Hitterhill Coppice and Town Coppice – A woodland garden

DAVE BARNETT

The two coppices, Hitterhill Coppice and Town Coppice, occupy 375 acres in Wyre Forest as put up for auction in 1902, and then in 1925 as part of a large private estate. The area is predominantly sessile oak woodland divided by a central stream (Bell Brook) which runs along a steep sided valley before passing out under the old railway embankment to Dowles Brook. This woodland was privately owned until 1970s when it was sold to the Nature Conservancy Council. The current OS map shows the area in green, indicating woodland. Bell brook is shown with pools and footbridges. But not is all what it seems.

In the 1960s my parents allowed me to walk the forest alone, occasionally accompanied by family or friends, but it was always Hitterhill Coppice that I headed for. The only condition was to be back for lunch. George Carter, who worked at Hitterhill gave us permission to walk in the woods there. My memories of those days are still vivid as I recall the beauty of the wood, the paths, wooden bridges that crossed the stream, the fish pools, pine trees and tunnels through thickets of Rhododendrons.

Hitterhill pool was where I first became acquainted with the woodland, then later on as my confidence grew and I ventured further into the wood. I remember fishing in the lowest pool on Bell Brook, sitting on the diving board with a makeshift rod and the excitement of catching my first fish, a roach.

This article is a collection of memories, old photos, discussions, and other records. Cedric Quayle (2010) wrote an excellent article 'The Bell Brook, Wyre Forest' which concerns the same stream, but I shall describe the woodland - Hitterhill Coppice and Town Coppice- which I am most familiar with.

Figure 2 shows the 1954 six-inch OS map, it was surveyed before 1930 and printed in

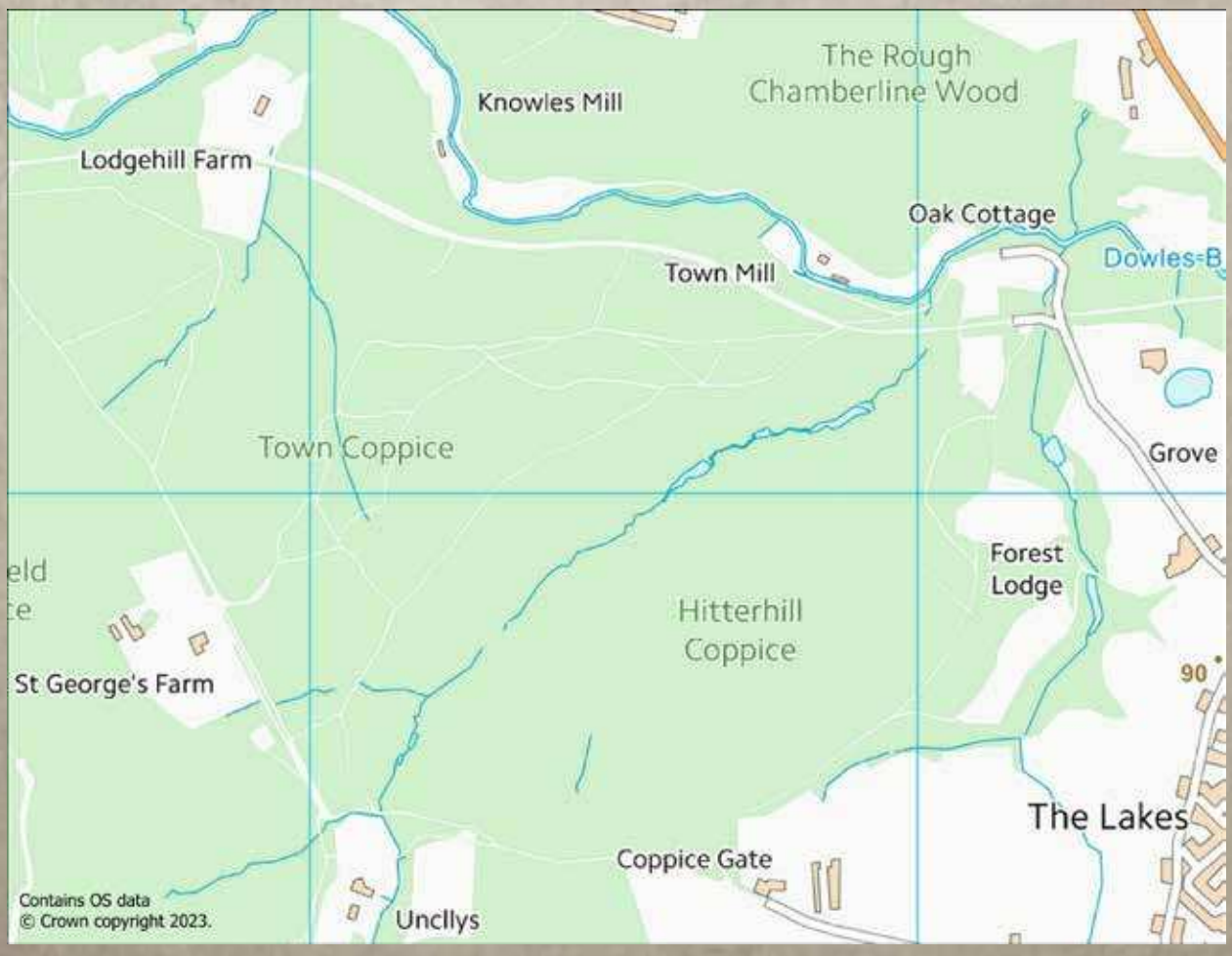


Figure 1. Map showing location of Hitterhill Coppice and Town Coppice.

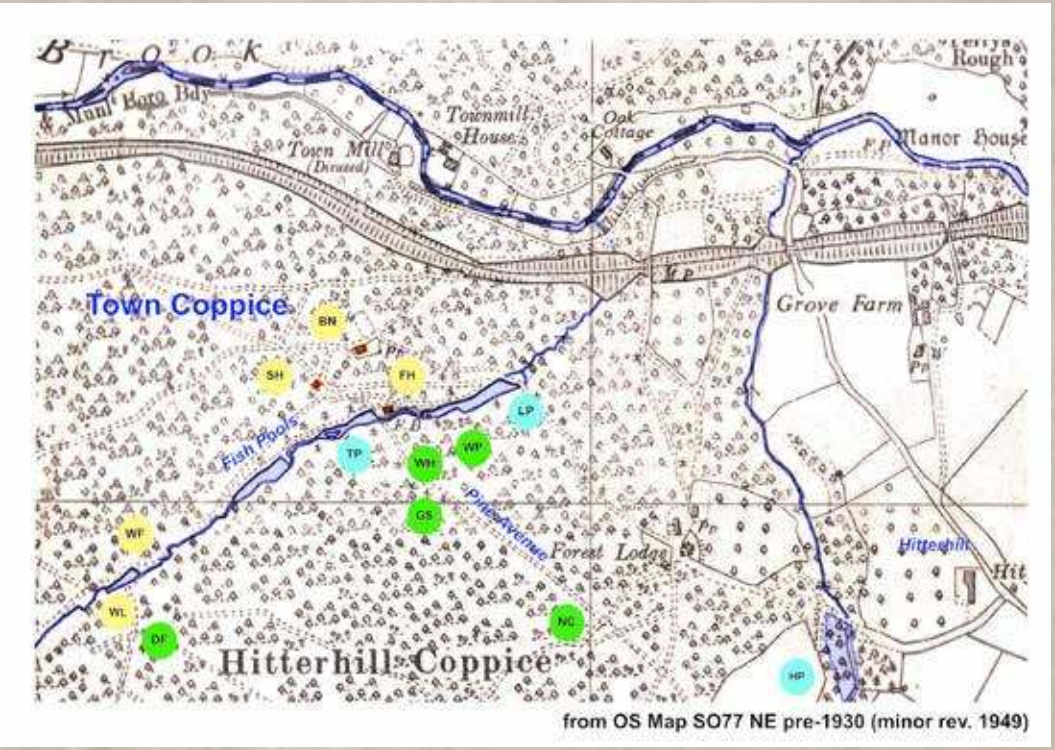


Figure 2. The 1954 six-inch Ordnance Survey Map of Town coppice and Hitterhill Coppice.

1968. It was acquired by me around 1970 and has always held much fascination because it shows the area that I regularly walked. The only feature I believe to have been added is Hitterhill House which was built around 1930.

The buildings and features that are most memorable, have been labelled: the fish house (FH), the shelter (SH), and bungalow (BN). The fish house still exists with remains of its stone walls and an octagonal brick structure in the middle, the bungalow and shelter gone. The well (WL), and waterfall (WF) are still there. Hitterhill pool (HP) is highlighted in blue, but for some strange reason the map shows trees.

All the large conifers have thankfully been spared the 'axe', and are now superb specimens 150 years old, worthy of any arboretum. Some I knew well are the Douglas Fir (DF) next to the well, the pine avenue of Giant Sequoias (GS) and Western Hemlock (WH) nearby. Then at the top of the avenue is a Nootka Cypress (NC) I recently identified. The Nootka is slow growing but it is an interesting cypress as its hybrid, the rapid growing Leylandii, was raised from Nootka seedlings in 1888, and is one of several species of cypress along the avenue amongst a mixture of conifers. The Weymouth Pine (WP) sadly fell down a few years ago and lies there on its side. There are many Corsican Pines, which together with the Douglas Firs are all around the woodland, singly or in small groups.

The Crown estate map of 1879 shows only the streams (Clay, sons and Taylors, 1870). There are no buildings and the woodland would have been coppiced throughout. The pools, the fish house, and forest lodge first appear on the 1884 OS map (Figure 3). The pools were certainly created by damming the streams. An article on the Countess of Portsmouth by Sylvia Sheldon (2002) suggests the pine avenue was planted in 1880 in memory of her father. This is likely to be the time the area was landscaped.

I know the area as the 'fish pools' and the building as the 'fish sorting house', names used by my family (William Wall), who lived in Town Mill House the other side of Dowles Brook from 1881 to 1925, and was part of the estate. The estate was put up for sale, first in 1902 on behalf of the Countess of Portland (Driver, 1902), and then 1925 on behalf of Peter Adam (of Adam Carpets) (Edwards, 1925). Both auctions describe the woodland for sporting purposes. Forest Lodge was built for this purpose. In 1902 it was described as '*Sporting lodge and Pheasantry*', and '*The GROUNDS very picturesque, being planted with Ornamental Trees and Shrubs, with a sheet of Ornamental Water*' (Driver, 1902)

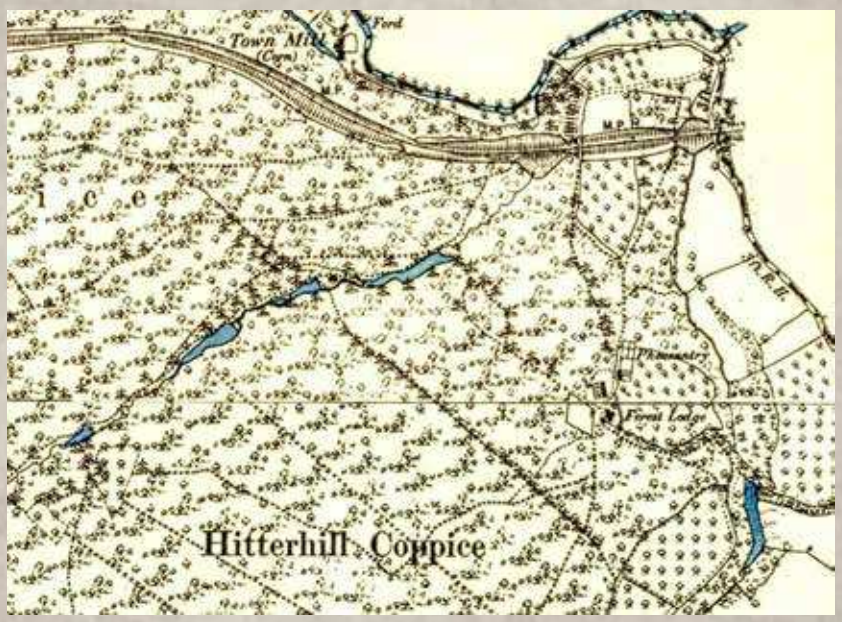


Figure 3. The 1884 OS Map (National Library of Scotland, 1884.

The ornamental water is the lower pool. A long diagonal path took you up to a shelter with bench overlooking the valley. The pool above the fish house was known by John Robinson as the trout pool (TP in Figure 2), probably used for breeding trout, the fish then being passed into the fish 'sorting' house. Suitable fish being removed for stocking fishing waters. The brick octagonal structure is still there. I remember years ago the wooden troughs in the building, which were in a state of disrepair, and the wooden four-sided columns, each with a 'V' notch at the top that would have supported the troughs.

There were two wooden footbridges. Both have now gone, one by the fish house, and the other above the waterfall (Figure 4). After crossing the stream above the waterfall, the path passed under a large rhododendron that sheltered a bank of lush mosses and liverworts. One moss, *Hookeria lucens*, a delightful moss with transparent leaves was especially exciting to discover there (c. 2000).



Figure 4. Sketch of Hitterhill Waterfall, Dave Barnett.

Without moist conditions and shade, I can't find it there now.

The path passes a brick fireplace structure that holds a few inches of water I call 'The Well'. A moss, *Fissidens cristatus* (Feb 2001), is still there, but has changed its name to *Fissidens dubius* (Feb 2023). Past The Well, the short ravine takes you up to an enormous Douglas Fir. The ravine turns into a stream after heavy rain. In the past there were flagstones over the stream bed. Figure 4 is a sketch of how I recall it, maybe with more Rhododendron.

The bungalow and thatched hut have gone. The fish house we knew as the 'fish sorting house' has all but gone, just a few courses of stone remain. John Robinson says people gradually removed the stones.

Many of the dams have been breached and washed away by floods and the Rhododendrons have been removed. The Oak under-storey is thick in places with Holly which thrives in shade, as do a mass of spindly Oak seedlings around 3 m in height. In more open areas Silver Birch is plentiful, as is bramble and bracken. The stream cuts its own course through the silted areas, now overgrown with Pendulous Sedge (*Carex pendula*).

When the last Adam sister died in the 1970s, the woodland was sold to the Nature Conservancy Council, and the character of the woodland, although still beautiful, has gradually changed. The buildings I knew fell into disrepair, the footbridges went, and paths are now kept clear by dog walkers and cyclists. The paths along the stream are still shored up in places by stone walls where they were first cut into the steep sided banks.

I have known the woodland all my life. In the early days I regularly walked from our house down Dry Mill Lane into the wood past Hitterhill pool, returning along the edge of the woodland to the cattle grid at Coppice Gate, or taking alternative routes around the fish pools. The photo of Hitterhill pool in 1962 was taken by my mother and shows a bench by the pool. At the far end, the Marsh Marigolds I photographed in 1976 (date from my notebook), still grow there today.

My earliest memory of the woodland was entering into Town Coppice from the railway crossing above Town Mill. I was aged five (1959) and my two sisters woke me very early in the morning, instructing me to make no noise which would wake my parents. It was mothering Sunday and we walked down to the bottom of Dry Mill Lane, up and across the railway line, still a working railway then (it was removed in the 1960s). A short distance up the path there was a brick 'hunting lodge', a small oblong red brick building which may have been used for fishing or shooting parties. My sisters knew a patch of daffodils that grew there, we picked some and took them home as a surprise for Mum. The lodge no longer exists, but recently after meeting two ladies who regularly walk in the wood, they assured me that the daffodils are still there. The 1925 auction map shows the building clearly and it is called the Bungalow.

John Robinson remembers the hunting lodge (bungalow) (Figure 5), but it was never called a hunting lodge, as the owners, the Adams', disapproved of hunting. He said it was used for tea parties for the factory workers. It had

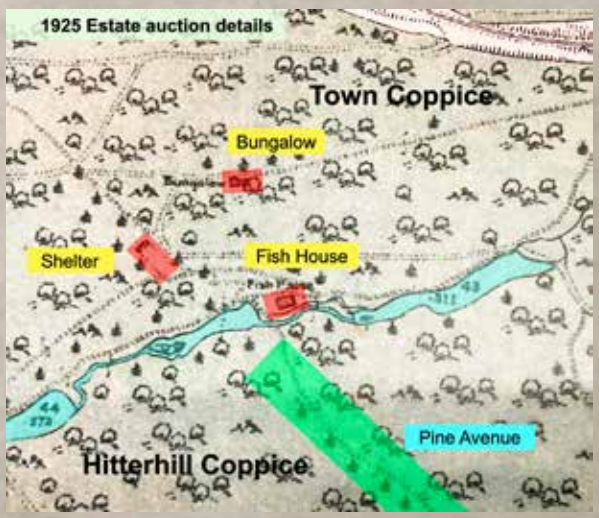


Figure 5. Detail from 1925 estate map. (From: Driver, 1925).



Wyre Forest Study Group






1976 Notebook - Dave Barnett

Hitterhill Pool April 22nd

1 Marsh Marigold
2 Ewe Pendulous Sedge
3 Celandine
4 Groundsel
5 Great Woodrush - Luzula sylvatica
6 Bluebell
7 Stonewort ?

Dowles Brook April 25th

1 Viola riviana . Common violet
Pubescent - Irish dog violet Copse Hill
Glaucous - north wood type
2 Cardamine flexuosa - Greater Bitter Cress
3 Yellow Archangel - Lamiastrum galeobdolon
4 Primula Veris - Cowslip
5 Wood Garlic - Allium ursinum
6 Bilberry - Vaccinium myrtillus
7 Golden Saxifrage - Chrysosplenium oppositifolium
8 Barren strawberry - Potentilla sterilis
9 Wood anemone - Anemone nemorosa

a cellar where he had found china cups and plates. The building was later vandalised and used for drugs, falling into disrepair, finally disappearing altogether. Today you can just about tell where it was, a slightly sunken area covered in brambles. The chimney pots, header tank and sink John salvaged and are in his garden.

Cedric Quale showed me the 1925 auction details (Edwards, 1925), and Figure 6 is the photo of the lodge called the Bungalow. It is quite splendid with a delightful garden. The somewhat fanciful description is copied below in italics, Ruabon tiles were red quarries:

THE BUNGALOW Is situated in a charming spot on high ground in the centre of the woods. It is brick built and rough-cast with tiled roof, and contains Rustic Porch with Ruabon tiled floor; A very pleasant room 24ft by 13ft 3in, with modern fire and serving hatch kitchen, with portable range and Rufford sink; lavatory and w.c. Under the whole with separate access another large room with boiler.

The track runs alongside the building as I remember it, but I don't remember the garden. David Adam confirmed that from 1910 Tompkinson and Adam Ltd provided works outings at weekends for tea at the bungalow. The workers caught the train to Bewdley and walked there. Quite a lengthy walk there and back.

A short distance from the Bungalow and commanding a delightful view is a well-built Stone and tiled Shelter with seats.

David Adam remembers the Shelter having a thatched roof as I did, and agreed there were sturdy oak roof posts either side and a stone wall at the back. John also remembers the stone wall built into the embankment. It would have had a fantastic view across the valley to the pine avenue.

THE WOODS are principally well grown Oak coppice, and comprise the areas known as Town Coppice and Hitterhill Coppice. These are divided by a brook course in which a chain of Fish Ponds has been formed. Between the two lowest pools is a well built Stone and tiled Fish House.

And finally,

This article started off a series of reminiscences. It ended being more of a historical fact finding mission which I hope will stand in good stead for further research. It has been a fascinating journey which has been helped by a number of people, including Mick Blythe, John Robinson, Cedric Quale, and David Adam.

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Figure 6. The Bungalow or Lodge 1925.