

# Ancient woodland features: what to look for wallchart

## Woodland plants

Ancient woods often contain a rich and characteristic flora. Some of their plants are widespread like bracken and bramble. Others are more particular to woods, and places with a history of woodland cover. Many of these will be familiar, for example wood spurge and yellow archangel in the lowlands, or cow wheat and sanicle in the uplands. Some are so strongly associated with old woods that they are called 'ancient woodland indicator species.'

To differentiate woodland plants from other, more widespread species, it is easiest to define them by what they are not; ie fast-growing, weedy plants. If you find smaller, more delicate looking plants, flowering and growing in the spring before the trees are in full leaf, then you should take a closer look. It might help to get to know a few of these woodland plants, see [www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/awguide](http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/awguide)



WTPL/David Rodway

## Old trees & deadwood

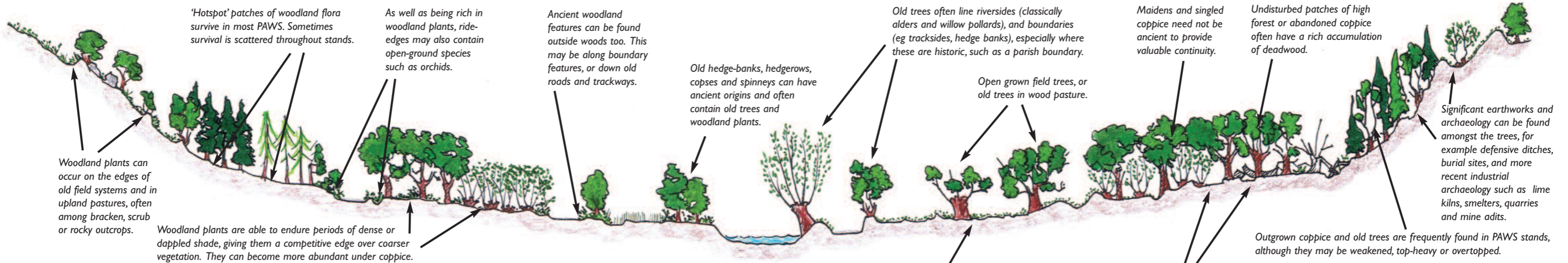
Old trees are a physical manifestation of continuity by simple virtue of their age. They are valuable in themselves but also for the species that live on and in them, from bats to lichens and mosses. Of particular note are the beetles, flies and fungi that are linked to the deadwood of old trees.

Old trees can be recognised in various forms, depending on their age, species and management history. Many of the signs that mark out an old tree are fairly intuitive: they might have a girth which is larger than most other trees in the wood; open-grown trees can be quite short, with wide spreading branches; they may have hollow trunks and branches; or deadwood in the crown and on the ground.

Once you 'get your eye in' you might notice signs of historical management, for example pollarding, or relatively young stems growing from a large and much older coppice stool. Many old trees, both in and outside woods, will have developed in open-grown conditions, such as those found in wood pasture.



WTPL/Niall Benwie



WTPL/John MacPherson



WTPL/Richard Becker

## Woodland soils

Woodland soils are often very different from those found elsewhere. This is partly due to origin (they were where people chose not to farm), and partly due to history (little or no ploughing, fertilising, liming). The resulting soils can be layered, patchy and complex, and they are likely to be alive with fungi, insects, microbes and worms.

While soils may be one of the most critical elements in an old wood's ecology, they are difficult to identify positively. The presence of other ancient woodland features – abundant fungi in autumn or other observations that point to a lack of disturbance (steep slopes, difficult access, and rocky outcrops) can be associated with their presence.

Take a precautionary approach, if there is no evidence that soils have ever been ploughed, excavated or disturbed in other ways, then assume that they are undisturbed.

## Human traces

Ancient woods have been providing for humans for centuries; and traces can be found of their use for fuel, shelter, hunting and keeping livestock. Other traces of human activity have simply become incorporated within the wood over time, such as settlement, defence, transport and old field systems. These vestiges of past human activity preserved in ancient woods, have become an important part of their fabric and ecology.

Significant human traces may be documented, or scheduled as Ancient Monuments. Other features may be found on old maps, or records held by local councils. However, most will only be discovered by going out into the wood. On the ground features may be obvious, such as walls, dams and buildings. Others may only appear as bumps and hollows in the ground that do not fit with the slope or soil conditions around them. These can be easiest to see in winter, when there is little vegetation. Straight edges are also likely to be man-made. Traces may also be found in the trees and plants themselves; there may be obvious species introductions, or signs of coppicing or pollarding. More subtle signs may show up as areas of distinct vegetation, such as nettle patches, where buried features have altered soil characteristics.



Fran Hinchinson