

## The Four Parishes Heritage Group and Research into the Medieval Wyre Forest

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The Four Parishes Heritage Group was founded in 2005 to research the history of Highley, Kinlet, Billingsley and Stottesdon as well as surrounding parishes. Consequently the Wyre Forest is of considerable interest to the group. Whilst the main efforts of the group have been directed towards Billingsley and Stottesdon, some research has been carried out that is relevant to the Wyre Forest. In particular, on the group website a number of documents have been transcribed that deal, directly or indirectly, with the history of the forest (see particularly <http://www.discovershropshire.org.uk/html/search/verb/GetRecord/theme:20080320220232>). In this article, research to the end of the Middle Ages will be described.

Field walking in Kinlet has produced material ranging in date from the mesolithic (c4000 BC) to modern times. Perhaps the most significant finding is that abraded Romano-British pottery is common in topsoil in fields throughout the area. It is not possible to pinpoint any farms or houses from this but its abundance provides evidence for settlement along what is now the fringes of the forest in Roman times. Indeed, aerial photographs suggest possible house sites<sup>1</sup>; the pottery evidence reinforces the belief that these are late iron-age or Roman.

It is impossible to plot the boundaries of the forest in Roman times with data available to the group. However, it seems highly likely that in the period following the

end of Roman Britain and the establishment of the Saxon kingdoms, there was a collapse in population and consequently a spread of the forest. As the population gradually recovered, there would be clearance of woodland to bring land into production for farming. The earliest glimpse that we have of this is in the names given to settlements by the Saxon incomers (Figure 1). Place names ending in -ley usually are taken to indicate a woodland clearance. The historian Margaret Gelling has pointed out that the names Highley, Billingsley and Glazeley suggest substantial areas of woodland extended north of the current boundary of the forest, although this may have been far from continuous<sup>2</sup>. There are also a cluster of wood-associated place names to the east of the current forest in Neen Savage. However, these names are rare south and east of the forest; significantly this correlates at least loosely with better quality soils.

The earliest available document which has provided useful information for the group is an Anglo-Saxon perambulation which describes the boundaries of Upper Arley<sup>3</sup>. The charter from which it is taken is almost certainly a forgery, but it has been argued that the perambulation itself is genuine and dates from c1000. It is not always clear whether it is describing a wooded or open landscape but in places (such as the boundary between Arley and Alveley), fields and closes are described, showing a pattern of established farms. Indeed, the impression is of dispersed farms, rather than the tightly-nucleated villages that would be expected at this time. The document also notes that Winna's tree was a boundary marker with Kinlet. It is tempting to relate this to Winwood Farm, on the fringes of the forest in Kinlet and to suggest that both reflect an estate carved out of the wood by Winna at some point before 1000.

The Wyre Forest is not mentioned in Domesday<sup>4</sup>. Highley, Stottesdon and Cleobury are all associated with woodland in the survey (Figure 2). Cleobury's portion was the largest and since Cleobury probably belonged to Queen Edith, widow of Edward the Confessor, Robert Eyton the great 19th Century historian of Shropshire argued that the forest was attached to Cleobury and that it was owned by the crown<sup>5</sup>. In support of this, Kinlet was also owned by Edith and its name means "royal portion". It is difficult to argue with Eyton's logic. However, some caution is needed before accepting that the whole of the Wyre Forest was a royal hunting forest. In 1066, none of the Worcestershire manors which might have been expected to include portions of Wyre were royal property; neither were Dowles or Kingswood, detached portions of Stottesdon. It is possible that the Saxon crown might have claimed hunting rights

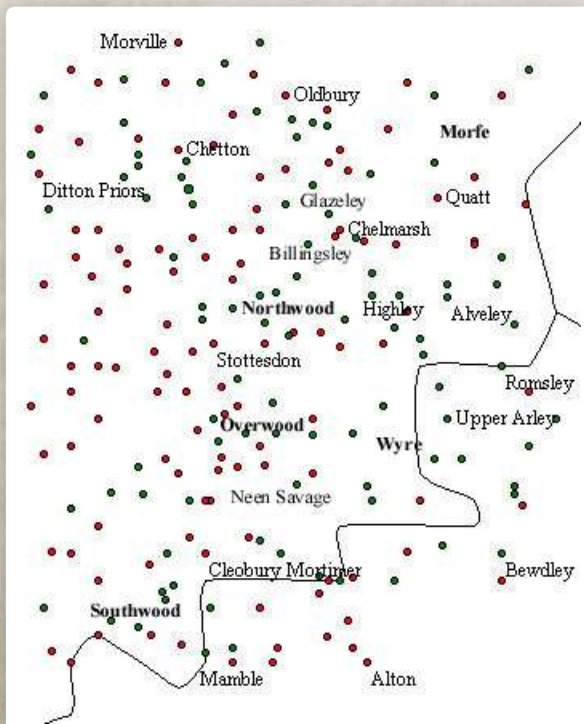


Figure 1 Woodland place names  
Green symbols, names ending in ley or wood; red symbols, names ending in ton. Names of selected woods, current or past, are shown in bold.

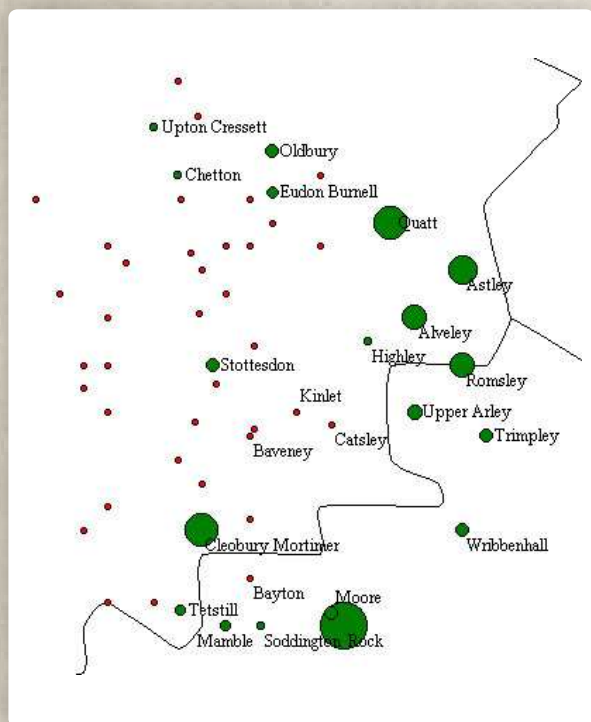


Figure 2 Domesday woodland.

Red symbols, manors for which no woodland is indicated in Domesday. Green symbols, manors which included woodland in their Domesday assessment. For these, the size of the symbol gives a speculative estimate of size. This is impossible to do with any precision as woods are often indicated either as a linear measurement (typically leagues) or in terms of the number of swine they can support. For purposes of comparison, the square of the dimension in leagues has been taken as the area and it has been assumed that one swine equates to five acres (based on estimates derived from D. Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape - the Kingdom of the Hwicce*, 1985, 156 and O. Rackham, *Ancient Woodland: its History, Vegetation and Uses in England* [2nd Edition], 2003, 120). The resulting figures must be treated with extreme caution.

over land owned by others, but the forest was divided between a multitude of different owners and was used in several different ways. It is interesting to note that by the 12th Century, much of the forest was fragmented, with detached estates being associated with manors outside or on the periphery of the forest. Indeed, the association in Domesday of Billingsley with Morville and Highley with Chetton may date back to the time when these manors could be considered as northern extensions of Wyre (Figure 3)<sup>6</sup>. The pattern is consistent with large manors having a share of woodland to provide them with fuel, wood for building and rough pasture.

For a brief period after the Conquest, Ribbesford was taken by the Crown and counted as part of the royal forest of Kinver<sup>7</sup>. However, by 1086 when the Domesday survey was made, most of the Shropshire portion of Wyre was owned by the Mortimer family or their undertenants and they and their descendants retained ownership for the entire medieval period. Stottesdon became royal property. Dowles eventually became a manor and parish in its own right, owned by Malvern Priory; Malvern also owned an estate at Meaton, in Kinlet. Kingswood

remained part of Stottesdon; the name reflects its one-time royal ownership (and further reinforces the fact that the bulk of Wyre was not a royal forest). However, from the middle of the 12th Century, Stottesdon was always held by subtenants; usually powerful men at court<sup>8</sup>.

The Mortimers established deer parks at Cleobury, Bewdley and Earnwood by the end of the 13th Century and attempted to keep most of the rest of the forest as their private chase for hunting<sup>9</sup>. By 1296, Nicholas de Segrave, Earl of Warwick and owner of Stottesdon had his own deer park at Kingswood<sup>10</sup>. However, the population that had started growing in Saxon times, continued on an upwards path until the early 14th Century. The Mortimers, the Segraves, and their undertenants had to balance hunting with the needs for farmland for their growing manors of Highley, Earnwood, Kinlet, Cleobury and Kingswood. The probability is that they managed this because of the sheer size of the forest; there was room for both the deer and the farmers (Figure 4). Earnwood is an interesting case in point. The manor is not mentioned in Domesday. It may have been counted as part of the woods that belonged to Cleobury or it may have been in extra-manorial woodland reckoned of no monetary value and so ignored by the surveyors. By the early 13th Century, the Mortimers had a park in Earnwood and a hunting lodge. This was considered sufficiently remote to be used as a prison later in the century and as a retreat when Edmund de Mortimer wanted to scheme with his fellow Marcher lords remote from the eyes of King Edward I<sup>11</sup>. Yet there were also people living on the manor. In 1251, Roger de Earnwood

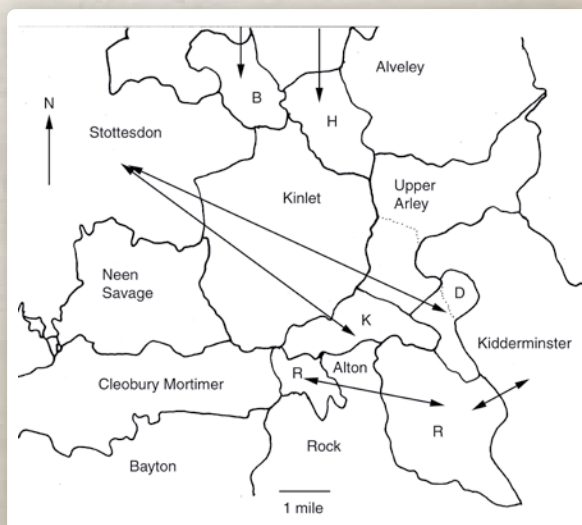
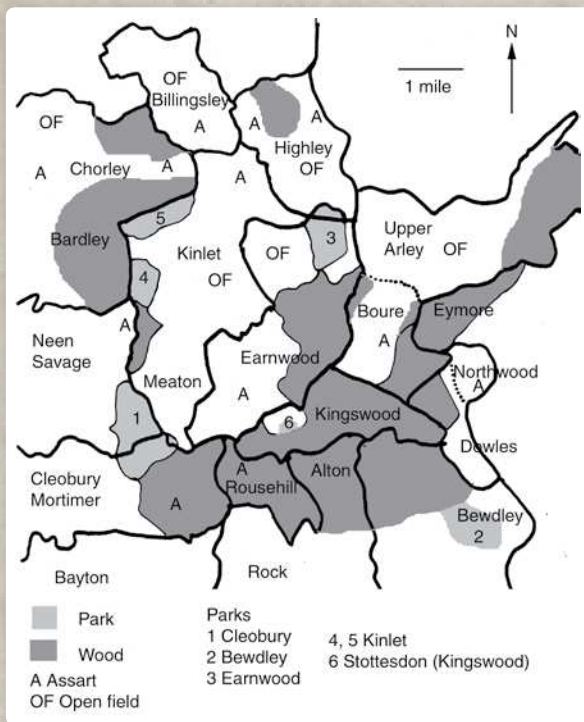


Figure 3 Parish boundaries in the Wyre Forest

This illustrates ecclesiastical parish boundaries in the mid-19th Century; they are likely to be broadly similar to the medieval boundaries. In Domesday book, Billingsley was part of the manor of Morville, Highley and Chetton were both owned by the Countess Godiva, Dowles and perhaps Kingswood were likely to be part of Stottesdon and Ribbesford was a member of Kidderminster. Abbreviations: B, Billingsley; D, Dowles; H, Highley; K, Kingswood; R, Ribbesford.





**Figure 4** Woodland and estate boundaries of Medieval Wyre  
 This is a speculative reconstruction of land use in Wyre around the 14th Century. The boundaries of Earnwood are shown as well as parish boundaries; in addition, at this date Alton had been divided into a portion considered part of Abberley and another part belonging to the abbey of St Evroul. It is impossible to draw boundaries with any precision and in any case they almost certainly changed with time. Accordingly, this map is intended simply as a guide to the approximate locations of parks, woodland, assarts and open-fields. The areas of assarts are those suggested to have been created since Domesday; it is uncertain whether the land so cleared was taken into the open fields or enclosed as private holdings.

and his wife sold half a virgate of land at "Maubeg, near the great park of Wyre" to Lucas le Marcescall. Roger must have been a freeholder, a man who owned land in his own right. Both freeholders and the lords of the manor would have been keen to clear woodland to bring more land into cultivation<sup>12</sup>. Between 1304 and 1332, the amount of arable land owned by the Mortimers in Earnwood increased from 120 to 200 acres and the rents from freeholders nominally jumped from 12/- to £6-10-0<sup>13</sup>. It seems that the wood was maintained to the east where the park was found and also extended south to the boundaries with Arley and Kingswood. The manor farm and the open fields were in the north-west, around what is today Birch Farm. In the south-west was Winwoods and probably other farms owned by free-holders who had cleared their lands from the forest; the process of assarting (Figure 4).

If the population had continued to grow unchecked, there would eventually have come a point when the Mortimers would have had to choose between deer and rent income. A series of natural disasters in the first half of the 14th Century saved them the decision. From

1315-22 there was a run of terrible harvests. In 1348/9, the Black Death struck. The population is likely to have fallen by a third, perhaps as much as one half. There are no surviving records from the immediate aftermath of the Black Death, but good manorial accounts do survive from the end of the 14th Century. In 1373 at Earnwood, the auditor noted that there were either no rents or reduced rents from 13 holdings. For eight of these there were no tenants, one was let at a reduced rent and four were now either in the "Chace of Wyre" or had been enclosed in the park<sup>14</sup>. The latter items are particularly interesting as they show these holdings had been permanently abandoned and turned over to woodland. The accounts for Cleobury Foreign (land in Cleobury and Neen Savage bordering the Wyre Forest) for 1372 paint a similar picture; 14 holdings with no tenants, 7 holdings now either in the forest or Cleobury Park and 8 let at reduced rents. In total, the auditor estimated that the manor was losing £3-4-4 pa as a result of these problems<sup>15</sup>.

Whilst the crises of the first part of the 14th Century were certainly traumatic and had far-reaching consequences, it would be wrong to assume that they set the tone for a century and a half of misery. The economy showed itself to be resilient and adaptable. Thus, whilst the auditor mournfully noted the loss of revenue to Cleobury Foreign, overall rents in 1372 came to £33-7-7; the losses were just 10% of the total rent income. The same was true at Earnwood; lost revenue of 11/10 had to be set against an actual rent income of £11-4-2. Individual farms were abandoned, but there is no evidence locally for any community of a significant size vanishing. The evidence for the few late 15th Century account rolls so far examined is that the expansion of farmland was again the dominant theme<sup>16</sup>.

It is possible to get a detailed picture of the way the Wyre was managed in the 14th Century. The accounts for Earnwood and Cleobury parks record the attention given to the deer<sup>17</sup>. Sums were regularly spent renewing the fencing around the parks and in the winter, ivy was cut for food for them. In addition, large amounts of hay were transported into parks. However, it was not just the deer that benefited from the parks. Grazing rights were leased out or sometimes they were considered to be one of the rights of lord's tenants. In 1307, the inhabitants of Walltown paid 12 hens yearly for the privilege of grazing rights in Kinlet Wood<sup>18</sup>. Cattle and sheep would be let onto largely tree-free areas of grassland, the lawns, or areas where trees were pollarded to stop them from being browsed out. In the Mortimer-held parks of Earnwood and around Cleobury, horses were allowed to graze in the parks.



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A specialised grazing right was that of pannage; the right to turn out pigs to eat the acorns ("mast") shed by oak trees in the winter. This was a direct connection with the Domesday woods, reckoned by the number of swine which they could support. At Earnwood and at Bewdley the parks also housed rabbit warrens<sup>19</sup>; at Kinlet the parker had regularly to spend money on tar for the bases of fruit trees in the manorial orchard, to stop them being "wickedly eaten" by the rabbits. Wild bees were another bonus that came with parks; the lord was entitled to the honey<sup>20</sup>.

Woodland also of course provided wood. This took several forms. There was the underwood, used for fuel or for hurdles and wattle. In the Mortimer-owned woods, this belonged to the lord and was sold<sup>21</sup>. The tenants were entitled to take dead wood for firewood, at least in the early 16th century. There was also timber for building. Any substantial tree that was blown over in the wind was usually sold for this purpose, but if required, trees could be felled to supplement this. It was not however common for felling of mature trees to take place and when it did, it could have repercussions. In 1464-5, Margaret Burley of Upper Arley was sued for creating waste in the forest by cutting down eighty oaks and hundred elms<sup>22</sup>. Prior to the 14th century, it is not clear if there was any systematic management of woods. However, the 1373-4 accounts for Earnwood park record money spent of enclosing a "vallet"<sup>23</sup>; another word for a coppice; managed underwood production was underway.

Manorial accounts and valuations reveal that woods and parks were rarely large income generators. Grazing rights were usually worth no more than a few shillings and sales of wood remained sporadic. Nonetheless, manorial woods were maintained and were probably of more importance than the strict monetary value as recorded by the medieval accountants.

There was also industry taking place in the forest. In 1384 there was mining of ironstone in Cleobury park. It may be significant that Robert le Fletcher was living in Cleobury Mortimer in 1327. There is a fair chance that Robert was a fletcher; an arrow maker and a man with that surname was still in Cleobury in the 1380s<sup>24</sup>. The arrow makers would need iron for their arrow heads; perhaps they used local material. Henry le Collier, a freeman of Earnwood in 1304 was probably a charcoal burner, perhaps providing fuel for a local iron industry. William Sawier of Upper Arley, at the same date, was presumably cutting wood for either fuel or building timber<sup>25</sup>. By 1472 there were coal mines in Cleobury Park, albeit unworked at that date<sup>26</sup>. Tanning was an

important medieval industry. In the 1380s, the parker of Cleobury suffered an implicit reprimand when he failed to skin several dead horses in time for the hides to be sold to a tanner<sup>27</sup>. Tanneries need bark from trees and this would certainly come from the forest.

By tradition, medieval woods were the haunts of outlaws. By the 14th Century there is little reason to suppose that Wyre was particularly attractive as a place of abode to the criminal fraternity. However, the resources of game and wood were attractive to many and there are frequent court proceedings arising from attempts to control this. A feature of the early 14th Century were what seem to be organised raids, involving perhaps 30 or more individuals on the deer parks. Sometimes these were led by neighbouring landowners<sup>28</sup>. The de Ribbesfords, with holdings around both Bewdley and Neen Savage, were frequently in dispute with the Mortimers and were not afraid of direct action to press their claims. In other cases there are no obvious ringleaders or motives. Local clergy often took part in the raids; it is possible that they were genuine expressions of discontent by local people at what they perceived to be unjust restrictions on their rights within the forest. Individual acts of poaching were doubtless commonplace, but would be dealt with by local manor courts whose records rarely survive from this period. The individuals would usually be fined. However, in 1364 the Rev Richard Nowel, parker of Earnwood and Roger de Foxcote were pardoned for assaulting Robert de Cleeton and taking away his sword, shield, purse, a girdle and a bow and arrow. They may have suspected that Robert had been using deer for target practice with the latter two items. As a footnote, Nowel was dismissed as parker in 1382 when suspected of helping himself to deer. As he had just been appointed Prior of Southwick Abbey on the south coast, this hardly left him destitute<sup>29</sup>.

1 Kinlet History Group, "Kinlet; the life and times of a Shropshire Parish", 2007, 1-4. It should be noted that the pottery recovered from the topsoil is invariably heavily abraded and its identification is not always simple.

2 M. Gelling, "The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages", Leicester University Press, 1992, 14-16

3 D. Hooke, "Worcestershire Anglo-Saxon Charters", Boydell, 1990, 235-9

4 F. & C. Thorn, "Domesday Book; Shropshire", Phillimore, 1986

5 R.W. Eyton, "Antiquities of Shropshire", 1858, London, Vol IV, 276-9

6 Thorn & Thorn, op cit: Eyton, op. cit., IV, 159-60

7 Victoria County of Worcestershire, 1924, London University Press, Vol 4, 297-314

8 Thorn & Thorn, op. cit.: Eyton, op. cit., 142-152; 160-2; R.C. Purton, "Stottesdon", Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society (TSAS), Vol 47, 1933-4, 139-49

9 Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortum, Vol 4, No 235; Inquest on Edmund de Mortimer, 1304; Eyton, op. cit. IV, 276-8

10 Calendar of the Patent Rolls (Cal Pat Roll), Ed I Vol 3, 421

11 Eyton, op. cit., 276-8: J. Blakeway, "Notes on Kinlet" (edited by Mrs Baldwin-Childe, TSAS, 1908, 3rd Series Vol 8, 83-150.

12 Eyton, op. cit., 278

13 National Archives (NA), C133/114, C135/29

14 NA SC6/967/3





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15 NA SC6/965/20

16 NA SC6/966/14

17 The following accounts have been examined: NA SC6/965/14, 27, 966/3, 7 (Cleobury Park); SC6/967/3, 5, 14, (Earnwood)

18 NA C134/9

19 NA C133/114

20 NA SC6/967/3

21 NA SC6/967/14. Wood cutting was heavily regulated. In 1380 William Hamond, William Astley, John Palmer, Robert atte Lowe, John de la Hyll and William Holloway were fined for cutting the demesne wood in Highly; the following year John de Foxcote in Earnwood was fined for cutting the underwood on his land (NA SC2/197/106)

22 NA SC6/966/7; Victoria County of Worcestershire, 1913, London University Press, Vol 3, 5-10

23 NA SC6/967/3

24 NA SC6/966/3

25 NA C133/114

26 NA SC6/966/13

27 NA SC6/965/14

28 Cal Pat Roll, Ed II Vol 3, 545; Vol 5, 399; Ed III Vol 1, 562; Vol 3, 675

29 Cal Pat Roll, Ed III, Vol 12, 441-2; Ric II Vol 1, 624; Vol 2, 143

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Visit to Cleobury Woods with David Poyner 16 Feb 2008

Rosemary Winnall

