

A Short History of Brandon Wood

Brandon Wood is a remnant of the Forest of Arden, part of the woodland that covered the British Isles in prehistoric times.

In, other parts of what became the Forests of Arden and Feldon, Neolithic man cleared woodland along the course of the River Avon and settled there to plant crops and raise cattle. These people, like others that followed them, supplemented their diets with fish from the river and the produce of the wood. But while there is evidence of Neolithic settlement in Brandon village, Brandon Wood itself has been described as a Neolithic frontier because the clay on which it stands was not suitable for clearance for tillage.

Following the Roman invasion there was further clearance of the forest as military and civil settlements grew up alongside the new Roman roads. But again, although it is so close to both the Fosse Way and the fort at Baginton, there is no evidence that these developments affected Brandon Wood. After the Roman withdrawal in the 4th and 5th centuries AD the clearances were colonised by the Angles and Saxons and as they settled there was a further diminution of the woodland areas.

The first clear definition of Warwickshire as a territory came in 914, when Aelthelfleda, Lady of Mercia, established a fortified settlement at Warwick, and claimed all the land that now forms the county. The Forests of Arden and Feldon sat on each side of the River Avon and Brandon Wood was prominent lying to the north-east of the main body of the Forest of Arden. At the time of the Norman Conquest Saxon Thorkell held Brandon. He is described in the Domesday Book as having woodland 4 furlongs long and 2 furlongs wide (half a mile by a quarter of a mile). His manor later passed to the Earl of Warwick and then to Sir Geoffrey de Clinton, who in the middle of the twelfth century built Brandon Castle adjacent to the wood. There are still some remains of the castle in the grounds of Castle

Hill riding school.

Succeeding generations of settlers lived in the clearings, sometimes enlarging them, and at other times abandoning them. In 1630 a map identifies one part of Brandon Wood as Thickthorne. This may have been an area that had been cleared but then reverted to woodland after being colonised by blackthorn, hawthorn, rowan, etc.

In 1656 Sir William Dugdale speculated that Brandon village might have got its name "because being antiently woody, it was first made fit for tillage by burning the thickets that naturally grew thereon". It is possible that the reversion to woodland took place in the 13th and 14th centuries, because of the reduction in the population caused by the Black Death.

Under the Saxons, part of the woodland attached to the village, was available to all, from the lord to the villager, for grazing, for forage for the pigs and for fuel. The map of 1630 shows this area as the cottagers' part.

The Great Coppis, also shown on this map, was the demesne or lord's wood. The mediaeval deer leat, still there today, forms the northern boundary of both the Great Coppis and the cottagers' part and originally marked the limit of the Brandon Estate. It contains the rare *Sorbus Torminalis*, - the Wild Service Tree, which is a sign of ancient woodland. During the centuries that followed, the wood remained as part of the manor of Brandon. It would have been an important part of the daily lives of the lords and the villagers. Timber from the wood provided houses. (There are many timber-framed houses in the vicinity). Timber would also have been used to build part of the important water mill that was on the river near the castle and the silk mill that was on the bend of the river towards the village of Ryton. The many species of trees would have provided fuel, storage barrels, weapons and carts. Pollarding and coppicing would have ensured

that the wood was a sustainable source for both timber and fuel.

The London and Birmingham Railway Act of 1832 (which authorised the building of the railway and defined the powers and obligations of the railway company indicates that Brandon Wood was part of the estate owned then by the Marquis of Hastings. There is a clause in the Act relating to crossings either over or under the railway to be provided for the Marquis and for subsequent owners. One of these crossings, Bridge 305, is a main access route from Brandon Lane to the wood.

It is thought that the Beech family then bought the estate including the wood in 1844. The Beech family used Brandon Hall as a shooting lodge, the main family residency being at Stone in Staffordshire. They used the wood for shooting and created the grid of "rides". Although many of the rides are now overgrown some remain in use as tracks, especially the Main Ride, which today serves as both a wide track and a firebreak.

In the early 1940s some of the large oaks in the wood may have been felled to help sustain the war effort. Certainly the remainder, along with many other mature broad-leafed trees, were felled to pay for death duties, probably in 1946. In the early 50s Brandon Hall was sold to become a hotel and in 1960 Brandon Wood was sold to the Forestry Commission. The Forestry Commission planted conifers on a large scale and in the mid-seventies parts of the western end of the wood were felled to allow sand and gravel extraction followed by landfill. In 1980 the wood was put onto the Forestry Commission's disposal list, the suggestion being that the land could be used for housing, with further mineral extraction at its western end.

It was this threat to the wood that led to the founding of the Friends of Brandon Wood. In 1986 the Friends entered into a partnership agreement with the Forestry Commission, making Brandon Wood the first Community Woodland in England. In 1992 the wood again came under threat of sale but in 1996 the Forestry Commission offered to sell Brandon Wood to the Friends under a special scheme, which allowed purchase of the wood without it being offered on the open market. The price was £100,000.

It took 3 years to raise the money, with local schools contributing over £1,000 to the total. Half the purchase money was from the landfill tax credit scheme. A fair redressing of the balance, considering the 45 years of sand and gravel extraction and subsequent landfill that the people in the area had experienced.

So on January 21st 2000 the wood passed into the ownership of the Friends of Brandon Wood to be run as community woodland for walking and conservation.

Compiled by :

Brenda Stone, Roy Cunningham, Beryl Smith