WoodWatch: Help! My wood is under threat and it could be ancient...

Ancient woods are the jewel in our woodland crown. They are our richest sites for wildlife and are full of cultural heritage. Ancient woods are also some of our prettiest woodland - some have carpets of bluebells, wood anemones and celandines in spring. Importantly for you they also carry a slightly higher level of protection in the planning system due to their vulnerability and value.

Ancient woodland is defined as land that has been continually wooded since at least 1600AD in England and Wales and 1750 in Scotland. It is thought that as planting of woodland only became common after these dates it is likely that woodland present before will have grown up naturally. Some ancient woods may even link back to the original wildwood that covered the UK around 10,000 years ago, after the last Ice Age.

It is really important to remember that just because the trees in your wood are young this does not necessarily mean the wood is not ancient. Woods have been managed for centuries so trees will have been cut many times. As long as the area has remained woodland or there was only a short period of time when the wood was open and there was no large scale ground disturbance, that area could still be classed as ancient.

How do I know if my wood is already identified as ancient?

It could already be on the ancient woodland inventory. Handily, ancient woods have been provisionally mapped - an inventory is available showing which areas have been classed as ancient. To make things a bit easier for you, you can look at this using the Woodland Trust mapping system.

The inventory shows the ancient woodland through England, Scotland and Wales. It was mostly complied through a comparison of historical and present day maps to check for a continuity of woodland cover.

The areas highlighted in green have been identified on the inventory as ancient woodland

Warning – the inventory is always classed as provisional and may be challenged. So check your history and be prepared!

1. It is provisional as initially the inventory only looked at woods over 2 hectares in size.

2. There is always the possibility that new information about wood may arise. Other evidence, such as estate maps, archaeological features, local knowledge or species thought to be characteristic of ancient woodland, can be very helpful in confirming an area’s value. This should be considered in conjunction with the inventories.
The inventory in each country is ‘held’ by the appropriate statutory body – Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage and Countryside Council for Wales. They are responsible for updating the inventory and will need contacting once you have your evidence in place.

Ok, so my wood is not on the inventory but I think it could be ancient. What should I do?

Proving whether or not a wood is ancient is not exact; try to paint a picture of the history of the wood from the evidence available to you. Depending on the history of a wood you will need a certain level of experience to weigh and assess up all of the evidence available but there are initial steps that can be taken by you to see if this is a genuine possibility.

If you have an inkling that your wood might be ancient the first (and very important) step is to start reviewing the historical evidence available. This is actually quite easy to do and it is a matter of gathering some historical evidence to see if further work is worth pursuing.

Historical maps of an area will show whether or not a site was wooded or not. Present day maps can give clues through boundary shape (an irregular boundary could show history) or topography of land. You can also look for place names (e.g. plantation may indicate a recent wood) and references to a wood in historical texts.

At this stage it is not about having a definitive answer but about ensuring that all evidence available is taken into account in a planning decision. If you do dig up some good historical evidence you can then present this to the planning authority and request that this is looked into further.

Where do I go for this information?
That will depend on where you are in the country but this list should set you on your way!

ENGLAND AND WALES
• A good place to view historical maps is www.old-maps.co.uk. This will allow you to check mapping history for the area from around 1880 up to 1960. You are looking for evidence indicating the area was continuously wooded throughout this period.
• You also need to check the Ordnance Surveyors drawings. These were produced between 1780 and 1840, covering England (from the south coast up Hull) and Wales. Available on the British Library website, use the key to work out which map you need and then type in the number to search box on the main mapping page.
• Contact your local historical records centre to find out if there are any other historical maps of the area. There might be Tithe maps, estate maps or county maps available.
• Ordnance Survey First Edition County Series 25 inch to 1 mile map also known as Epoch 1

SCOTLAND
Historical maps can be found online at the National Library of Scotland website. The two detailed below were amongst the data sources used for the Scottish inventory and show the smaller ancient woodlands not included on the inventory.
• The Roy Military sketches are from around1750
• The First Edition Ordnance Survey maps from the 1860's (at six inches to the mile)

If the woodland appears on either or both of these maps or both further investigations should be taken.
Great, I can see my wood on the historical maps 😊😊😊

If there is good historical evidence showing a continuity of woodland for several hundred years you need to persuade the local authority to request the applicant carries out a full investigation into the wood.

More detailed investigations will be needed to confirm if the woodland is ancient or not. These should include the following areas of evidence:

**Historical evidence** - You should have already done some of the leg work here as this is your first point of call. Basic evidence gathering can be done from your computer at home. Historical maps of an area will show whether or not a site was wooded or not and give clues through boundary shape or topography. You can also look for place names or references to a wood in historical texts.

**Survey evidence** – a definitive answer cannot be given about a site’s history unless a site visit is made and thorough survey work is carried out.

- **Ecological surveys** - certain species of plants are known to have an affinity with ancient woodland. They are slow to colonise new areas and are shade tolerant. Examples of these are wood anemone, bluebell, pendulous sedge and spindle. The exact range of plants depends on where about you are in the country and the type of woodland. Surveys for ancient woodland plants need to be carried out between May-June (again depending on where you live) as this is when the plans are in flower and easy to spot.

- **Archaeological features** – Not only may these features demonstrate the former management of a wood but they could show a preceding historic and prehistoric land-use. Examples are banks and ditches, sunken tracks or stone extraction pits.

If you have no luck in persuading the council you could try employing your own ecologist to assess the antiquity of the wood in question. A good point of contact is often you local Wildlife Trust, they may be able to recommend a reliable ecologist.

**Want to know more?**

- Learn about ancient woodland plants:
  - Scotland - [http://www.tnrc.co.uk/media/DIR_64201/C LCrawford_SF63No1.pdf](http://www.tnrc.co.uk/media/DIR_64201/C LCrawford_SF63No1.pdf)
- Roy Military sketches: [http://geo.nls.uk/roy](http://geo.nls.uk/roy)
- First edition ordnance survey maps (Scotland): [http://geo.nls.uk/os6inch](http://geo.nls.uk/os6inch)
- Historical Maps – [http://www.old-maps.co.uk](http://www.old-maps.co.uk)

Who to contact:

- England – Emma Goldberg (Natural England)
- Wales – Emma Small (Forestry Commission Wales)
- Scotland – Janette Hall (Scottish Natural Heritage)

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Ancient woodland can contain archaeological features such as banks and ditches. Photo WTPL

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