and additions overlaid through countless centuries, a palimpsest. Modern management eroded and erases this to smudge and merge the manuscript and spewing out at the end, a cheap modern paperback novel. The paperback novel type landscape cannot be considered a genuinely ancient woodland ..... This we must recognise.

***To safeguard and conserve the irreplaceable heritage of the woods we must surely learn to walk more softly in the footsteps of the ghosts of our woodland ancestors.***

This 2-day event consists of a 1-day indoor seminar and a linked 1-day hybrid seminar (morning) & field visit (afternoon). Early booking is advised because numbers attending may be limited. The venues are in south Sheffield and nearby North Derbyshire with a field visit will be to the Moss Valley woodlands close to Coal Aston.



Recent impacts of Forestry Commission work in Whitwell Wood, North Derbyshire

**Key issues and themes include the following:**

- The unique nature, heritage, & archaeology of ancient woodlands.
- New and emerging research on woodland heritage and archaeology
- The differences between archaeology *'of'* the woods, and archaeology *'in'* the woods.
- The limited recognition of archaeology and heritage in woods.
- Links between ancient woodland ecology and heritage.
- The vulnerability of woodland heritage features.
- The challenges facing woodland managers in the twenty-first century
- The need for freely-available information to support site workers, planners, & operatives
- The absence of any due process of guidance for physical management operations in woodland environments.
- The damage done to heritage by modern machine-driven site management of woodlands.
- Shortcomings in the **Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI)**.
- An **industry recognition marque of traditionally worked woods** and the separation of industrial woods – and their necessary removal from the Inventory, perhaps replaced by a category of **'Industrial Woodlands'**.
- Asking questions like 'just how important is that medieval charcoal hearth?' & 'why?'

**Call & further information:**

We are calling for partners, collaborators, and sponsors for the event. There will be a publication based on the papers presented and / or invited. If interested, please contact Professor Ian Rotherham in the first instance: [syeconet@gmail.com](mailto:syeconet@gmail.com)



Prehistoric bank and ditch running around half a mile in Whitwell Wood, North Derbyshire

## Outline programme

Event CHAIRS: Ian Rotherham, Ken Smith, Andy Alder, Christine Handley, Andy Tickle

Thursday, 25<sup>th</sup> April, Lees Hall Golf Club – *New Insights into Woodland History & Heritage*

9.15 – 9.50 am Registration

Tea / coffee on arrival

10.00 – 10.10 am Professor Ian Rotherham (Sheffield Hallam University) – Introduction to the day

10.10 – 10.50 am Keynote presentation – Professor Charles Watkins (University of Nottingham) – Woodland History & Heritage\*

11.00 – 11.30 am Dr Tim Cockrell (Archaeological Consultant) – Some latest findings in woodland archaeology in South Yorkshire's Ecclesall Woods\*

11.40 – 12.10 pm David Lovelace (Landscape History Consultant) – Aspects of woodland history & heritage\*

12.20 – 12.40pm Discussion / Forum

12.50 – 13.30 pm Lunch

13.35 – 14.10 pm Andy Gaunt (Mercian Archaeological Services) – Recent discoveries in woodland archaeology & heritage in Sherwood & the Dukeries\*

14.20 – 14.50 pm James Jesson (Woodland Trust) – The challenges facing a twenty-first century woodland manager\*

15.00 – 15.15 pm Discussion / Forum

15.15 – 15.35 pm Tea / Coffee

15.40 – 16.20 pm Professor Ian Rotherham (Sheffield Hallam University) – Often unseen: the remarkable history & heritage of ancient woods, trees, & forests

16.30 – 16.50 pm Discussion / Forum

17.00 pm Close & depart

[\*Exact titles to be confirmed]

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Friday, 26<sup>th</sup>, April, Coal Aston Village Hall, Dronfield – *Unique Heritage under threat – the 'New Locust Years'*

9.15 – 9.50 am Registration

Tea / coffee on arrival

**10.00 – 10.10 am Professor Ian Rotherham (Sheffield Hallam University) – Introduction to the day**

**10.10 – 10.50 am Keynote presentation – Professor Ian Rotherham (Sheffield Hallam University) – How current woodland management has triggered the ‘New Locust Years’ for Woodland History & Heritage**

**11.00 – 11.30 am TBC – Forestry Commission – UK Forestry Standards\***

**11.40 – 12.00 noon Andy Alder (Consultant) – Thoughts on the Moss Valley countryside & its ancient woods\***

**12.05 – 12.20 pm Discussion / Forum**

**12.30 – 13.15 pm Lunch**

**13.20 – 16.20 pm Site field visit guided by Ian Rotherham & James Jesson – with thanks to the Woodland Trust**

**16.20 – 16.45 pm Discussion / Forum**

**16.50 pm Close & depart**

**[\*Exact titles to be confirmed]**

**Poster displays welcome**



Woodland destruction at Rought Standhills ancient woodland, Sheffield



**BOOKING FORM**

Please reserve \_\_\_ places at £75.00 (£30.00\*) each at the seminar “Trouble in the Woods – on 25 April 2024. [Includes refreshments & buffet lunch]

Please reserve \_\_\_ places at £55.00 (£20.00\*) each at the field day for “Trouble in the Woods – on 26 April 2024. [Includes refreshments & buffet lunch]

**Name:** .....

**Organisation:** .....

**Address:** .....

..... **Post Code:** .....

**Daytime Tel.:**.....**E-mail address:** .....

Please specify any special dietary or other requirements: Vegetarian/Vegan/Other.....

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Cheque/PO enclosed for £\_\_\_\_\_payable to ‘**Landscape Conservation Forum**’.

**Send to:** Professor Ian Rotherham, Landscape Conservation Forum, c/o Ash Tree Yard, 62-68 Thirlwell Rd, Heeley, Sheffield, S8 9TF

**Telephone:** 0114 2724227 ; **E-mail:** [syeconet@gmail.com](mailto:syeconet@gmail.com)

**On-line booking:** <https://bookwhen.com/sybrg#focus=ev-sbj6-20240425093000>

\*Discounted places, at the prices marked above are available to full-time students, retirees, and others not in fulltime relevant employment (i.e., consultancy, nature conservation, woodland management, tree management, forestry, or academia). Proof of status may be required.

## **The Landscape Conservation Forum**

The LCF was initiated in 1987 following the seminar ‘The Future of the Historic Landscape’ that accompanied the ‘Landscapes Through Time’ exhibition at Sheffield City Museum. The Forum involves archaeologists, ecologists, planners, and others operating in the Sheffield and Peak District area and welcomes participation in heritage conservation from the professional and voluntary sectors. It aims to integrate heritage conservation. Its objectives are to:

- Promote greater understanding between professionals.
- Establish joint approaches to casework.
- Create a unified input to conservation management and strategic resource planning.
- Promote integration of heritage conservation into interpretation and education.

This event is held in honour of four people very involved in the Forum over the last forty years or so:

**Dr Frank Spode, Professor David Hey, Professor Melvyn Jones, and Professor Donald Pigott**

And to the pioneer of research on woodland heritage and who coined the phrase ‘**the locust years**’ for impacts of the 1950s / 1960s forestry industry on British ancient woods

**Professor Oliver Rackham**

