



The State of the Woods in 1801

STUART DAVIES

Introduction

There are relatively few (probably reliable) printed descriptions of the Wyre Forest during the period of rapid industrialisation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

W. Pitt's description from the General View of the Agriculture of the County of Worcester (1813) is perhaps the best known (p.187) :

'The Forest of Wire, near Bewdley, extends into Shropshire, but a considerable tract of it is in Worcestershire; this is a very great nursery for oak poles and underwood, which are cut at the stated periods, reserving timber trees at proper distances; the oak poles, which are often shoots from old roots, are innumerable; and very great numbers are cut down annually, and, after being stripped of their bark, are sold for making rails, hurdles, laths etc under the name of black poles.'

This was the system of coppice-with-standards that had been the mainstay of woodland management since the Middle Ages. It was designed to meet three needs. The landscape it created was one of copses which provided ample cover for the beasts of the chase who could be beaten out into the more open parts of the Forest (as defined by Forest Law and the perambulations of its boundaries) for the purpose of hunting. Secondly, the full grown trees (the standards) provided timber for repairs to Crown properties and occasional sales to others to generate income. And thirdly, the underwoods produced wood suitable for the needs of local people for a myriad of purposes, including building repairs, shingles, fencing, hurdles, firewood, charcoaling and so on. Some were surrendered for free to people living on the forest edge with customary rights while other wood was sold. These underwoods were cut on a regular cycle, by 1801 this was every 17 years in the manorial coppices. It is the system and landscape of traditional English woodlands.

The General View entry is brief and altogether positive. However, more detailed surveys tell a rather less optimistic story.

A Valuation Commissioned

On May 2nd 1801, the Surveyor General of His Majesty's Land Revenue wrote to Mr. Abraham Purshouse Driver, Surveyor, with a commission to

'authorise and desire you to view and survey certain Coppices, Woods, Underwoods and Woodlands belonging to His Majesty now or heretofore called by the several names of Lodge Coppice, Parkend Coppice,

New Coppice, otherwise the New Bind, and Powcastle and Piccamaston Coppice, situate within the Parish of Ribbesford and Manor of Bewdley and within the Forest of Wyre in the County of Worcester, now in the possession of Sir Edward Winnington, Bart., or his Undertenants, and to make forth a Particular and Valuation of the said Premises.....'

The woods in question were those of the Manor of Bewdley and had been held by the Crown since the late fifteenth century when the estates of the Mortimer family passed to the Crown. The proposed Valuation was one of a series being commissioned across the country to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the nation's timber resources. Driver reported back later in the year. What follows is firstly a part transcription, part summary of his report and then a brief commentary on it.

The Coppices

The survey is of those coppices within the manor of Bewdley which were granted by lease from the Crown to Sir Edward Winnington for a term which expired at Michaelmas 1800.

Lodge or Brand Lodge Coppice

Part of the coppice on the South Side was fallen in the year 1795 and the remainder was fallen the following year. This Wood being 17 yrs old at the time of cutting, has not produced 5s pr. Acre, without deducting either the parochial rates or the Salary of the Woodman.

Park End Bind now called Rock Coppice

The whole of the Coppice was fallen in 1798, producing under 2s pr. Acre, without deductions.

New Coppice now called Dog Hanging Coppice

The whole of the Coppice was fallen in 1787. The Coppice is now very thin of wood in many places, as I am informed at the last fall was a great deal worse. It has not produced 1s pr acre pr Annum, though neither the parochial rates or Salary of the Woodman are deducted. This is a very indifferent Coppice.

Hitterell Coppice

The whole of the Coppice was fallen in 1789. About One Third of this Wood on the East Side has lately been sett on Fire and is not likely to recover, as the greatest part of the Stems are dead. Great part of this Wood is very indifferent.....and has not paid 2s pr Acre annually [without deductions].

Hawks Bind or Ox Bind Coppice

The whole of the coppice was fallen in 1786. It is in general tolerably good.

Powcastle or Picamaston Coppice now called Symonds Stool Coppice

About half of this Coppice has been fallen in 1801 and the remainder which it is intended to fall the ensuing year appears to be rather the best fall.

Produce of the Fall in 1800

	£	s	d
Bark	55	0	0
10,000 Poles	40	0	0
75 Cord of Wood at 11/-	41	0	0
Sundries sold in Wood	10	0	0
	146	0	0
Expenses	-26	0	0
	120	0	0

This Fall contains about 50 Acres and being 17 years old has not produced annually quite 3s pr. Acre though no deduction has been made either for the parochial rates or the Salary of the Woodman. In all there were 65 trees, 540 feet in length.

'General Observations'

The Coppices upon the foregoing Estate vary materially in the Soil. In the inmost parts they consist of a Loam interrupted with loose Stones of a soft Nature.

The Wood consists principally of Oak Stools with a small proportion of Birch & considerable parts are very heathy, which produces but little & the Coppices thereby are much reduced in value at the time of cutting, which might be prevented by planting the vacant places with Willow & Sallow & in many places with Ash.

The Wood Lands contain 560 [acres] – 3 [perches] – 38 [rodds] which being cut at 17 yr old, the Average Quantity cut annually is about 32 Acres & as they have only produced at the rate of £1-15-0 per Acre at the time of cutting, the Ann[ual] produce would only be 64£ which is not sufficient to pay the Outgoings as the poor Rate is in general high. This year it is 36/- in the pound.

Outgoings

	£	s	d
The Woodman's Salary	20	0	0
Woods assessed to the Poor Rate at 94£ p Ann & the Poor Rate being this year 36/- in the pound have amounted to	169	0	0
Church Rates at	2	7	0
Highway do. at	0	6	0
Hedging, Gates etc at	6	0	0
	197	13	0

This Assessment contains as much & more as the Woods of which the Lease is now expired therefore taking half which is £98 16 6 leaves a considerable balance against the Woods, by which it may be thought the price I have put upon them is high....

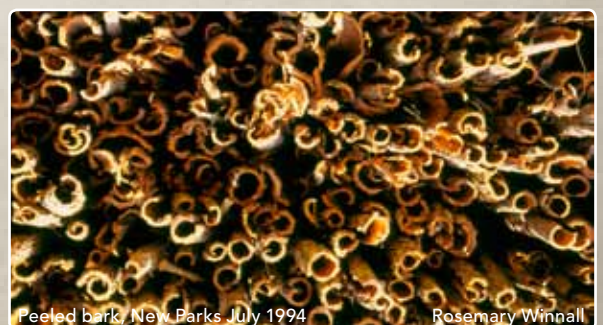
I do not think that it would be advisable at present to grub those Coppices that are nearly of an age for cutting but the three Coppices called Lodge Coppice, Park End Coppice & Powcastle Coppice being very young, I should recommend they might be grubbed considerably & I have no doubt there are many persons in the Neighbourhood who would readily do it upon a Lease being granted for 31 years upon the following Terms

1st Five years at 2s p Acre
 2nd do. at 3s p Acre
 3rd do. at 5s p Acre
 And the remainder of the Term at 5s p Acre.

There are some particular parts of these Coppices which might still remain as such, for the accommodation of the Tenants as it is a considerable advantage to every Farmer to have sufficient Wood to cut annually for Hurdles, Rails, Firewood etc as all Farms should as much as possible be supplied from the Land without being obliged to purchase. I would propose a Clause should be inserted in the Lease that at every cutting the Vacant places should be filled with Ash, Sallow and Willow as the ground may best suit & that at least 20 p Ann should be left of the best Saplings if any & if not as many of the best Stems for Timber which should not be afterward cut. At the time every Sapling or Stem is cut either at the first or the second fall.

It may be proper to observe that most of the adjoining Lands which are now in Corn or Grass were formerly part of these Coppices & very lately part have been grubbed for which a Rent of 10 p Acre is paid.

There is at this time a very considerable Stock of Wood upon the Ground which will amply pay for any extra Expense occasioned by grubbing as it is worth upon a Rough calculation at least 600£.



The following are the ages of the different growths of the Coppices

	£	s	d	
Lodge Coppice	77	3	30	5 years growth
Park End do.	113	3	0	3 do.
New do.	59	2	10	13 do.
Hitterell	139	1	15	11 do.
Oxbind	62	0	10	14 do.
Powcastle	54	0	0	1 do.
Do.	54	1	13	17 do.
	560	3	38	

As the coppices have been always let, I am not much surprised to find so little Timber, as it is not the Interest of Tenants to encourage the growth of it. The few Trees that are there are principally from the old Stools & left on the outside of the Wood for the repair of the Gates, Stiles etc.

The Wood is cut at 17 years growth & it is always usual to leave the best Standards till the next cutting, when they are cut for the profit arising from the Bark & the poles are sold for the use of the Collieries & also for Rafters etc at about 7s or 8s p 100 which is a very low price. The Cord Wood is also sold low, at not more than 10 or 12s p Cord occasioned by the demand being much less than some years back from the Proprietors of the Forges in the Neighbourhood using pit Coal instead of Wood for the manufacture of Iron. It was formerly considered Iron could not be made without Wood.

The Buildings are all very indifferent upon the Estate & being principally Cottages for the Occupation of Labourers I have not thought it proper in my Valuation to add any Sum for them beyond the Value of the Land. There are no Commons that may be considered of any value to this Estate as they do not exceed 30 Acres.

The Commentary

It is fairly clear that Mr. Driver was rather unimpressed by the state of the Bewdley manorial woods in 1801. The Napoleonic Wars had once again sharpened thinking about the long term need for timber resources for the Navy and it was quite clear that the Wyre Forest would be supplying little if any timber for either the needs of the current conflict nor of future ones.

The value of the Coppices he considers to be generally poor, though he only suggests that the poorness of the soil is responsible. There is no real analysis of the market for Wyre Forest products. The low price of poles and other coppice products suggests there may be a market problem but Mr. Driver does not say there is one.

Poles apparently go to the local collieries, but while these might be numerous, they are not extensively worked. The cheapness of Cord Wood is put down to the conversion of ironmaking forges from a charcoal process to one utilising pit coal. The only product favourably commented upon (obliquely) is bark.

Having calculated that the Coppices were making significant annual financial losses, he proposes that the solution is to grub up at least some of the unprofitable woods and convert them to farmland. The flaw in this argument is that it is difficult to see why farming on poor heathy soils would necessarily yield more profit than the woodland. There is certainly nothing to indicate that Mr Driver's recommendations were adopted.

What the survey and valuation of 1801 shows us is the old woodland management system – one which dates back to at least the fifteenth century – of coppice-with-standards is in a fairly advanced state of decaying paralysis. The pressures of industrialisation and the practice of letting to tenants perhaps more interested in the status and influence which went with being Lord of the Manor rather than good woodland management were taking their toll. The manorial coppices were in a bad way as far as income generation for the Crown was concerned. However, it might still be good for the local tenant farmers and cottagers, who could claim free wood as they had done by custom for generations. Good perhaps also for small craft workers in the forest districts and Bewdley because forest products seem to have been – according to Driver – comparatively cheap.

But this is a snapshot of a world which elsewhere was about to change quite radically. Concerns about the lack of naval timber at the time of the Napoleonic Wars led to a number of fundamental changes (ironic really because by the time timber planted then was scarce half grown the wooden ships were redundant). Before Waterloo the Commissioners of Woods and Forests had been created and had taken responsibility for the Crown Lands. They introduced a policy of legal disafforestation which released the Crown from the old system. The Crown woods could be apportioned and inclosed and customary rights abolished. This heralded the creation of plantations and the reduction of coppice underwoods. This process was further hastened by the arrival of the Douglas Fir in 1827 and the Sitka Spruce in 1831.

These changes did not perhaps come as quickly to the Wyre Forest as in other forests, but the survey and valuation of 1801, with its coppice rotations and focus on the underwoods, was very much a glimpse of an old way destined to eventually become almost extinct in many parts of the country.