



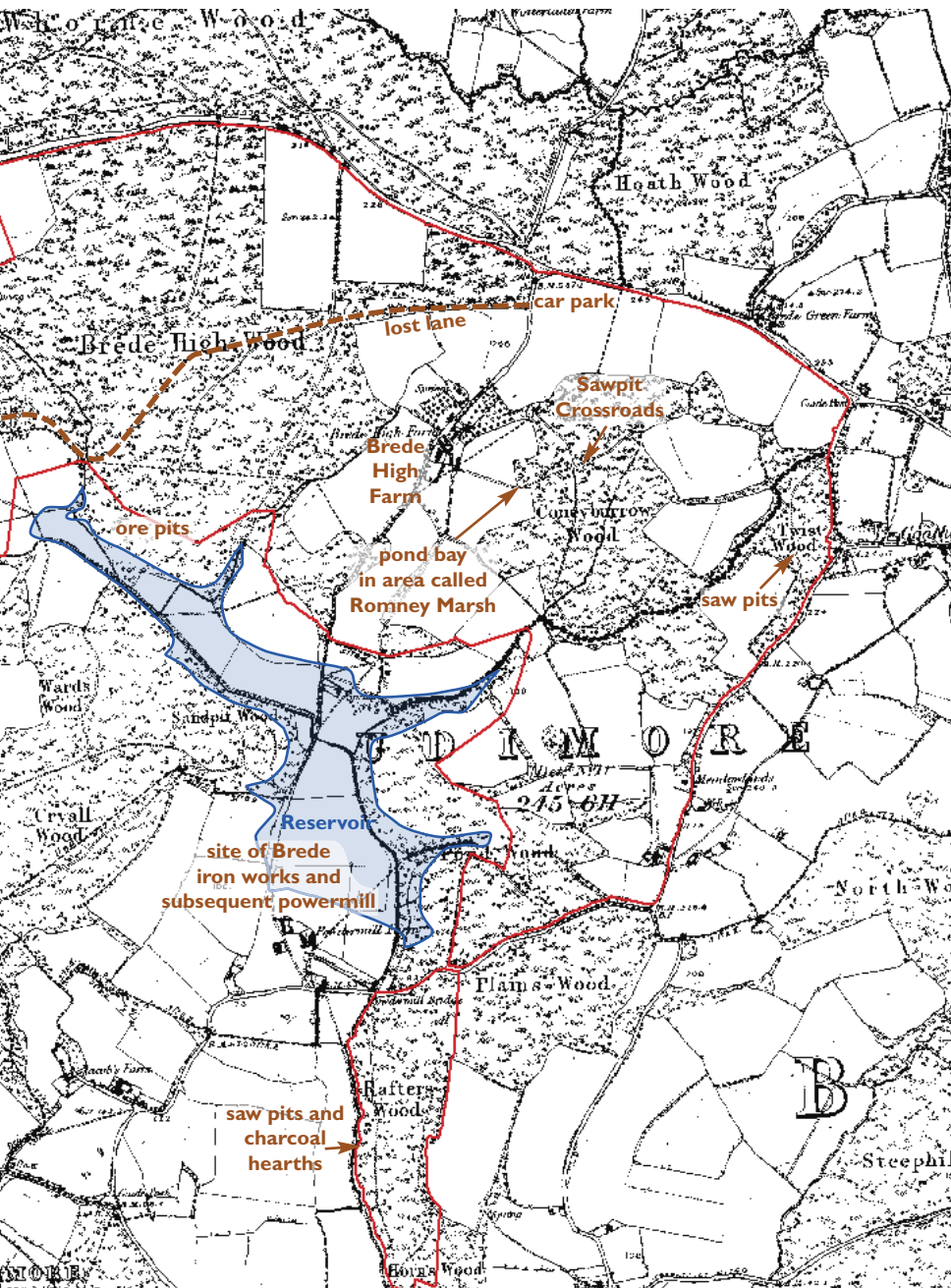
WOODLAND  
TRUST

# The History of Brede High Woods



Nicola R Bannister





Extract from the Ordnance Survey Map six inch first edition Sheet 44 published 1878



*Bank with old stubbed hornbeams along the line of the 'lost' lane from Austford to Brede High*

## Land use in Brede High Woods and its legacy

Today Brede High Woods are a quiet and tranquil place in which to relax and enjoy the trees and wildlife, but this peace belies their industrial and agrarian past. Evidence of this past can be seen throughout the woodland, in the form of pits, mounds, banks, ditches and living trees.

### Setting

Brede High Woods lie on the south-facing slopes of a tributary valley of the River Brede, in the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The woods are a complex of ancient coppices, conifer and sweet chestnut plantations and areas of open heathy ground. They were purchased by the Woodland Trust in 2007 as a place for quiet enjoyment.



*Iron ore pit or quarry in area called Hilly Field*

The geology at Brede High comprises a complex layering of sandstones, siltstones and clays known as the Hastings Beds; sedimentary rocks laid down in the Lower Cretaceous period. Since Roman times these rocks and clays have been exploited for iron ore and building stone.

### Brede Valley and its prehistory

The name Brede means 'broad' in Old English and probably describes the lower reaches of the valley. After the last Ice Age, layers of peat were laid down in the river valleys. About 10,000 years ago, the Brede valley had alder and willow trees at the bottom, oak and hazel along the sides and birch on the upper slopes and ridge tops. This distribution can still be seen in the woods today.

There is no recorded evidence of prehistoric people in the area of Brede High Woods, but this is not to say they did not travel along the ridges of high ground, set up temporary camps in the valley, hunted animals and collected nuts, fruits and berries in the mixed woodland.

## Bloomeries & Furnaces – Iron production



*Greeneden Gill & Stream*

Brede High Woods lies in an area of East Sussex exploited by the Romans for its iron ore. Small iron furnace sites or bloomeries were located in the gills where the streams had cut through rock layers exposing the Wadhurst Clay in which the ironstone is found. Many were first operated in the Iron Age from 600 BC as the Romans did not take over until 44 A.D.

In Greeneden Gill is the site of a possible bloomery. Lumps of slag have been found in and around the stream there.

## The Medieval Period at Brede High

The early medieval period left more evidence of how Brede High was settled. The name High means a 'hay' or grassy enclosure, suggesting that within the woods enclosed pastures were used for stock grazing, possibly by farmers from the village. On the western side of Brede High is the farmstead of Austford. The name is recorded in a charter of 1483 as 'Ealh's ford'. It is probable that the old lane from the wood yard (at a place called 'Gallows at Horne') to Austford and thence to Sedlescombe is an ancient routeway, crossing the stream where it was not marshy or boggy.



*The 'lost' lane from Austford to Brede High*



*An area of the 'lost' lane revealed for the first time in approximately 200 years*

Medieval documents also describe a lane from Austford to Brede High, which fell out of use in the eighteenth century though can still be traced on the ground. Near Austford it is a single track bounded on either side by a ditch and bank topped with ancient hornbeams.

In 1086 Brede, along with Rye and Winchelsea, probably formed part of the lands that made up the now lost and large Manor of Ramsley, which belonged to the Norman Abbey at Fécamp in Normandy.

In the 15th century the manor of Brede with its lands was granted to the newly founded Syon Priory in Middlesex.

### Ownership and territory boundaries

A characteristic feature of the High Weald's history is that many manors held detached portions of woodland and pasture. At Brede High Woods six manors held land or 'tenements'.



*Boundary between the Manors of Bodiam and Crowhurst near Austford (see brown arrow on map below)*

From manorial records it is possible to identify some of the manors' boundaries as banks and ditches, such as the one running through Streetfield Wood. The two lanes, one from Brede High to the reservoir, and the other from the wood yard to Austford are also manorial boundaries.

### History of Austford Farm



*Extract from Map of the lands in the parish of Ewhurst belonging to the Manor of Bodiam (ESRO AMS 5691-3-3)*

In 1483 William Abbot of Robertsbridge granted to John Amyot two tenements and lands at Austford, including two parcels of land called 'Hothlands' to the west of the lane. The name 'hoth' means heath and these areas, now called 'Sedlescombe Heath', are being restored to heathland as part of the management of Brede High Woods.

## History of Brede High Farm

The farm at Brede High was held by ecclesiastical owners until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1534-45, when it was granted to Sir Anthony Browne (who also acquired Battle Abbey). After a succession of owners, Brede High is recorded in 1558 as being owned by a branch of the Sackville family of Knole in Kent. In the 17th century the manor passed to the Westerne Family who originally came from Essex and for a while owned Brede Furnace. Today the site of the farm lies buried in woodland, the buildings having been demolished by Hastings Corporation in 1930.

## Brede Furnace

Brede High was an important place for producing armaments which were exported to the Continent as well as being used by the English Navy. The site of the furnace now lies beneath the dam of the reservoir and was probably built on the site of a medieval corn mill. The furnace was built in 1578 by a consortium of iron masters from Tonbridge in Kent. As well as casting the great guns (the 32 pounders at 9½ feet long), Brede Furnace was also known for its cast iron fire backs.



Map of Brede High Farm belonging to Mr John Reed 1767 (ESRO AMS 02936-02)

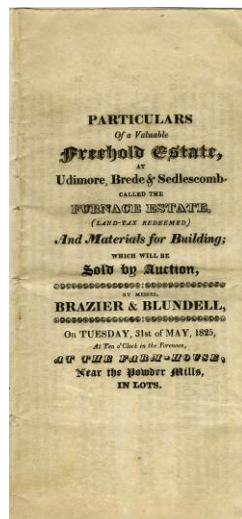
The large bellows for firing the furnace were powered by a waterwheel using water stored in two large ‘hammer’ ponds, where the reservoir now lies. The continuous supply of water was one of the main limitations to production, for in 1742 John Fuller, iron master at Brightling, noted that ‘the ponds [at Brede] were nearly dry but they kept going by workmen ‘treading the [water] wheel’.

### Gunpowder works

Brede Furnace closed before 1770, when it was converted to a gunpowder mill. Charcoal, saltpetre and sulphur were used to form the powder, again using water-power. It was a very unstable product and there were several explosions at Brede. In 1805 three people were killed and the windows of houses in Brede village were blown out.



A slight hollow way in the southern end of Rafters Wood



Extract from Powdermill Sale Particulars 1825 [ESRO AMS 1676-02]

### Woodland and Forestry

Much of the woodland here is the consequence of afforestation after the building of the Powdermill Reservoir. However, in the Medieval period there were several enclosed woods; Greenden, Streetfield, Coneyburrow, Pond and Rafters. Wood for fuel was regularly cut and exported down the River Brede to Rye and Winchelsea. Timber was also used to help in building sea defences.

An important component of iron production was charcoal. This was produced from underwood; usually oak, hornbeam and alder cut from the nearby coppices. Charcoal production is an exacting craft, requiring the burners to live on site for several days. The only remains of their activities that survive today are charcoal burning platforms or hearths. These levelled circular areas are located close to streams in former coppice woodland. A number lie on the



*Remains of a charcoal hearth in Brede High Wood*

north side of Greenden Gill and along the lower path through Rafter's Wood.

Charcoal was also required for gunpowder; alder produced the best and purest charcoal and a particularly fine hearth is located in an area of alder coppice in Coneyburrow Wood.

The woods also have many saw pits, often close to charcoal hearths. It was more efficient to saw trunks into planks within the woodland and carry out the finished product. Tree trunks were rolled onto frames built over a pit dug in the ground. One man or boy stood in the pit (the underdog) and another on top of the trunk (top dog) and using a two handled saw the trunk was cut into planks; it was hard, dusty and thirsty work. Today the pits are recognised by the elliptical depression accompanied by a mound and located on sloping ground to aid drainage. Look for them in Twist Wood, Rafter's Wood and the large one at 'Sawpit Cross Roads' in Coneyburrow Wood.



*A saw pit in Twist Wood – note the mound on one side of the elliptical depression*

## Quarrying

In Brede High Woods are numerous pits and quarries where sand, stone and iron ore were dug out. In Austford Lane is a small sand pit. In Pond Wood and along the edge of the reservoir are iron ore pits. Some of the larger ones are probably Roman, while the smaller circular 'bell pits' are thought to be later.



*A view through Pond Wood showing some of the iron ore pits*

## Farming and hops

Orchards and hops were important crops at Brede High in the late 18th, 19th and early 20th century. Hops were grown mainly in the valleys, often in meadows formed from silted hammer ponds. Today hop plants can still



be seen twining up trees. On the edge of the footpath to Austford are the remains of a tar tank where hop poles were dipped in hot bitumen to seal the ends.

*A view of the 'Tar Tank' showing the iron door to the furnace located beneath the tank*

## Water management

Hastings was expanding rapidly in the early 20th century and its water needs could not be met by existing means. Thus Powdermill Reservoir was built in 1930 on land of the Great Sanders Estate. The reservoir occupies the valley where the old iron hammer ponds were located. The lower pond bay was enlarged and rebuilt to form the present dam using clay dug out from the valley sides. Evidence of this clay quarrying can be seen from the cliff at the end of the hollow way from Brede High Farm. To preserve the water quality nearly all the buildings within the catchment area were demolished, and the fields planted with conifers and broadleaved trees. The only building still standing is a small cart shed and barn on the edge of Austford Lane and Streetfield Wood.



*The cartshed at Austford*

*Hollow way at the southern end of lane from Brede High to Brede Iron Works*





© Crown Copyright 2010. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number AL100017626

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The historic maps reproduced with the permission of the Archivist of the East Sussex Record Office (ESRO). The author would also like to acknowledge the help of Christopher Whittick ESRO and Dr Patrick Roper.



Established in 1972, the Woodland Trust is the UK's leading woodland conservation charity. Our three main aims are to enable the creation of more native woods and places rich in trees, protect native woods, trees and their wildlife for the future, and to inspire everyone to enjoy and value woods and trees.

To find out more about these and our many related projects and campaigns, plus how you can get involved, visit

**[woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://woodlandtrust.org.uk)**



Registered office. The Woodland Trust is a registered charity in England and Wales no. 294344 and in Scotland no. SC038885 and is a non-profit making company limited by guarantee. Registered in England no. 1982873. The Woodland Trust is a registered trademark.

Front cover image: A fine veteran hornbeam stub marking the corner of Brede High Wood with the edge of the 'lost' lane from Austford to Brede High. The hornbeam is probably about 250-300 years old.

All images are by Dr Nicola R Bannister and page 4 (top) WTPL/Mick House.