



## *Position statement Ancient Woodland*

- ◆ Definitions
- ◆ The importance of ancient woodland
- ◆ Records of ancient woodland
- ◆ Ancient woodland under threat
- ◆ The Woodland Trust view

---

### **Definitions**

In the UK, ancient woodland is generally understood to be an area continuously wooded since at least 1600<sup>1 2</sup>. The concept can be traced as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century but came into more widespread use in this form from the 1970s onwards<sup>3 4</sup>.

Ancient semi-natural woodland (ASNW) is composed of mainly native tree species that have not obviously been planted. In Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS), the former tree cover has been replaced by felling and replanting, often with non-native trees.

### **The importance of ancient woodland**

Ancient woods are uniquely valuable. Their wildlife communities are generally richer than those of recent woods<sup>5</sup>, having developed over long periods of time. They contain a high proportion of rare and vulnerable species, many of which require the stable conditions that ancient woodland affords.

As the terrestrial habitat most representative of original, natural, stable conditions, ancient woodland is home to more threatened species than any other habitat in the UK. This is supported by the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, which identifies that broadleaved woodland supports almost twice as many species of conservation concern as any other habitat e.g. more than twice as many as chalk grassland and almost three times as many as lowland heathland<sup>6</sup>.

Ancient woods are also treasure troves of historical features such as bronze and iron age earthworks, Saxon range boundaries, ancient park boundaries, ridge and furrow, park pales and woodbanks, all of which give a picture of past land use. Old coppice stools and pollards point to past woodland management practices, and charcoal pits, ore furnaces and kilns are clues to local industrial history.

Finally, ancient woods are timeless places of great beauty and tranquillity. The importance of woodland, and especially ancient woodland, to our quality of life should not be underestimated.

Our remaining ancient woodland covers less than 2 per cent of the UK, and is irreplaceable.

## Records of ancient woodland

Records of ancient woodland are fundamental to its protection. During the 1980s the Nature Conservancy Council produced inventories of ancient woodland over 2 hectares (ha) in area in England and Wales<sup>7</sup>, and Scotland<sup>8</sup>, now maintained by the respective conservation agencies. In 2007 the Woodland Trust completed an inventory of ancient and long-established woods over 0.5 ha in area in Northern Ireland.

The sources used to produce the inventories differed from one country to another:

- In England and Wales, the First Edition one-inch to the mile Ordnance Survey (OS) maps of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (surveyed 1805-1873) were used as a baseline, and woods present on these and later OS maps were assumed to be ancient unless evidence was found to the contrary.
- In Scotland, the Roy military maps of 1750 were used in conjunction with 6 inch to the mile OS maps from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ancient woods were strictly those shown as semi-natural on the Roy maps and present on subsequent maps. In practice, long-established woods of semi-natural origin (shown as semi-natural on the OS 6 inch maps, but not appearing on the Roy maps) are now also treated as ancient.
- In Northern Ireland, the First Edition 6 inch to the mile maps from around the 1830s were used as a baseline. Woods appearing on these and all subsequent OS maps were assumed to be long-established (continuously present since the 1830s but not proved ancient) unless evidence from archive research and field survey was sufficiently strong to indicate they originated before 1600.

In England, Natural England has revised the inventory by re-digitising and aligning with OS MasterMap features, and checking against the Forestry Commission's National Inventory of Woodland and Trees. Localised work has also been carried out in England to update and improve the inventories, beginning with Wealden District<sup>9</sup> and followed by several nearby authorities. In Wales, work has begun to revise the inventory using 6 inch to the mile OS maps from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the "County Series") as a basis as these are believed to be superior to the First Edition maps.

The ancient woodland inventories (AWIs) have helped increase awareness of the importance of ancient woodland and have become an important tool for policy makers and planners. By their nature, they will always be provisional. However, there is currently no system for updating the inventories when woods are lost, no comprehensive record of ancient woods less than 2 ha in area in Great Britain, and no comprehensive record of the extent and distribution of ancient wood pasture and parkland.

## Ancient woodland under threat

Between 1930 and the production of the inventories in the 1980s, 7 per cent of the remaining ancient woodland in England and Wales was permanently cleared and 38 per cent converted to plantation<sup>10</sup>. Research commissioned by the Woodland Trust on PAWS showed that 44 per cent of Britain's remaining ancient woodland is now plantation, and about two-thirds of this plantation is coniferous or mixed<sup>11</sup>. In Northern Ireland, 13 per cent of ancient and long-established woodland has been lost since the 1960s (during this time there was no

system of felling licences in NI) and around a third of ancient and long-established woodland has been planted with conifers.

The Broadleaves Policy of 1985 and subsequent improvements in protection of ancient woodland through planning policy slowed the rate of loss, though the Woodland Trust still deals with new cases of ancient woodland under threat from development each month. Many ancient woods are also vulnerable to the effects of surrounding intensive land use<sup>12</sup>.

However, the biggest threat ancient woods and their wildlife now face is climate change. The UK's remaining ancient woods are mainly small and fragmented: only 48 per cent of ancient woods on the AWIs in Great Britain are under 5 ha in area, and in NI, less than one-tenth of ancient and long-established woods remaining are over 10ha in area. Most ancient woods are too small to sustain populations of many woodland species and are too isolated to allow migration, especially given that many ancient woodland species are relatively immobile. As climate change accelerates, species that are unable to relocate to occupy suitable climate space may face local extinction<sup>13</sup>.

Only 21% of ancient woodland in Great Britain is covered by Site of Special Scientific Interest/Area of Special Scientific Interest or Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designation<sup>14</sup>. The remainder, including 14 of the 46 largest ASNWs in Great Britain, has no statutory protection.

### **The Woodland Trust view**

The Woodland Trust believes that, because of its ecological value, ancient woodland is the cornerstone of woodland biodiversity in the UK, and that there should therefore be **no further loss of any ancient woodland**.

To achieve this it will:

- Campaign to improve protective policies and legislation at a UK, country, regional and local level specific to ancient woodland
- Work with statutory conservation agencies to update and improve the AWIs
- Campaign against threats to individual ancient woods, especially where they illustrate generic issues that need to be addressed nationally or have the potential to increase public awareness of the threats to our ancient woodland heritage
- Continue to acquire ancient woods, which are directly threatened in ways which could lead to a reduction in their area or a diminution of their conservation value and where there is no reasonable prospect of the threats being averted by other means
- Promote ancient woodland as a key resource for enhancing people's quality of life and focus for increasing appreciation of the importance of the environment

The Woodland Trust would like to see:

- Full protection of ancient woodland through legislation and national planning guidance
- A clear statement in all local planning documents that ancient woodland should be protected from development

- The Forestry Commission to become a statutory consultee on all planning applications affecting ancient woodland
- The statutory agencies to continue to improve and update the ancient woodland inventories as a minimum including a review of archive work in England and Wales using the 6 inch to the mile County Series maps, and inclusion of ancient wood pasture and parkland.
- Restoration of all PAWS threatened by non-native conifers and rhododendron
- Systems by which the inventories can be updated following decisions on planning applications and felling licences
- Better guidelines and incentives to encourage owners of ancient woodland to understand its importance and manage it appropriately
- Buffering and extension of ancient woodland sites through targeted woodland and habitat creation, especially in areas of the country with a high density of ancient woodland, which have greatest potential to be placed on a sustainable footing, and a general reduction in the intensity of surrounding land use.

## References

---

- <sup>1</sup> Spencer J and Kirby K (1992) An inventory of ancient woodland for England and Wales *Biological Conservation* 62, 77-93
- <sup>2</sup> Walker G J and Kirby K J (1989) Inventories of ancient, long-established and semi-natural woodland for Scotland. Nature Conservancy Council: Research and survey in nature conservation No. 22
- <sup>3</sup> Peterken G F (1977) Habitat Conservation priorities in British and European Woodlands. *Biological Conservation* 11, 223-236.
- <sup>4</sup> Rackham O (1976) *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*. London: Dent
- <sup>5</sup> Peterken G F (1983) Woodland Conservation in Britain in A Warren and F B Goldsmith (eds) *Conservation in perspective (pp83-100)*. Chichester: Wiley.
- <sup>6</sup> Biodiversity: the UK Steering Group Report (1995) Volume 1: Meeting the Rio challenge (HMSO)
- <sup>7</sup> Spencer, J. and Kirby, K. (1992) An inventory of ancient woodland for England and Wales. *Biological Conservation* 62, 77-93
- <sup>8</sup> Walker G and Kirby K J (1989) Inventories of ancient, long-established and semi-natural woodland for Scotland. Nature Conservancy Council: Research and survey in nature conservation No 22.
- <sup>9</sup> Westaway S (2006) A revision of the Ancient Woodland Inventory for Wealden District, East Sussex: final report. [http://www.highweald.org/uploads/Wealden\\_Ancient\\_Woodland\\_Report2.pdf](http://www.highweald.org/uploads/Wealden_Ancient_Woodland_Report2.pdf)
- <sup>10</sup> Spencer and Kirby (1992) An inventory of ancient woodland for England and Wales *Biological Conservation* 62, 77-93
- <sup>11</sup> Pryor, S N and Smith, S (2002) The area and composition of plantations on ancient woodland sites. The Woodland Trust. [www.woodland-trust.org.uk/policy/index.htm](http://www.woodland-trust.org.uk/policy/index.htm)
- <sup>12</sup> Corney et al (2008) Impacts of nearby development on the ecology of ancient woodland <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/en/campaigns/woodwatch/neighbour-hell/Pages/neighbours-hell-summary.aspx>
- <sup>13</sup> Harrison, P.A., Berry, P.M. and Dawson, T.P. (Eds.) (2001) Climate change and nature conservation in Britain and Ireland: Modelling natural resource responses to climate change (the MONARCH project). UKCIP Technical report, Oxford
- <sup>14</sup> JNCC <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-1437>