

**"CHANGING COUNTRYSIDE" COURSE
HISTORY AND MANAGEMENT OF SELSDON WOODS
PROJECT FOR THE OPEN UNIVERSITY
Janet Bickerstaff - December 1986**

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INTRODUCTION

Selsdon Woods is a nature reserve owned by the National Trust and managed for them by the London Borough of Croydon. It was opened as a nature reserve in 1936 and the fiftieth anniversary was celebrated by the Parks Department with the publication of an illustrated history, a copy of which is included in the project folder. (Ref.1)

There are nearly 200 acres, the greater part of which is woodland, but on the north western side are large areas of open grassland which amount to about one quarter of the whole. The main entrance and Warden's hut is in Old Farleigh Road, Selsdon. (O.S. map reference TQ 357 616).

The soil is clay with flints, overlying upper chalk, which in places is very near the surface, and the elevation varies from 380 to 520 feet above sea level.

My interest in the Woods has grown from three facts, firstly I am a life member of the National Trust and have a great concern for conservation, secondly as a ratepayer of the London Borough of Croydon I am interested in how my money is spent and, thirdly, having decided to take the Open University's Changing Countryside Course (PD770), the History and Management of the Woods seemed an ideal project.

The bungalow where we live was built in 1982 on the new Wates estate of Forestdale, and backs onto the 150ft buffer zone behind the Bridle Way on the north side of the Woods. This section, known as Court Wood, contains some of the oldest trees, mostly oaks up to 200 years old, and sweet chestnut and hazel which were previously coppiced. There are also some very old yew trees, one of which the forester working in the Woods reckons to be 900 years old.

When we were planning to move here from Whitstable, Kent, four years ago I imagined Croydon as a solid built-up area with few green spaces. I was delighted to find that just outside Croydon is a vast area of green hills and woodland, and that some of the ancient Surrey woods survive so near to London.

HISTORY OF THE WOODS

Ownership of the Selsdon Park estate, of which the Woods formed a part, can be traced back to the 9th century. The manor of Croydon, including the tithings of Selsdon were known to belong to the See of Canterbury in the year 871, and in the Domesday Survey it is entered among the Archbishop's lands held in demesne. (Ref.2)

The Knights Templar held the estate in the 13th century for their overlord, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and in 1291 the Archbishop's Croydon estates were taxed at £20. The Valour Ecclesiasticus of 1535 gives the value as over £80. (Ref.2)

In his book "A History of Surrey", (Ref.3) Peter Brandon writes of Farleigh Woods, which adjoin Selsdon Woods and a 10ft strip of which was incorporated into Selsdon Woods during boundary changes. He states that Farleigh was an estate of Merton College, Oxford, and from its documents its officials are shown to be very attentive to efficient woodland management in the 14th and 15th centuries, not basically different from

principles practised today, i.e. coppice with standard, the prime object being to ensure a constant supply of well-developed standard trees of different ages in the same wood. From the age of some the trees and old coppice stools, it is likely that the same management pattern was practiced in parts of Selsdon Woods.

This was the traditional Surrey system of tree-growing to meet the demands of firewood and charcoal for London and also timber for shipbuilding and building construction. The charcoal may also have been used in the ironfields in the Weald of Kent, as the Old Farleigh Road linked the two areas.

In 1647 the manor was sold by the trustees for the sale of church lands to Sir William Brereton, and in 1676 came into the possession of the Bowyer family. In John Rocque's map of Surrey, dated 1762, the bulk of the Woods is shown as woodland with the exception of the southern tip.(Ref.1)

Oaks 150 - 200 years old now would have been planted in the late Georgian/Regency period when Chippendale and Sheraton were designing furniture, Robert Adam's decor was fashionable and the Georges were on the throne of England.

The oldest trees, beeches in Hillocks Wood, which stretched across Farleigh Road 300 years ago when nearby Caterham was a centre of the furniture industry, may have been planted in the reign of William and Mary or Queen Anne.

The Bainbridge map of 1800, drawn at the time of the Enclosures Act, shows Selsdon Wood as forming part of the 'Croydon Crook', a detached part of the Croydon Parish in the Wallington Hundred. The section known today as East, Middle and West Gorse, was then called Broad Field, and the open area to the north west existed then, known as Great Field Hill.

Around 1810 the estate came into the ownership of the Smith family who rebuilt the house and lived there for about 100 years. There is an interesting article concerning this family which was published by the Bourne Society in their 'Local History Records 1980 - Vol X1X. George Smith planted more trees on the estate but there are few records of his actual management of the woodland, apart from the fact that it was used for shooting purposes, being laid out with clearings and rides.

In 1899 William Noakes became the owner and shooting parties were held in the Woods and a pheasantry was built on the estate. The property remained in his ownership throughout the first World War, which appeared to have little effect on Selsdon Wood.

However, on his death in 1923 the estate was split for the first time in its history and the parkland and Selsdon Park buildings were sold as one lot and became the now famous Selsdon Park Hotel, and the remaining land and woods were split up into several holdings.

The existence of part of the woods as a nature reserve began at that time and is explained in detail in the Parks Department's illustrated history. The fact that it survived at that time is due to public spirited individuals and societies who over a number of years acquired the 200 acres known now as Selsdon Woods, and in 1936 the deeds of what was then the largest bird sanctuary in Britain were handed to the National Trust, on whose behalf it is managed by a joint Committee appointed by the Trust and the London Borough of Croydon, who maintain the estate on a 999 year lease. (Ref.1)

Although not part of Selsdon Wood Nature Reserve, there are buffer zones between the Woods and housing estates built in the last 20 years. These zones are 150ft in depth and may not be used for building. The buffer zone bordering the Wimpey estate in Selsdon Vale was adopted by the London Borough of Croydon in 1975 and renamed Fox Shaw.

There is a similar buffer zone on the northern boundary with the Forestdale estate built by Wates. This area is in a poor state as it is owned by a Wates company, Fernwood Estates Limited (in voluntary liquidation). Now that Wates have completed the estate and sold all their houses they have lost interest, and this area and other parts of the estate which they own are neglected and overgrown. It is hoped that eventually the London Borough of Croydon will take over, as they did with Fox Shaw.

However, if this is not possible, maybe Wates could be persuaded to hand over these woodland areas (all once part of Court Wood) to The National Trust or The Woodland Trust who, if acceptable to them, would care for the woodland in perpetuity. [\(In 2008 this land was bought by some concerned residents of Brookscroft.\)](#)

THE LAST 50 YEARS

During 1939-45 the Woods played their part in the War effort in several ways. In the spring of 1942 the Great Field was ploughed by the Surrey War Agricultural Committee, with the help of Italian prisoners of war. (Ref.4) That area also served as a decoy for Biggin Hill airfield and dummy tanks were placed with their guns protruding from the trees.

There are many small craters in the Woods and it is known from the World War II Bomb Maps held in the Croydon Reference Library that three high explosive bombs fell in Court Wood.

Much heavy timber was taken during the War and in the summer of 1944 many of the trees in Stevens' Larch were cut for pit-props by the Ministry of Supply. Some replanting took place in 1948 and 1952 and more has been done recently.

Up until 1945 a local firm of contractors had the coppicing rights. In the 1950s large areas were coppiced but there was little replanting. Then in 1965 the late Mr. Patrick Bunce, the head forester for the Parks Department instigated a more active management and in 1969 he carried out a complete survey, dividing the Woods into 33 sections, which revealed the existence of virtually every common species of woodland tree, indicating very old woodland. (Appendix II).

As a result of the survey a 25 year programme of re-forestation and management was prepared and for 10 years there was a steady schedule of coppicing and planting. Unfortunately this came to an end in 1979 when local Government changes meant cutbacks and the end of long-term planning. To date 37,300 trees have been planted.

Two keepers are currently employed and their duties include patrolling, pest control, care of toilets and car park, as well as forestry, so they are hard pushed to keep up with the coppicing and clearing work, one problem being the sheer time it takes to walk from the keepers' hut to the far side of the Woods to check and lock the gates etc. It is hoped to provide them with a suitable vehicle soon.

Timber from the Woods is not sold for wood-burning stoves, firewood or pulp but used by the Parks Department for their own projects such as fencing and pond banks.

Chestnut in Court Wood is now being felled and is leaving much-needed clearings in an area of dense canopy. The bluebells and wood anemones should be a picture there in years to come. Small areas are generally selected for coppicing and replanting, rather than clear felling. A problem spot listed to be dealt with in the future is an area between Leafy Grove and Stevens' Walk where ash canker has to be eradicated and the Parks Department are hoping for a grant of £500 to replant with oak and chestnut.

MANAGEMENT

The Joint Committee of Management consisting of six local Councillors and three representatives of the National Trust was set up in 1935 in the 999 year lease document. A suggestion that perhaps a ratepayer, who is a life member of the National Trust and has the future of the Woods at heart, might be co-opted appeared to fall on stony ground!

The Committee meet in January each year to fix the budget for the forthcoming year and again in May when they make a site inspection and walk through the Woods.

The London Borough of Croydon see Selsdon Woods primarily as amenity woodland, and it is only a small section of the vast area of parks, playing-fields, verges and woodlands managed by the Parks Department, who naturally have limited resources, bearing in mind that their money comes from the rates. The Woods come under the general control of Mr. W. Gilmore, the Forestry Officer, and Mr. D. Holmes of the Parks Department.

The National Trust's Regional Forestry Officer gave their views on woodland management as a policy to perpetuate by phased replacement, i.e. fell and replant:-

- (a) the landscape of the countryside,
- (b) nature conservation,
- (c) public access,
- (d) financial return.

Mr. Philip Broadbent-Yale, the National Trust Agent, and Vice-Chairman of the Management Committee, said that they would require the London Borough of Croydon to maintain the Woods in a proper manner and that the National Trust would have to take steps if the London Borough of Croydon failed in their management. For National Trust woodland there is a five-year management plan and Selsdon Woods should fall in line with this concept in due course. (I believe that in the Reigate area the National Trust have reclaimed ownership of woodland which the local Council did not maintain satisfactorily.)

On the subject of the management of nature reserves, Dr. A. Lindley, Conservation Officer for the Surrey Wildlife Trust, told me that in general the objectives should be, in order of priority:-

- (a) maintain and enhance wildlife value,
- (b) undertake survey/research work,
- (c) provide educational facilities,
- (d) provide public access/recreation.

There is now no written management plan as the 25 year plan drawn up in 1969 had to be abandoned, and decisions are taken on a seasonal basis. This does not comply with the requirements of the National Trust mentioned above.

University College, London, have produced a 'proforma' for writing a management plan, and there is an example of a plan in 'Everyman's Nature Reserve - Ideas for Action' (Ref.5).

The Forestry Commission have been consulted to see if a grant could be obtained under the new Broadleaved Woodland Grant scheme, but it does not apply in this case. However, the Forestry Commission have produced a booklet setting out very clearly the Guidelines for the Management of Broadleaved Woodlands. It sets out in detail the importance of management in maintaining coppice and coppice-with-standard woodland. (Ref.7)

Another source of information on management of amenity land is Bryn Green's book 'Countryside Conservation' (Ref.10) which is full of basic knowledge for the managers of such land.

The Nature Conservancy Council is compiling a Register of Ancient Woodland, which is defined as sites which have borne woodland of one type or another since at least 1600, which certainly applies to Selsdon Wood.

The London Borough of Croydon are conscious of the importance of nature conservation and have recently set up a Nature Conservation Consultative Panel, which is dedicated to preserving Croydon's Countryside and there is currently a tree planting campaign. Therefore there is every reason to hope that they will manage Selsdon Woods in the manner considered appropriate by the National Trust, as they have in the past.

CONSERVATION WORK

In 1980/81 young people in the Youth Opportunities scheme helped to plant trees as part of their training, but there appears to have been little use of volunteer labour to assist the foresters (with the intention only to help and not to take work away from them or prevent the employment of another forester).

A while ago a group did offer to work on a pond (there is no natural water in the Woods) which would attract birds and perhaps even wildfowl, but this fell through when they discovered that the Parks Department expected them to provide the clay necessary to seal the chalk, and a lorry to transport it, as well as actually providing the labour to do the work!

Another group, properly organised and skilled volunteers belonging to the National Trust Activities Group, who have worked all over the south of England, is interested in working in the Woods, which seems appropriate since it is National Trust property, but there does appear to be some opposition. The Parks Department, being concerned lest it upsets the direct labour force, is cautious.

This is a great pity as a good volunteer group could do much useful work, which is additional to the foresters' duties. For instance, there is already a small overgrown pond near the special sanctuary at the western end of Stevens' Walk (named after Mr. Stevens who owned the estate in 1890). This pond had been lined with concrete with a concrete surround, which is now cracked and leaking, and could be restored. Also the Jubilee Plantation in this special sanctuary, which is a stand of beech and oaks presented by the Girl Guide

Association in 1977, is neglected, overgrown and choked with elderberries, brambles, etc. The Pool Grove pool also needs cleaning.

Volunteers could care for the special sanctuaries to encourage the nesting birds and keep out dogs and other intruders. Dick, who is a keeper-attendant, is a keen ornithologist and would welcome such assistance in the Woods.

The London Wildlife Trust, of which I am also a member, has two nature reserves locally where their team of volunteers are doing excellent work. Bramley Bank has been fenced and two ponds cleared, and on Hutchison's Bank the current project is the clearance of scrub to allow the only colony of small blue butterflies to breed more successfully. Although only in existence for two years the Croydon Branch has organised interesting and well-attended Walks to see orchids, butterflies and birds in their natural surroundings.

I feel that Conservation Volunteers could play a useful part in the management of the Woods, particularly when they are trained and skilled in conservation work and have attended courses run by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

NATURE RESERVE

In the original appeal for subscriptions to purchase the area it was described as "Proposed Bird and Wild Flower Sanctuary", later it was known as "Selsdon Wood Bird Sanctuary" and in the deed of gift to the National Trust it is titled "Selsdon Wood Nature Reserve and Bird Sanctuary".

In the early days the enthusiasts did much to encourage and protect the birds, providing specially fenced sanctuaries and nesting boxes. In Pool Grove is a small pool with running water (piped from Farleigh Road) which is a memorial to Col. H.S. Wood.

In 1978 Mr. Jack Penry-Jones of the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society made a comprehensive record of the flora and fauna, which has been published as a booklet by that Society. (Ref.6) There are detailed lists of plants, fungi, birds, mammals, insects, etc, but the Society state that unfortunately on his death all records ceased.

Prior to that date regular bird counts were taken by the Society for the Parks Department, and in the last count in May 1984 it was noted that the blue tits and great tits, blackbirds, pigeons and wrens had increased but there was a fall in sparrows and starlings compared with May 1976.

Squirrels are a constant nuisance in the Woods and have been controlled for many years by shooting, sometimes nearly 200 in one year. They have damaged many young trees by stripping the bark, and also rob the birds' nests.

There are few rabbits, partly because a neighbouring farmer is said to take diseased corpses into the wood to spread myxomatosis and so keep down the population.

I know of two badger sets and during dry weather they frequently visit my garden to drink from the bird pool. Unfortunately both sets are near the boundaries of the Woods and could be subject to interference from local housing estates. The foxes make full use of their new neighbours and are delighted to find a regular supply of food in the dustbins.

Coppicing and clearing encourages flowers, butterflies, insects and birds. The area known as The Wend was coppiced last year with the result that this year 50 to 60 species of flowers were to be seen. This winter the young trees in Middle Gorse are being thinned and cleaned so next year should see an improvement there also.

The growth of nearby housing estates has brought about over-visiting with a consequent decline in bird life. The woods are used by many nature lovers and dog-walkers (who are not necessarily nature-lovers!).

It is estimated that in one week there are 1000 visits by dogs, which is one of the reasons why there are few ground-nesting birds. Although there is a notice stating that dogs should be on a leash, very few people comply with this request. Even ten years ago there was a woodcock, but the pheasants and partridges disappeared long before that. The wire surrounding the special sanctuaries is now broken and overgrown in many places.

There are no nature trails or educational leaflets available, although booklets can be obtained from local libraries giving suggested walks. A local primary school takes parties of young children for nature walks but I do not know of any organised visits or walks.

I have heard people remark that, having spent an hour in the Woods and not seen one bird, there is more wildlife in their own back gardens. My own garden attracts woodpeckers, nuthatches, tree creepers, jays and long-tailed tits as well as more common birds, but in 200 acres of woodland it may be more difficult to spot them.

The great variety and age of the trees could be an educational feature. There are some great beeches and oak trees known to be at least 200 years old. The open areas may not be of such conservation interest as the local farmer, who is allowed to take the hay crop, treated the grass with herbicide a few years ago. He is now only permitted to use basic slag as a dressing.

Rare plants could be marked on a map, made available on request to those especially interested in botany and conservation.

The groves and walks have recently been given new name plates, which is a good feature as it is easy to become lost in the Woods.

In the book 'Discovering the Countryside with David Bellamy - Woodland Walks', which was produced in collaboration with the Royal Society for Nature Conservation (Ref.B), six woodland walks are described. A leaflet, on the lines of one of those chapters, describing a walk through Selsdon Woods would be of great educational value, based perhaps on the Parks Department's booklet, Woodland Ramble No. 1. (Ref.9)

CONCLUSIONS

It should be borne in mind that in the deed of gift the Woods are designated a Nature Reserve and Bird Sanctuary, and I feel more should be made of this fact.

The area could include a Nature Trail and Woodland Walk for educational purposes, with perhaps in the summer months a small caravan manned by volunteers selling maps, guides and leaflets issued by various conservation societies.

The special sanctuaries need new fencing and notices and, in addition, there should be 'no-go' areas for dog-walkers to allow birds to nest without disturbance. The small pool in Pool Grove needs cleaning and the derelict pond near the Jubilee Plantation could be restored. With all the timber available on site it should be possible to construct hides for observation of special areas as is done at the Wild Fowl Trust at Arundel. The Jubilee Plantation is another area mentioned as in need of cleaning-up and re-fencing. For all this work a volunteer group could be used as the task force.

Coppicing and clearing is going well. Of necessity areas have to be at different stages in the cycle, which allows wildlife to move on as coppicing is done, but as long as all sections are included in a management plan for attention at some time, with appropriate replanting, the Woods will survive.

Selsdon Woods have certainly been in existence for 1000 years and is typical of many English woodlands, with no special features, but it is just such woodland that must be preserved for future generations to enjoy, not only as a nature reserve and bird sanctuary, but a landscape feature.

Preservation means active management. To some people preservation means retaining old dying woodland without attention, but this is not the case and felling and replanting is essential if the Wood is to survive another 1000 years, and the general public should be informed of this point when they complain that trees are being felled.

The Management Committee are taking positive action, within the restrictions of their budget, to preserve the Woods. Starting with the tree survey in 1969 much has been done, but much remains to be done and a five-year plan should be drawn up so that at least the work is planned for a five year period, although time must also be allowed to deal with emergency work.

It is our responsibility to care for our woodlands so that future generations may enjoy them too.

HISTORY AND MANAGEMENT OF SELSDON WOODS - REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 1 - HISTORICAL NOTES

The history of the area surrounding Selsdon Woods can be traced back hundreds of years. In the 1950s Mr. R.I. Little excavated a Romano-British settlement in nearby Kings Wood, half a mile to the south-west. A small farmstead and cemetery were discovered which had been undisturbed for 2000 years. Pottery found there indicated occupation from the middle of the first century to the middle of the second century A.D.

The section of Old Farleigh Road on the south west border of Selsdon Woods is an Iron Age track way to the Sussex ironfields via Farleigh, Titsey and Limsfield Common, and in Kings Wood Mr. Little discovered 46 dene holes or depressions, thought to be marl pits. One 10 foot shaft contained Iron Age pottery. There are many lineal earthworks, which may be ancient field boundaries, similar to the mound and ditch which forms the Addington Boundary in Selsdon Woods. (Ref.9)

The name of Selsdon, or "Selesdun", is derived from the Anglo Saxon language meaning seat or mansion (seles) on a hill (dun), and certainly since the ninth century there has been a mansion on the site of the present Selsdon Park Hotel. (Ref.4)

APPENDIX 2 - EXTRACT FROM TREE SURVEY BY PARKS DEPARTMENT IN APRIL 1969

Section 1. Court Wood. 5.70 acres

Average age - 150 years. Main species - oak/chestnut.

History - Part coppiced 1951.

Action - Coppice, leaving standards, replant oak/chestnut.

Section 2. Court Wood. 3.70 acres

Average age - 150 years. Main species - oak.

History - Coppiced 1949.

Action - Coppice, thin birch, plant oak/chestnut.

Section 3. Court Wood. 10 acres

Average age - 200 years. Main species - oak, sparse.

History - Coppiced 1951.

Action - Coppice, thin, plant oak.

Section 3a. Court Wood. 3.80 acres

Main species - oak, sparse.

Average age - 200 years.

History - Deforested 1949.

Action - Clear undergrowth.

Section 4. Broad Walk. 7.20 acres

Main species - oak.

Average age - 200 years.

History - Coppiced 1949.

Action - Coppice, plant oak/chestnut.

Section 5 Beech Grove. 6.50 acres

Average age - 200 years. Main species - oak.

History - Coppiced 1949.

Action - Coppice, plant oak.

Section 6. Beech Grove. 6.70 acres

Average age - 150 years. Main species - oak.

History - Coppiced 1951.

Action - Coppice, plant oak.

Section 7. Langford's Way. 6.00 acres.

Average age - 150/200 years. Main species - oak.

History - Coppiced 1951 and 1962. Larch planted 80 years ago, removed 1939/45. Evidence of charcoal industry.

Action - Coppice, plant oak/larch.

Section 8. Court Wood Lane Gate. 0.03 acres.

Average age - ? Main species - oak.

History - Coppiced 1951.

Action - Coppice.

Section 9. Broad Walk. 4.45

Average age - 150/200 years. Main species - oak.

History - Coppiced 1951.

Action - Coppice, plant oak.

Section 10. Avis Grove. 7.00 acres.

Average age - 200 years. Main species - oak.

History - Coppiced 1951. Evidence of charcoal industry.

Action - Coppice, plant oak.

Section 11. Avis Grove. 5.80 acres.

Average age - 200 years. Main species - oak.

History - Coppiced 1949. Evidence of charcoal industry.

Action - Coppice, plant oak.

Section 12. Leafy Grove. 5.74 acres.

Average age - 150 years. Main species - chestnut.

History - Deforested 1929. Coppiced 1954.

Action - Coppice, plant oak/chestnut.

Section 13. The Wend. 4.90 acres.

Average age - ? Main species - stunted.

History - Coppiced 1952 (and 1985).

Action - Coppice, clear undergrowth, plant oak/larch.

Section 14. The Wend. 8.00 acres.

Average age - 100 years. Main species - oak.

History - Coppiced 1966/67.

Action - Coppice, plant oak in S.E. section.

Section 15. Stevens' Walk. 7.20 acres

Average age oak 150, others 80. Main species - oak, birch/ash/larch.

History - Oak planted 250 years ago, replanted 150 years ago. Clear felled 1890 leaving standards, replanted larch. Part coppiced 1953.

Action - Coppice, thin, plant oak/larch/pine.

Section 16. The Wend. 2.20 acres.

Average age - 150 years. Main species chestnut

History - Chestnut, underplanted hazel. Coppiced 1953

Action - Coppice, thin.

Section 17. The Wend. 1.30 acres.

Average age - 150 years. Main species - oak.

History - Underplanted hazel. Coppiced 1953.

Action - Coppice, thin, replant oak.

Section 18. The Wend. 1.35 acres.

Average age - 150 years. Main species - oak.

History - Underplanted hazel. Coppiced 1952.

Action - Coppice, replant oak.