

OR – 75

The History of Woodlands in Britain

The climate in Britain has been arctic for the last several million years, punctuated by relatively warm timespans, or interglacials of thousands of years, one of which we are in as of now. Since the last glaciation, British woodland history is considered quite short in terms of geological time spans, and is also closely related to the human civilization developing.

At the peak of the last glaciation (100,000 — 12,000 BC), the majority of Britain would have had no trees. Birch and willow scrub may have grown along the lower reaches of the ice, with pine in some areas. It's possible that remnants of pre-glacial flora were sheltered along the western bays of Great Britain and Ireland's coasts, but as far as the southern parts of England, the ice kept any land barren. Information regarding the development of Britain's flora following glaciation can be found by studying the deposits of pollen and seed in peat, as well as by the use of radiocarbon dating. Tundra and moorland followed the retreating ice, which led to phases of different tree species spreading from the south. First came birch, aspen and willow, followed by pine and hazel continuing to spread north as of 8500 BC, replacing birch to make it less commonly found for the next few thousand years. Oak and alder came after pine, then lime, elm, beech, and maple, all spreading northwards one after the other. From the moment lime arrived, in about 7300, to about 4500 BC the climate remained stable for a length of time known as the Atlantic Period, a time in which numerous species grew to form a series of wildwood or wilderness types.

What did the wilderness or wildwood look like, before man started interfering with it? One theory holds that Britain and Western Europe in Palaeolithic times was covered from coast to coast in a wildwood of continuous trees. However, a modern theory proposed by Francis Vera holds that Western Europe wilderness was a combination of grassland, scrub, and clusters or groves of trees. It was not a dense, impassable wildwood, but instead, an area similar to a park, kept up by wild herbivores eating the plants and grass. Throughout earlier interglacial periods, this may also have been the case in Britain, as creatures of the Palaeolithic era needed to roam large areas of grassland to survive. A variety of grassland plants continued to live there in the last interglacial, as according to pollen records. However, since the last glaciation, the bison, elk and other large herbivores which persisted on mainland Europe were extinct in Britain, so Vera's theory may not apply so well to Britain.

Meanwhile, throughout the period since it's spread northwards after the last glaciation, the sustained growth of oak in Britain demonstrates that the wildwood was not as continual as once believed. Oak is a pioneer species, which requires vacant space to generate more of itself. Grazing animals are also present to keep areas open, so Oak regenerates in the thorny brush as a protective measure from their grazing. Archaeological evidence indicates that red deer, who graze on grass as well as browse from trees, were essential to the economy in Mesolithic Britain, with people utilizing them for meat, skins, antlers and bones.

As the Mesolithic (10,000-3000 BC) era ended, evidence of the beginnings of agriculture emerges. Agricultural weeds, such as plantain and stinging nettle, were also increasing in number. Nearly all the wildwood was cut down as the population increased rapidly. However, the falling elm population around 4,000 BC all across Europe has been attributed not to the clearing of trees, but to what's referred to as Elm disease.

Throughout the Bronze Age (2400-750 BC), people were cutting down trees more than ever before, until the prevalence of the practice "coppicing" peaked, likely at some point during the early Iron Age. Oliver Rackham (1990) theorizes that nearly 50% of land throughout England was no longer wildwood by 500 BC. The regrowth from a stump grows more readily than the original tree, and Neolithic man had discovered this practice, known as coppicing. Much of the remaining woods were maintained by way of this method during the Bronze Age.

The Celtic peoples living in the Iron Age were able to master woodworking as an artform. Today, Celtic woodworking can be seen in houses, boats, wheels and other artifacts of the time. Coppicing as a means to manage woodland was of massive importance throughout two millennia that followed. Buildings, roads, fences, carts, and the fuel for heating, cooking, metalworking and pottery were all made possible due to wood materials gained from the vital practice of coppicing.

A clear divide has existed between wooded and non-wooded regions of Britain since the time of the Romans. As evidenced by The Domesday Book (1086), all the wood in England had an economic value and was the property of either an individual or community owner. Woods were the territories, or 'exclaves' of communities who lived some miles away. Even though it had to be transported over long distances, the materials which woodlands produced were of obvious value, and their ownership was long before established. Merely around 15% of land in England was represented by woodland or wood-pasture in the year 1086.

English woodlands produced mostly underwood used as fuel along with other things, with small oaks being used to construct buildings. The average wood-framed houses of the Medieval era mostly used oaks shorter than 18" in diameter. Longer pieces of timber were hard to come by, and kept only for elaborate buildings intended for the Church. Imported boards of thin oak or wainscot from Central Europe were brought in for the purpose of domestic building. Woodland cover was as low as 15% in 1086, and continued to decline from as a result of an ever-growing population to 10% by 1350. This stopped suddenly with the plague of the Black Death of 1349 wiping out some of the human population. Woods which had persisted up to 1350 mostly prospered over the next 500 years.

Questions 1-9

Do the following statements agree with the information given in the reading passage?

In boxes 1-9 on your answer sheet, write

TRUE if the statement agrees with the information

FALSE if the statement contradicts the information

NOT GIVEN if there is no information on this.

1. An understanding of Britain's pre-glacial flora's development has been deduced from studies of pollen and seed deposits in peat.
2. Various species of wildwood types began growing in Britain in around the year 8500 BC.
3. Beech and lime did not spread beyond southern Britain.
4. The extinction of large herbivores in Europe adds to speculation that Vera's theory might not be as applicable to Britain.
5. The persistence of oak in Britain supports Francis Vera's theory.
6. The sharp decline in elm around 4000 BC is more likely to be the result of clearance than elm disease.
7. The first evidence of clearance of land for agriculture appears at the end of the Bronze Age.
8. The practice of coppicing is traceable back to the Neolithic period.
9. The Black Death negatively impacted growth of forests of Europe.

Questions 10-14

Look at the following items (Questions 10-14) and a list of periods of time below.

Match each item with the period of time it best corresponds with

Write the correct number A-F in boxes Questions 10-14 on your answer sheet.

NB You may use any letter more than once.

A list of periods of time

- A. The Palaeolithic era
- B. The Bronze age
- C. The Iron age
- D. The Medieval era
- E. The Mesolithic age
- F. Roman times

10. Every type of wood in England belonged to some person or some community.
11. People used woodworking to create elaborate boats, houses, and wheels.
12. Animals kept expansive areas of land clear without human interference.
13. Coppicing was first used for woodland management.
14. Houses were made with short pieces of wood, and longer pieces were used for religious buildings.

Answers – OR 75

1. FALSE
2. FALSE
3. NOT GIVEN
4. FALSE
5. TRUE
6. FALSE
7. FALSE
8. TRUE
9. FALSE
10. F
11. C
12. A
13. B
14. D

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