

HOCKERIDGE WOOD

Managing Agents for Miss Mary Wellesley -
Brown & Merry

Since the present owner of this much-loved wood acquired it in 1952 it has been our policy to tell the citizens of Berkhamsted what is going on. Now that 26 years of re-afforestation have passed and there are many newcomers in the area, it is time to tell the story once again and to bring it up to date.

The wood stands between Chesham Road and Johns Lane with a number of footpaths passing through. It comprises some 155 acres (63 hectares for Eurocitizens!). Before the War there was a fine crop of mature beech but in the late 1930s most of this was clear-felled. This is something that cannot happen now, thanks to Town & Country planning policies and a dedication scheme which is exercised by the Forestry Commission on behalf of the Planners and the Government.

From the 1930s to 1953, Hockeridge Wood was the happy hunting ground of local residents who enjoyed wandering hither and thither, exercising their dogs, horses, cars and motor cycles and helping themselves to the flora and fauna.

Very few of the mature beech trees left were of any timber value and these had become the 'mothers' of poor quality seedlings. Natural regeneration of birch was extensive. To some eyes this was attractive and it was a good habitat for wild life. However, large areas of birch are not what most expect to find on the wooded Chiltern tops and it is a wood of very little commercial value thanks to the decline of the local turnery trade and other users. A very large quantity of bracken had also become established; this was a severe fire danger and also smothered seedling trees and prevented regeneration.

We therefore had to start almost from scratch, creating a new wood. Before the War, the woods were set freely open to the public, so the routes of principal footpaths were agreed with the Citizens' Association and these formed the skeleton of the plan. Just as the farmer divides his land into fields suitable for various crops, so does the forester but he calls them 'compartments' and his crop is timber.

The compartments have been relatively small to allow for flexibility in choosing and planting the crop and for variety in appearance.

Choosing the trees to plant - what a problem! Imagine a farmer having to decide not only what will grow on a particular site but what will be saleable in 25, 50 or 100 years' time: think how he and his Bank Manager would flinch at locking up a lot of money for so long. These paths also enabled people to walk where they would not trample on almost invisible newly-planted trees.

The prime object has been to re-establish a hardwood final crop, mainly beech with some oak and other species, as a commercial enterprise but very much with the enhancement of the landscape in mind. But it is quite unrealistic just to plant 155 acres of beech.

Young trees, like young children, have to huddle close together for mutual protection against extremes of wind, rain and temperature. Close planting also helps the trees to grow straight and without too many side branches. As they grow, they need more light and space about them and require thinning out, perhaps when about 15 to 20 years old for the first time, followed by second thinnings at about 25 to 30 years.

Immature beech, oak and most other hardwoods have virtually no commercial value so what do we do? We plant groups of hardwoods with a criss-cross 'nurse' crop of conifers. The conifer thinnings are saleable and contribute to the country's needs, including those of the locals whose insatiable demand for Christmas trees can never be satisfied.

A typical pattern is groups of 9 beech with two or three rows of spruce, larch or pine between. As the years go by, the conifers are removed and some hardwoods remain until finally the best one in each group grows on to maturity, thus transforming the wood from a mainly coniferous to a mainly deciduous appearance.

Why is the planting in unnatural straight lines? Firstly, because when the trees are very small and need weeding, it is only possible to find them if they are at regular spacings. Secondly, it is only possible to carry out first thinnings economically by removing complete rows. By the time the second thinning takes place and when the best final crop trees are identified, this can be much more selective and the remaining trees are scattered more at random.

(to be continued)

HAWDON HOUSE, BERKHAMSTED

Never heard of it? I'm not surprised! If I said 'St Peter's Hall as was' then you would know what I am talking about. Aitchesons, the estate agents have issued the brochure. The entrance to the car park will be surfaced with granite sets and the scheme will include additional planting of shrubs on the western churchyard wall. There is a car park space for twelve cars and the House will be used for office accommodation. The brochure includes a painting of the House by Peter Wagon, the Hemel Hempstead artist. This is reproduced on our cover.

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(Continued from June edition)

But nothing in life is that simple. Plans have to be changed because a crop has failed. Natural diseases and pests may attack trees. All have heard of the recent devastation caused by the Dutch Elm Disease and Beech Blast or Beech Bark Disease.

Larger pests can wipe out all of one type of tree in an area. The worst of these in the Chilterns is the much loved dear little squirrel. Look upon it as a tree-rat: it is a killer. It kills beech and sycamore trees especially, mainly when they are about 12 to 25 years old and there are many experienced foresters who believe that it will not be possible to grow beech to maturity while the squirrel is around. There is a great deal of damage to many species by the Glis-glis (or edible dormouse). These nocturnal squirrel-like creatures damage the upper parts of trees when they are not hibernating in local attics. One of the greatest pests is an irresponsible subspecies of *Homo sapiens* which by design, carelessness or ignorance can mutilate the wood and use it as the local rubbish tip.

All efforts are made to combat these attacks on woods but inevitably some compartments (we hope only a few) may end up with a stand of conifers instead of hardwoods. However, is it not a good thing to have a splash of green in the winter or to see the lovely spring and autumn colours of larch? Also, variety in shape as well as colour is pleasing to the eye.

People wonder why rides sometimes have to be wide and straight: this is to help the fire brigade to reach and contain any fires to small areas and to enable timber to be extracted. Incidentally, the forester calls paths 'rides'. Some people wrongly think that 'Please keep to the rides' is addressed only to horse-riders!

Actually there are no bridleways through the wood; horse riding (at walking pace only please) is only by courtesy.

What has been done during the past 26 years? The official paths and the rides have been cleared and except for some unavoidable rutting when extracting timber, are much more walkable than they used to be. Nearly one quarter million trees have been planted and large numbers have been replaced following drought, too much wet weather, fires, etc. All of these have been literally individually weeded and helped to grow successfully. A number of compartments have been thinned for the first time; several are just reaching the second thinning stage when they really will begin to look like woods instead of plantations.

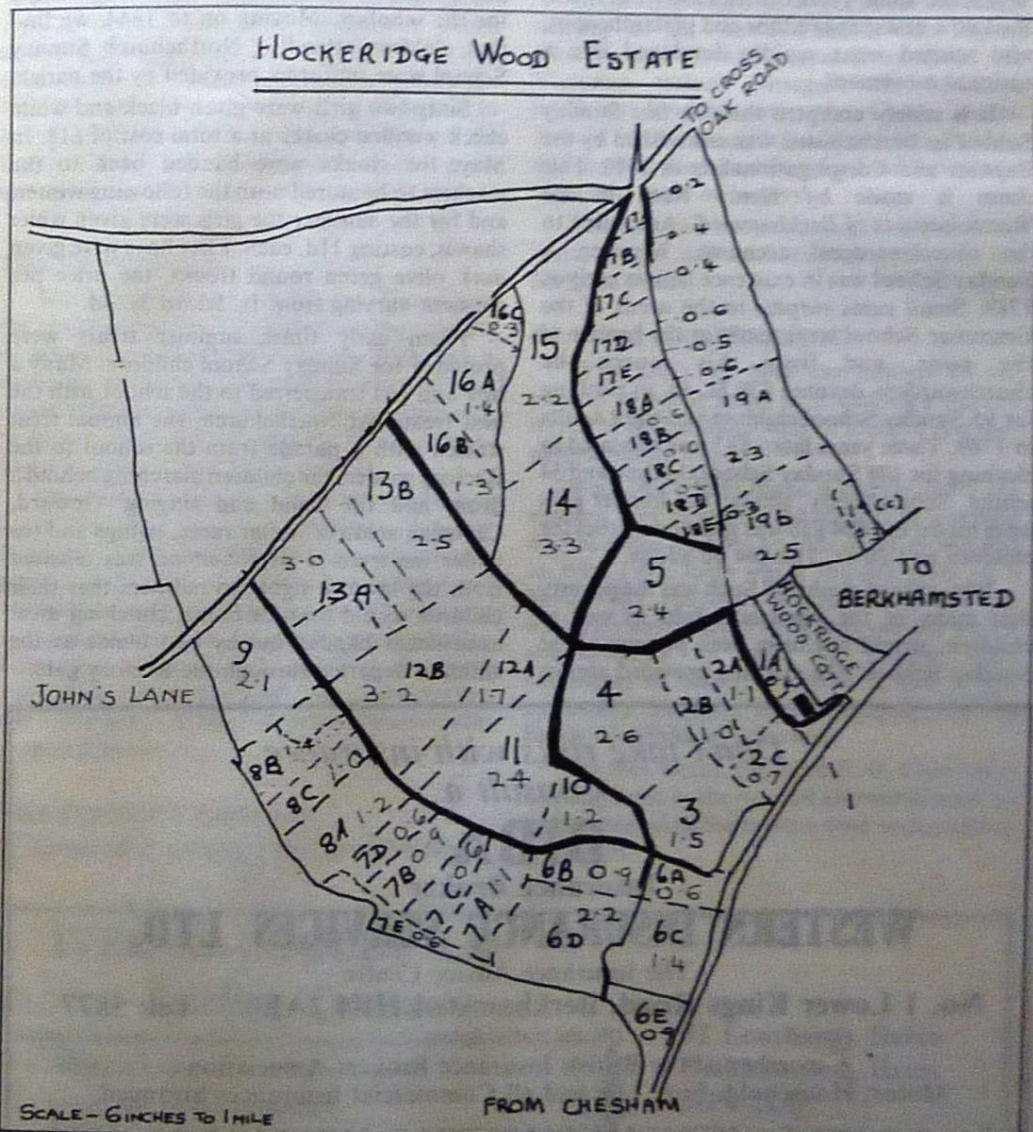
About twelve different main species have been planted, giving a wide variety of shape and colour. Unfortunately, due to having to start from scratch, there is little mature timber but we are getting well on the way towards achieving predominantly hardwood crops interspersed with softwoods.

The owner's object has been to establish for future generations fine commercial timber with as pleasing appearance as possible. What has not been possible is to produce out of a hat instant mature timber or to wait several hundred years for nature to regenerate completely natural woods of mainly unmarketable timber. This may be what the nature conservationist would have preferred for an ideal 'eco system' but what owner (or the State) could afford to be such a purist however laudable the conservationists' ideals may be? Be assured, leaving it to nature will produce growth of extremely low or nil value.

Most of the productive woodlands in the United Kingdom have been planted at some stage. The planting of the New Forest for ships' timber is an outstanding example of forward-looking ownership. If it had not been for our forebears planting beech in the Chilterns, there would have been no Mosquito aircraft to help win the last War, no chairs which do not burn in a toxic flash for us to sit on, or no woods for us all just to enjoy looking at. Few private

individuals would put up with the severe cost of establishing woods if it were not for their faith in the future of timber and their love of trees. It therefore should go without saying that the product of such efforts can only be a source of pleasure.

In Hockeridge Wood, there are many paths; large numbers of walkers enjoy using them and more are welcome. It has been gratifying that so
(see page 7)



The footpaths in Hockeridge Wood open for walking are marked in heavy black lines.

HOCKERIDGE WOOD

(continued from page 2)

many people help us by acting as 'unpaid wardens'. In return, we enjoy explaining what we are doing.

Many people in Berkhamsted have talked of their pleasure of tapping Perce' Stubbs' wealth of knowledge as he is working in the woods. It is hoped that more visitors will get the best out of their walks and that this article may help them do so. There are still thousands of bluebells and other flowers and plants, fungi and small

creatures to be seen without leaving the paths. Now that they have grown too large to be stolen, we can publicize for the first time the Red Oak, Tulip Trees, Evergreen Oak and Liquidambar planted along the ride sides and particularly the fine stands of Sequoias (Wellingtonia and Redwoods) along the side of the ride entering the woods opposite Hockeridge Farm.

John Bolton King
