What are ancient woodland features?

We are still able to find ancient features and clues, even on sites that have been planted with non-native trees. These include certain woodland plants, deadwood and stumps, pre-plantation and original trees and archaeological remains.

There are other features, too, which may be hidden to the eye like fungi, seeds, bugs and insects in the soil or hiding under the leaf litter.
Ancient woods have been around for many centuries and are a vital part of our landscape and heritage. They have been in existence since at least 1600 when the earliest reliable maps were published in England and Wales, and 1750 in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Today ancient woodland faces increasing threats and now covers just 2% of the UK. Almost half of what’s left is battling with invasive species or has been converted from native trees to commercial softwood timber crops. The dark and shady conditions of these plantations can stifle the growth of sensitive and important woodland plants and the ongoing management can put historic features at risk.

Ancient woods that have been felled and planted with trees can be restored gradually, leaving a healthy and sustainable woodland legacy for future generations. The key is finding out which plantations were once ancient woods.

What is ancient woodland?
Explore ancient woodland

Each ancient wood has its own unique set of features and its own story. The clues you find will vary from wood to wood depending on woodland type, climate and how it’s been used in the past.

Before you set out, research the history of your local area and see if you can dig deeper into the story of the wood. You may be able to discover when the wood was cleared and replanted or find some nuggets of information about how the woodland was managed in the past.

Often only a combination of signs can give a real insight into the true hidden value and history of an ancient wood.
1. Boundary/woodland edge
2. Stream edge
3. Pond
4. Public track/ride
5. Veteran trees and deadwood
6. Conifer woodland
7. Broadleaf trees
8. Hotspots of ground flora
9. Archaeological features (eg mill stone)
What story can the woodland tell me?

The UK’s ancient woods are special areas that have remained as woodland for centuries and are full of unique and delicate features. In the 20th century many of these woods were replaced with commercial tree plantations. This guide will help you to explore and uncover any ancient features that could remain in a replanted wood.

Discover:

- Which parts of the woodland contain special ancient features.
- How the woodland could have been used by our ancestors.
- Clues to look out for.
Where to start?

The woodland edge

The best place to start your search for ancient features is the woodland edge. The boundary of a wood can tell us lots about historic land ownership borders.

Look for wood banks at the edge of the wood. These are long raised mounds of earth, often with a deep ditch on one side, which would once have been used to contain livestock in one part of the wood. Straight wood banks are likely to date from the nineteenth century, whereas irregular shaped wood banks are more likely to be medieval, and therefore offer a clue that you might be in an ancient woodland.

There could be veteran trees at the edge of the wood which might once have been important landmarks. These broadleaf trees could be hundreds of years old and are often surrounded by flowers such as wild garlic, wood anemone and dog’s mercury. Bear in mind, the original woodland edge may have moved as boundaries change and woods expand over time. Today wood banks, walls and veteran trees can also be found buried deep within the woodland.
Tracks and pathways

Modern pathways through woods are often shallow and surfaced. Sunken tracks could be much older and may have been used as trading routes by our ancestors. They would be wide enough for horses and carts to pass through the wood.

Hollow ways are tracks which are very obviously lower than the land on either side and have not been formed by modern engineering. Often lined with veteran broadleaf trees and delicate plants, these deeply sunken tracks have been trodden for hundreds of years.

Water and industry

Look out for streams, rivers and ponds. Wet, boggy areas in a wood can tell us a lot about its history. Watery spots in ancient woods are likely to be undisturbed. They could be very overgrown and contain stagnant water and are sometimes surrounded by dead wood.

In these places you might find evidence of the early iron industry. Charcoal was critical to iron production and mine pits were often dug in sloped woodlands to extract ore deposits. Look for dips in the ground, which could once have been pits and may now be full of debris or even water. Kilns were often erected near these pits or charcoal hearths, which can sometimes still be seen. To find a charcoal hearth find level ground near the pits with black soil and small pieces of charcoal under the leaf litter.

Compare historic tracks to modern forestry access routes to see how they differ. Old maps will help you to locate longstanding tracks - visit old-maps.co.uk for more.
Archaeology

There are two kinds of archaeological features you might discover deep in the woodland.

Natural features that show how woodland was used or managed. Look out for coppice stools, these are trees with lots of clustered stems growing from one, ground level base that have been repeatedly cut for timber. There could also be pollarded veteran trees, which have had the upper branches removed for timber, leading to a dense head of foliage and branches.

Man-made structures that pre-date the wood could be hidden among the trees. See if you can find any old stone buildings like sheep huts, or wood banks and walls. In some of the oldest woodlands, features like these could date back to the Iron Age.

Woodland plants

Deep in the woodland, search for spots among the trees where the light hits the floor and examine the flowers and plants growing there. Plants that indicate the woodland may be ancient include bluebells, wild garlic, wood sorrel and wood anemones.

At first glance the wood might appear to be a dark and barren with little to see, but by exploring a different route you could be surprised at what you discover.
Thanks to generous funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, we are offering independent support and training to landowners, managers and community groups across the UK to sustainably manage and restore ancient woods. If you are interested in helping to protect and restore ancient woodland near you, please visit our website or get in touch for more information.

woodlandtrust.org.uk/restoration  restoration@woodlandtrust.org.uk  0330 333 3300

The Woodland Trust, Kempton Way, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 6LL
The Woodland Trust is a registered charity, numbers 294344 and SC038885.
A non-profit making company limited by guarantee. Registered in England No. 1982873.
The Woodland Trust logo is a registered trademark. 7506 04/16