

A History of Selsdon Wood up until 1945 by Ted Frith

This should be read in conjunction with R T Harrison's Booklet 'Selsdon Wood Nature Reserve', published by The London Borough of Croydon in 1986

The 'estate' of Selsdon, which probably dates back to Saxon times, had become a detached part of the parish of Croydon by the time of the Domesday enquiry in 1086. Most of the estate was owned by the Archbishops of Canterbury and was centred on Selsdon farm, which probably stood where the hotel now is. Little is known about the very early history of Selsdon and in particular the woods and fields of what is now Selsdon Wood.

In 1492, the year Columbus 'discovered' America, a terrier, or survey, was carried out for John Morton, the then Archbishop, of all his lands in Croydon, including Selsdon, to ascertain who paid rent to him. This survey, which is held in Croydon library, lists all the fields and woods, with their acreage, the tenants and the rent they paid - many fields were still cultivated in strips. There was no map, but the present wood would have been part of the Este Field, the Grotten or Great Field and 62 acres then called Spicers Wood. The presence of the wood anemones in the eastern part of the wood now is an indicator of ancient woodland.

The perambulation of the parish boundaries of Croydon for 1552 still exists - the boundaries of Selsdon have hardly changed over the centuries. Starting from '*a gate called Clabe Gate*' in the lane from Sanderstead to Addington, now where the pylon wires pass over, the boundary followed a hedge for three quarters of a mile bending southeast to a corner of a hedge '*bounding upon Eylesden in ye parish of Farley and Courtland in ye parish of Addington and then turning upon a hedge heading south and by west for the space of three quarters of a myle to ye King's highway leading from Limpsfield to Croidon at ye furthest end of a parcell of woodland called Hall....*' This perambulation was updated in 1780 and is a little more specific - the corner of a hedge referred to above is '*where there is a + in a maple tree in Ashton Grove*' and the 'south by west' is qualified '*Pupletswood and Selsdon to Broadfield*' And the parcel of land is called '*Hailwood where there is a + on an oak pollard stump*'. Part of the old boundary between Selsdon and Addington is still visible along the side of the Addington Border path.

The first detailed map we have of Selsdon is that which accompanied the Enclosure Award of 1803. This shows every field, its name and there was a list of the owners. The present Selsdon Wood comprised the fields Green Hill, Great Field Hill, David's Crook, Broad Field and two areas of woodland, Hale Oaks and Selsdon Wood.

The map of the Tithe Redemption Award of 1847 shows the fields unaltered but are shown, with acreages, as Selsdon Wood (84 acres), Hill Field (formerly Green Hill - 14 acres), Great Hill (Great Field Hill - 37 acres), Green Hill (David's Crook - 8 acres), Broad Field (10 acres) and Hale Oaks (23 acres). There seems some confusion over David's Crook!

The first 6 inches to the mile Ordnance Survey map of the area was published in 1869 but the fields are not named. The wooded areas are shown as Selsdon Wood, with Court Wood on the other side of the boundary with Addington, Hillocks Wood (which is a corruption of Hale Oaks) with the smaller Broom Wood joining it to the main wood. Most of the present rides and wide footpaths date back before this time as they appear on this map. In the 1914 edition Stevens Larch is shown, but the Broad Field has become scrub and called The Gorse.

We know virtually nothing of how the fields and woods were looked after in the past. About 1809 a new farm, Selsdon Park Farm, was built with cottages, two of which still remain, in the lane to Addington and where Aldi now stands. The land east of Old Farleigh Road would have been farmed by the tenants of this farm, including William Gutteridge and Thomas Langford during the 19th century. The fields would have been cultivated or used as pasture. The woodland would have been managed, with coppicing, felling and replanting, as woods were an important asset and source of income. From around 1805 until 1890 most of Selsdon was owned by the Smith family, who lived in the big house, now the hotel. In 1890 William Stevens, the publisher of a popular magazine, *The Family Herald*, purchased Selsdon Park, the mansion and he is remembered for planting the small plantation of conifers known as Steven's Larch. He died in 1899 and a brewer, Wickham Noakes became the new squire of Selsdon. He was a very keen sportsman, particularly shooting, and by then most of this was done in Selsdon Wood. To keep the woods well stocked with birds, a gamekeeper, William Westall, was employed to raise young birds in a pheasantry, roughly where Ravenshead Close is now. Although Noakes had regular shoots in the Wood before the first world war, this probably declined in the early twenties as he was then in his late seventies and a widower.

All was to change in 1923/4. Noakes died and shortly afterwards Howard Houlder, the owner of Heathfield, was declared bankrupt. The whole of Selsdon was up for sale and it was then that Costains, a Liverpool based builder, came on the scene to develop the new Selsdon Garden Village. The big house was sold to become a hotel and the land to the east of Old Farleigh Road was bought by Arthur Cresswell, who seems to have bought up land with the eventual aim of selling it off for development. He did initially farm Selsdon Park Farm and had a dairy business there. He also bought part of the Heathfield estate, later moving to Coney Hall and Chelsham Place Farm.

The First Steps in Saving Selsdon Wood

Immediately after the First World War the Surrey Garden Village Trust had been set up. In an article in the April 1921 issue of *Garden Cities and Town Planning* Miss E L Hudson, Hon. Secretary of the Trust had written:

“The SGVT have set on foot a project which seems destined to realize many of Ruskin’s soul stirring ideals. They know, as Ruskin knew, that the production of food is the basis of all national well-being, and that the broader that foundation is made the more stable will be the superstructure which it is required to support. Their ambition is to enable men to live in a scene ‘rich by joyful human labour; smooth in field; fair in garden; full in orchard: trim, sweet and frequent in homestead; ringing with voices of vivid existence.’”

Practically, some 200 acres had been purchased at Addington, between Selsdon Park Road and Featherbed Lane, for the Trust to establish a complete garden village, settling ex-servicemen into smallholdings for dairying, pigs and poultry, market gardening, fruit and flower growing and it was to be a co-operative enterprise. It could also include men with other sources of income. The Committee of Management included Malcolm Sharpe, an architect, who was one of the group that saved Croham Hurst in 1901 and he had designed a prototype bungalow for the smallholdings. By the end of 1926 all the land had been or was about to be taken up and ten houses had been built and inhabited. Two smallholders had built their cottages themselves, five employed builders and the Trust assisted three. A trading scheme had been started and arrangement was made for an inspection on May 8th 1926.

The Trust’s annual report had stated that all the principal timber, both in Lady Grove and Court Wood had been removed. This had alarmed a group of local conservationists, including Malcolm Sharpe and they took immediate steps to secure 16 acres of Court Wood, all in Addington Parish, as a nature reserve, the SGVT donating 5 acres themselves. Early in 1925 the first moves to set up a bird sanctuary south of London had been mooted.

“No part of Surrey has undergone such rapid changes during the last 20 years as the chalk country through which the Brighton Road passes beyond Croydon. As far as Purley and for some distance beyond the Downs have been absorbed for building and the only barriers that have arrested the process of developments are provided by a few open spaces. Fortunately, the country to the east of Sanderstead has, so far, escaped disfiguring changes. It is somewhat inaccessible and was largely owned by the late Mr Noakes, of Selsdon Park; circumstances that have hitherto sufficed to keep it out of the market. The death of the owner, however, has led to the splitting up of the property and all the road frontages are now being taken up for building...

Steps have been taken to enter into a contract for the purchase of 107 acres at the low price of £30 an acre, subject to the condition that the purchase money of £3,210 is provided by public subscription before the end of July. It is intended to vest the land either in the National Trust or the Nature Reserve Society, in order that it may be permanently preserved as a public possession.”

On May 30th the Advertiser reported a visit that had been recently arranged and the following acts as a reminder of what the woods were like 80 years ago:

“The wood clings to a hillside 500 ft above sea level, with gloriously expansive views all around. No public road is nearer than a quarter of a mile. Only rough bridle ways lead through this paradise of sylvan charms. It consists of groves of oak, birch, pine, beech, chestnut and yew, rising above tangled coppices of elder, holly, gorse and the myriad charms of prolific undergrowth. On Saturday bluebells were seen in gorgeous plenty, rivalled in the more open spots by bugle. Other seasons are marked by all the flowers characteristic of chalk soil – the honeysuckle, enchanter’s nightshade, musk mallow, mullein, centuary, several of the orchid family, the rosy berries of the spindle tree, and even the Paris herb and autumn crocus, the exact haunts of which are not disclosed, because they might be ‘collected’ out of existence.

So much for flowers. Of animals, the rabbit heads the list, despite its many enemies. Thousands are killed every year and plenty remain. The thinning is absolutely essential or the wood would deteriorate. As for foxes they have been more numerous than hunters cared to tackle. Hence in a recent winter 32 were killed otherwise than by organised sport.

Coming to birds, people who came on Saturday saw or heard about 30 varieties. In the days when Mr Noakes was

'squire' 72 varieties of birds' eggs were collected. Of course, the nightingale is found. Even the hoopoe has been observed this year...

In the wood are several decayed huts built when the Bishop of Rochester lived at Selsdon House and used by tired East End curates and other church workers for Drives. One was originally a caravan, and was bought from a gipsy on Epsom Downs, when a Selsdon party attended the Derby. One novelty is a beech tree 'tapped' to keep a cistern full of water – probably for use in other days in the game rearing seasons.”

In April 1926 the Croydon Advertiser reported on a joint ramble, organised by The Federation of Rambling Clubs when the 80 participants explored the wood's romantic beauty. The leader, Mr A L Simpson, or 'Pathfinder', a writer on rambling matters, said with a twinkle in his eye, 'this has been specially arranged for our visit', when the cuckoo was heard as they reached Court Wood.

“The woods were richly clothed in bluebells, violets and primroses and fragrance was shed around. Further on were found wood anemones peeping shyly through the undergrowth. These were pounced upon by many members of the party.”

At a meeting of the Selsdon Wood Preservation Society that month it was stated that £2,000 was needed to complete the purchase of the 110 acres, which would include legal fees and the cost of fencing. Mr Noakes' gamekeeper, Mr Westall, who presumably had lost his job when the big house was sold, was appointed Watcher and the Committee visited the wood after their meeting. Later in the year, A Beadell, who contributed nature notes to the Advertiser at the time devoted several articles on the wildlife in Selsdon Woods

The Campaign to Save Selsdon Wood Continues

To stop cyclists a gate was installed on the Addington Road footpath entrance to the woods in early 1930. In 1932 a further brochure was issued appealing for funds. By now most of the woodland had been secured, although £700 still needed to be collected. The Committee however had recently an opportunity to complete the scheme and rounding off the Reserve by the acquisition of a further 31 acres.

“This has been made possible by the very great generosity of a Croydon resident, who in addition to giving us 2 or the 31 acres, has advanced the purchase money on a further 10 acres on extremely favourable terms, and also enabled us to secure an option over the remaining 19 acres.”

So far they had paid out over £6,100, plus other expenses such as mortgages, keeper's wages and fencing. They were now nearly at the end of their resources, so they were now hopeful the £ 3,500 now needed would be raised. The 31 acres related to the fields near the current car park and some of this had been ready to parcel out in building plots.

The Selsdon Wood Quotation Calendar

Malcolm Sharpe launched a fresh appeal for funds in January 1934 to complete the purchase of Selsdon Wood, with a letter in the local press, but it was reported in May that there had been a poor response. A number of societies, such as the RSPB, responded with further contributions but at the end of the year a group of local residents came up with an intriguing fund raising exercise. They produced a Selsdon Wood Quotation Calendar for 1935, one copy of which still exists. Residents paid 1/- to have their favourite quotations included and these were set out week by week on a separate page. Mr Hector Hutt prefaced each month with a brief paragraph of nature notes in italics.

For example, the first week of December has the nature note in italics and then six quotations ranging from Tennyson to Charles Lamb, each with the name of the donor underneath. Some were 'home made' and some were short.

Mrs S C Crabbe's entry in June was from Emerson – 'As I am– so I see'.

In September four two line stanzas were included together:

MISS A C WALLACE	Sunlit skies of wondrous blue
	Woodlands robed in gorgeous hue.
MISS M LAMBERT	Hills o'er decked with soft blue haze,
	Tasselled ears of golden maize.
MISS G COUSENS	Ripened fruits on tree and vine
	Fragrance from the spruce and pine.

'BLUE'

Autumn's festive days are here
With their wealth of love and cheer.
(there is no explanation of who Blue was)

S W Hutt contributed 'A bluebell in the wood is worth two in a vase'.

Miss M Pleass: 'He found God when he saw the sun shining on a patch of bluebells in a Surrey wood.'

Blanche Lee wrote;

The countryside's so dear to me
I love the brilliant flowers,
I love the handsome oak trees
And cooling summer showers.
The moonbeams dancing thro' the trees,
The morning sun so bright.
How thankful we should be to God
For all this fair delight.

Some contributors were not so serious: Miss M Lemon said 'I'm awfully fond of wild thyme – I like a wild time too.'

A map of the woods was included and the cover (printed in brown on cream paper) had a line drawing of a wide trunked oak titled 'The confines of the Sanctuary'. The Calendar was priced for one shilling and 750 copies sold raising £24 for the fund.

Subscribers

Over 10,000 people subscribed to the appeals, including Sir Jeremiah Colman, of mustard fame, and Sir Julian Huxley. There was also one anonymous Croydon resident, who subscribed a substantial sum and a local Farleigh resident, William Coker Iliffe, was also very generous. There were also contributions from supporting societies, such as the RSPB, the CHNSS, the Men of Trees and others. Croydon and Coulsdon and Purley Councils were also asked in 1933 to make contributions and undertook jointly to take over the maintenance of the property as an open space and bird sanctuary.

Selsdon Wood is Officially Opened

On June 5th 1936 Selsdon Woods were officially opened by Sir Percy Vincent, the Lord Mayor of London, who happened to live in Purley. The opening did not quite go to plan, as very heavy rain overnight had made the ground too wet for a ceremony on the site. The ceremonial presentations took place in Croydon Town Hall, where the Mayor and Mayoress of Croydon welcomed the Lord Mayor and other guests in the late afternoon. The Mayor paid tribute to the Selsdon Residents' Association for its support and thanked those who had acted as watchers at weekends and holidays. The Lord Mayor handed the deeds to Lt Col Buxton of the National Trust and he in turn handed the lease to Cllr Nichols. Cllr Harrison, Chairman of the UDC proposed a vote of thanks and the Lord Mayor said Mr Harrison should have a glade named after him. Tea was taken in the Council Chamber. There was then an inspection of a guard of honour formed of scouts, cubs and guides in Katharine Street, before the Lord Mayor went to Selsdon Woods, where a small crowd watched him plant an oak to commemorate the occasion amid three cheers.

Although the National Trust became the owners, a joint management committee was set up on July 5th 1936. This comprised representatives of the National Trust and Croydon and Coulsdon and Purley councils.

Subsequently two keepers were appointed – Mr Robert Barnes of Chelsham (Senior Keeper at £3 per week) and his assistant, Mr S Eales of Sanderstead. Barnes held the job until his retirement in 1951 and recalled his busiest time was at Whitsun, stopping visitors from picking the bluebells. The management of the woods was gradually put on to a proper basis.

Fences were constructed, paths repaired, coppicing commenced, private access gates from Selsdon Vale smallholdings were closed, water supplies put in and horse riding stopped. A small strip of land by Broom Wood was acquired for £10 from Merton College, the owners of Farleigh and requests to pick blackberries were granted

Reminiscences of Selsdon Wood (a.k.a. Selsdon Bird Sanctuary) just before the war.

Ena de Bues (nee Robbins) recalls:

“From my childhood days spent living in Selsdon Vale, Selsdon, Selsdon Wood was the Selsdon Bird Sanctuary, or just “The Sanctuary”. Before the National Trust took over in 1936 access was easy from the Vale as few properties had been built before then. As children we could go into the Sanctuary at bluebell time to look for what we always considered a rare prize, a white bluebell. There were also wood anemones and woody violets growing among the trees.

The chalky bank which was approximately behind what became the Hallinwood Kennels, was a mass of primroses in the spring. We used to sit up on the bank and watch Capt. de Gurney, who owned the kennels then training Alsatians (now known as German Shepherd Dogs) to become guard dogs. We had a good view of him with one arm heavily padded while he encouraged the dog to attack him as if he were an intruder.

When the National Trust took over the Sanctuary they put up a very high chain link fence and access was only through one of the wrought iron gates, the nearest one being near the kennels where the bridle path joined Yew Tree Way, or further over at Courtwood Lane. I seem to remember that there was a ranger who patrolled the wood and no flowers were to be picked for fear of recriminations!

It was at the edge of the Sanctuary where it met Selsdon Vale opposite our home that for many years a nightingale came every spring and began to sing as night fell. This continued for a number of years right up until 1940, when it could be still heard singing despite the noise of ack-ack guns, searchlights overhead and German bombers droning on their way to bomb London. The nightingale did not return in 1941 or thereafter. It was 60 years later that having moved to Dorset in the interim I clearly saw and heard a nightingale again, singing in daylight in bushes on the headland above Swanage, a sighting confirmed by the information centre nearby. I was told that the birds had begun to arrive from the continent the day before.

Before the National Trust put up their tall fence a neighbour's son and I went into the Sanctuary to pick beech nuts. Reaching up into the branches we disturbed a wasps' nest either in the undergrowth or in the branches above. Within seconds we were surrounded by angry insects all intent on stinging as often as possible. I ran all the way home at top speed to receive what was the standard treatment for wasp stings in those days, copious dabbing with the blue-bag used by housewives before the days of automatic washing machines and suitable soap powders, to add whiteness to the week's wash. Incidentally, the neighbour's son told his Mother that I had deliberately pushed him into the wasps' nest, This was a likely tale and hotly denied by me as I recovered from the discomfort of numerous stings.

In those early days my father, who had been a keen runner in his time (he had won the mile championship when he was in the Army during the first world war serving in Egypt) undertook the task of laying a paper trail for the Croydon Ladies' Harriers. He set off with a pack on his back of shredded coloured paper and from our garden I could see him come out of the trees half way up the field to set off scattering the paper as he went and then round the Sanctuary and back again to the Vale. Nowadays one would be prosecuted for spreading litter!

Looking back over the years, I am reminded that we could go off into the Sanctuary with no fear of molestation by a stranger and enjoy the freedom of our childhood. Now with the celebration of 75 years last year I cannot help feeling that Selsdon Wood as it is now called would be better called by its old name, Selsdon Bird Sanctuary, after all it is today as it was all those years ago - a sanctuary for birds.”

Selsdon Wood during the War

Selsdon suffered a number of attacks during the first Blitz of 1940/1. The day that the war really came to Selsdon was on Sunday August 18th August 1940 when a Dornier bomber was hit by a shell after an attack on Kenley airfield flew low across, chased by two hurricanes before crashing near Leaves Green, but not before dropping a couple of bombs, one of which shattered a bungalow in Ashen Vale. Later bombs were dropped in Selsdon Vale and nine bombs (one unexploded) fell in Selsdon Wood around Broad Walk. On September 7th in the early evening a parachutist, seen drifting over Selsdon Wood, landed in a cornfield near Farleigh Common. On the 23rd two high explosives fell between Selsdon Wood and Baker Boy Lane, as well as about eight incendiary bombs in Hagglers Dean - and four days later six bombs landed in the wood in the afternoon.

Little has been recorded on the formation and the early days of the Home Guard in Selsdon, but by now they had become well established. Unusually, but not uniquely, there was a Mounted Home Guard Patrol, with which Cecil Ireland, local men's outfitter and keen horseman was involved. The Selsdon Wood Management Committee discussed at this time the question of access to the woods by this patrol. The Home Guard had suggested that it would make their work simpler if

they could have access to the woods at night. They would only use the woods when proceeding to or returning from their place of duty and would keep to the paths unless the enemy were reported in the woods. This was agreed and notices to the public would be displayed if there were unexploded bombs known to be in the woods.

Harry Hart was sixteen years old living in Addiscombe and working on war work in a factory in Purley Way. He and a friend joined the Mounted Platoon:

“The Selsdon Mounted Platoon provided a three man mounted patrol of the Selsdon and Chelsham areas. The patrols started at 8 pm in the Selsdon Park Riding Stables, where the first task was to saddle the three horses. The men wore home guard uniform, except that they had riding breeches, puttees and carried revolvers... The patrols went by various routes to stables at Chelsham Common. The horses would be fed and watered and we would get a few hours sleep before arising at 4.30 am to muck out the stables, saddle up and patrol back to Selsdon, usually by the most direct route. After stabling the horses we dismissed at 6.0 am and I would catch the first bus from Selsdon

Summer patrols were very enjoyable, as they would sometimes stop at The Harrow, then a typical country pub, where as he couldn't drink, he stood outside to mind the horses. Winter patrols, however were different – moonlit nights were not too bad, but with the blackout some patrols were carried out in pitch-black conditions. Another hazard was icy roads and he hated the steep hill from the stables to Selsdon Wood.

On December 15th seven high explosive bombs were dropped in the Kingswood Way area and on April 16th a number of incidents were reported across Selsdon, some being close to the woods. Then for almost three years Selsdon escaped any major aerial incidents. With a number of the smallholdings in Selsdon Vale being poultry farms, and more householders keeping chickens, foxes were by mid 1941 seen as a major problem. 28 had been shot in Selsdon Wood, but the council surveyors were anxious to get hold of the ‘granddaddy’ of them all, reputedly a large blackish fox with a tip on his tail. A local resident, Mr W Fisher, who lived in Lady Grove Farm wrote:

“I personally have suffered losses through foxes for several years and I have reason to regret that there are persons interested in nature preservation who have little or no regard for the losses and annoyances caused to their neighbours so long as their own ideas of nature are carried out.”

Mr Fisher also suggested that organised shoots would be the best way to control another pest - the grey squirrel.

On October 9th 1942 it was reported in the Croydon Advertiser that William Coker Iliffe had died. He lived at Moorcroft and was the largest resident landowner in Farleigh. He was the elder brother of Lord Iliffe, the newspaper magnate and had been a Selsdon and Farleigh ward councillor before the war. He was also a generous supporter of the movement to acquire open spaces for public access. He contributed liberally to the purchase of Littleheath Woods, but with a donation of 1000 guineas he appears to have made the largest private contribution in the purchase of Selsdon Woods.

The War came back to Selsdon on the night of Friday March 24th 1944. A whole sweep of high explosive and incendiary bombs fell in Selsdon, Sanderstead and South Croydon. An elderly couple were killed in Sundale Avenue. On this night incendiary and phosphorus bombs were showered on the decoy airfield that had been constructed in Hagglers Dean.

Then came the pilotless aircraft, flying bombs or doodlebugs as they were later called. Hundreds would have flown over Selsdon, but fortunately only two landed in Selsdon and none affected Selsdon Woods, although one on July 3rd crashed near Frith Wood.

Much of Stevens Larch was felled during the war for pit-props.