

After the revolt - a sideways look at the Forest

Voices raised during the public alarm over the proposed forest sell offs raise deeper issues about the meaning of our contemporary forests, as this discussion of the Forest of Dean illustrates.

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When I started writing this, early in the UN International Year of Forests, there was still a proposal to transfer more or most of England's public forest estate out of immediate State control, as part of the Government's rush to a Big Society, but to do so leaving in place "assured... public access, biodiversity and protection from development". This interested me, as the boundary of my garden is also the boundary of the Forest of Dean woodland. It was comforting to know that such safeguards were to stay, but there did seem to be a few uncertainties about the proposal, to say the least.

The proposal generated a national outcry – and this outburst of democracy has led to a governmental back-down. There were a lot of worried people locally, including our former Conservative MP who in a previous sell-off sortie in the eighties declared that the Dean would be sold only over his dead body. All needless, according to a distant neighbour of ours, who said that, as a Heritage Forest, the Dean would be exempt from sale. He was doubtless right, as he's the present (Conservative) MP, and a Minister. He has striven¹ to make it clear that Heritage Forests such as the Dean would not be sold, but leased to charities – or would remain in status quo if none came forward to take them on. To slightly complicate the picture, he suggested that a charity could take on forest land in the form of either a trust or lease. A trust would be subject to the Charity Commission. We were also reassured that 'Commercially Valuable' forests weren't actually to be sold, but leased. A curious scenario, but not so stark a prospect as the originally intended "very substantial disposal" of the estate. Nonetheless the enabling Bill is ringing alarm bells everywhere. Previous Conservative Government advisor Tom Burke says of the situation: "In nearly 40 years of observing government, I have never seen an effort to steal power from Parliament and the public on such a colossal scale".² Meanwhile, planning constraints generally are being weakened, and I see some wag has asked why the government thinks timber companies might want to buy the forests. ... "To abandon the work they do and become Druids?" No: neither the anger nor the worry was completely abated by such reassurances: in fact, they prompted a few silly (or naive) questions.

The Forest of Dean

What is the Forest of Dean? In a curious part of the world, where England marches with Wales, is "one of the oldest and most valuable of our national woodlands", wrote a former chair of the Forestry Commission introducing the official guide.³ Taking

advantage of the now-abandoned FC (England) & Defra Consultation Document's words⁴, I would say that it is a large multi-purpose potentially commercially valuable heritage forest that is well-used by its community. For England, it is a massive piece of woodland. Its c.120 square kilometres (c.48.5 square miles) of afforested land are almost entirely plantation: a mix of, native and exotic, soft- and hardwoods, but it has long been praised as our foremost oak forest. Recently planted oaks can expect to be in a 150 year rotation. Even softwoods need decades of peace...

Actually, it is a core of statutory forest⁵, with large contiguous woodlands and bits and pieces of smaller woods; and of course, it isn't just trees: patches of grassland, bracken, etc, all constitute 'forest', within which there are numerous settlements. Quite which pieces of woodland were and weren't included in the proposal is as clear as mud, even to the MP. But there were and are other confusions.

A forest from the past

What is the Forest of Dean *for*? Although it makes little from its crops, its longstanding remit to be a source of timber continues. Actually, 'timber' is a little misleading: some – even some of the picturesque oaks planted in the shadow of Napoleon in the 1800s, for the Navy's future men-o'-war – is just firewood, and when recently I bought some oak planks locally, they were from France. (One to Boney.) Since 1938, when it became England's first Forest Park, a second remit is to cater for outdoor recreation. It offers an attractive setting for (r)ambling, cycling, horse-riding, joyriding; a sculpture trail for art-lovers; cover for joyfully wild lovers; and wildlife for nature-lovers. Many visitors come here to 'recharge' through 'contact with nature'.

In its history, the Forest has rung to the calls of royal hunting horns, the clang of hammers and picks on anvils and on stone in iron-mines, coal-mines and quarries, the roar of furnaces, the puffing and huffing of railways. And of course the eager chomp of axes, to feed the furnaces, for building timber and for ships'-beams. It has had one or two lean times. A royal need for funds led to the selling-off of its timber, and minerals, to John Wintour in 1640, after whose entrepreneurial pillaging a Reafforestation Act was needed.⁶

Britons mined here before the Romans. William the Bastard made it a Royal (hunting) Forest after 1066. The English word 'forest', in fact, originally means land subject to severe forest law, as introduced to England by William. Even so, iron mining, quarrying, and coal mining activities grew. The endeavours of metallurgists in the 1800s could have made the Dean a major steel-working centre, but the initiative went to Sheffield. Shallow workings by 'freeminers' still yield a little coal, but deep mining is a memory, and opencast mining is scarcely remembered in the re-afforested landscape. The intense network of railbeds now makes for easy walking and riding. I guess that most visitors, many incomers, and probably some natives, have little notion of this long history of cropping, extraction, and industry – partly because the trees hide much of the evidence.

All this past is part of the present Forest, but I think few would today welcome the characterisation of the Dean as an industrial and mineral extraction region.



A public message to the Forest of Dean MP

Photo: David Gear

Indeed, proposals for new quarrying, more opencasting, replacement of redundant navy oaks by wanted softwoods, or introducing limited deer and wild (feral) boar hunting, tend to be looked on with horror. Quite right, too! Unless you need a job...

A forest for the future

What might the Forest of Dean be for? By raping other people's forests, just as by having other lands grow much or most of our food, we (I) allow ourselves (myself) to call the place a forest park, sculpture park, or just 'park', and to urge that it should be safeguarded for rambling, dog-walking, bird-watching, family picnics, and 'getting back in touch with nature'. Others would say car rallies, bike scrambling, war-gaming, or pig-sticking. Yet others say settings for luxury hotels, golf-courses, conference centres and the like. If (when) we couldn't (can't) get cheap imports, intensive home-growing of timber might be a more acceptable option in this respect - or we could follow the historical route, and clear the forest for cultivation. It would, of course, be great if it could be steered to become the Wilderness of Dean in the interests of 'biodiversity'...⁷

That would not be likely to please either timber-growers or the access lobby! The widespread anger amongst locals – native and incomer – was (I believe) provoked largely by the thought that a sell-off/leasing – in whole or part – might restrict access for recreation, eliminate historic customs of freemining and sheep-running, and degrade the aesthetic amenity. That, and a taken-for-granted claim that the

Forest is ours. Threats to it seem to be felt with something like Welsh *hiraeth*: grief, longing-through-belonging (I am grateful to RJ Mansfield in his self published *Forest story* (1964) for this insight on *hiraeth*).

But just whose *is* it? Much of the local anger was provoked by the thought that someone else was going to sell our forest *and* keep the money. It isn't so straightforward. It is (as I understand it, and I admit bemusement) the property of the nation. Many of us, even republicans, still call it the Royal Forest of Dean and talk of Crown land – though it isn't: it was, but the Crown granted it to the nation in 1924. I don't think many locals are aware of that. It was put into the charge of the Ministry/Minister of Agriculture and the care of the young Forestry Commission, and now by hand-me-down is in the charge of Defra.⁸ Just to complicate things: rather than 'granted', some say 'entrusted'... However, the popular line is that it belongs to us the English Nation, whereas the official line is that it is owned by the Government.

Such confusion is academic, and unlikely to get us anywhere. Anger is negative: is there something more positive in the offing? Certainly, privatising woodland doesn't have to be (from a conservationist point of view) a negative. Private ownership isn't confined to what the *Telegraph* called "supermarket giants and sleazy bankers", though it isn't clear who else could afford to take on the larger woods. The Forest of Dean's annual deficit is about £0.5 million, and for one the Woodland Trust indicated it wouldn't take part in the selloff / leasing / entrusting.

I remember an article by land economist Prof Denman, arguing that "conservation is a positive act and power, and so to act lies not with planning authorities but with the authority of land ownership – public and private". But even I find his conclusion – that "he who would respond to nature's lead to conserve in living leaves the tree-life of past ages must plant his tree as much with his heart as with his foot, and with a freedom known only to the franchise of ownership of the land..." – overly poetic.⁹ Conservation; stewardship; ownership; prudence; usufruct; resource; asset: there are some but only some overlaps.

This land is whose land?

Was the Wintour episode of 1640 an aberration? The 2011 scenario was complicated. It includes leasing, the Minister/Ministry remaining the landlord/lady. The pretend owner wished to invite "new or existing charitable organisations to take on ownership or management of the heritage forests". "Opportunities for community and civil society groups to buy or lease" would be created for smaller parcels. "Commercial operators to take on long term leases" the large-scale commercially valuable bits would be found. The trusts would "secure [...] public benefits for the long term future". For smaller woods elsewhere, community or civil society groups could be involved.

That seems a dream. One might also dream that such a scenario ought to be an opportunity for England to slightly reduce its global footprint, by side-lining birders, carvers and other groups, and letting someone make a fist of growing *trees*. Alas: the time isn't ripe...

Locally, I have heard only an occasional weak voice mention the Dean's future in terms of a significantly increased home-grown crop of wood. The loudest shouting was about access and amenity; there was some shouting about heritage, and some clear voices were concerned with whatever they mean by 'biodiversity'. The Forest is commonly seen as 'resources', but – surprisingly – one seldom hears of its 'ecosystem services'. Carbon sequestration as a service is sometimes whispered, but has failed to make the headlines. 'Biofuel' has been a little more successful. I guess Foresters haven't noticed the "paradigm shift, moving away from protecting the natural environment for its own sake towards managing nature for the services it provides".¹⁰ Actually, I can't say I'd noticed much of a shift towards treating nature for its own sake.

This local quietness of environmentalist voices apparently merely reflects a national quietness in the popular outcry. "It is one of the most extraordinary popular revolts in recent decades, and it's providing the first real trial of David Cameron's pledge to lead the 'greenest government ever'. But Britain's substantially resourced – and insufferably self-important – environmental pressure groups have played no part in it. Only now [early February] are they scrambling sclerotically to try to avoid being left behind".¹¹ I hope by the time you are reading this they (we) shall have caught up.

A forest with friends

I'm impatient, and very unrealistic. Of course the sell-off proposal is seen foremost as an economic (i.e. political) matter, not an ecological one. We are thinking in terms of resources, facilities, maybe services, and money costs, not biological communities, ecological stability, and environmental costs. In a two hour meeting of locals with our MP, the word 'environmental' was used about twice, and 'ecology' maybe once. Little about these aspects has appeared in the torrent of letters in the local papers or on local organisations' web-sites.¹²

The campaign against selloff, HOOFF (Hands Off Our Forest), was effectively organised. The local papers both supported it, and were (as usual) a platform for letter-writers; their petition was well supported. A leftist flavour predominated in public meetings, a 3,000-turnout rally in snow, and a cramped meeting - the only one – with the MP, called at one day's notice. The area is perhaps fortunate to have the Opposition leader of the Lords as a denizen, and her speeches have boosted enthusiasm. The Bishop of Gloucester added support, as did the Conservative District Council, which sent a deputation to Westminster. Along roads through the forest, rashes of Not for Sale and Hands Off notices and yellow ribbons quickly appeared. These are perhaps being removed a little prematurely...

As I said, I'm unrealistic. In the aborted consultation we were asked how much we like a mixed-model future for a collection of shed woods, forests and plantations – with no option to say 'No'. We were not being asked how best to urgently and dramatically increase the tree-cover of our over 90% naked country – let alone how to stop plundering other people's forests. We were not being asked what the forest estate might be *for*.

If you go down in the woods today...

We were not invited to think like a forest. Not surprising, I suppose! I wonder if a Council Of All Beings in the Forest of Dean would be tempted to bid to 'manage' the place.¹³ But if the director of the Adam Smith Institute could say of last year's report from the New Economics Foundation which once again rehearsed the blunt Green argument that our present economics rationale is wantonly incompatible with environmental stability – that it “exhibited a complete lack of understanding of economics and, indeed, human development”, and that its authors “want us to be poorer and to lead more restricted lives for the sake of their faddish beliefs” ... what hope then for All Beings? Only *Homo sapiens* counts in this game.¹⁴

Standing on the sideline, as usual, watching the play, I can't help thinking that, as US eco-forester Alan Wittbecker put it¹⁵: “We are making the forests of the future with our actions today”; yet, “foresters have so long focused on trees that they forget that the forest is a frame that holds many foci (or points of view)”; and that “forestry is about where medicine was in the 1900s; that is, the patient has a better chance of survival being left to itself.” Maybe Prof. Denman was, in his way, exploring the same territory. Wittbecker presents forestry as ‘poetic activity’. Poetry is essentially a communication of *qualities* of things. ‘Quality’ is surely something the notion of Big Society is struggling to deal with, in the face of – but not acknowledging – a rationalistic economics, a politics of short-term fits, and a philosophy which daren't see that (as it were) a wood is more than trees. On short-termism in forests, note Herbert Edlin's nice warning that “with oak trees, [...] we are in a world of economics where the users of one century suffer from the habits of the previous two”.¹⁶

The tame forest

In the Forest of Dean there stand today only a few handfuls of oak of around 300 years. We have greed, commerce, and the Navy to thank for that. Replanting was intended to re-establish oak plantation; but over the past few centuries the Dean's composition has repeatedly changed. In 1969, a policy change intended a swing to 75% conifers. By 1971, with 58% achieved, policy changed in favour of broadleaves. In 1990, a 50:50 state was proposed, and the forest still feels about half and half.¹⁷ Past policy swings were for strategic, economic reasons. What will determine things in the future? Prioritizing a need for (say) biofuel, or for biodiversity, for house-construction timber, or woodpulp, or for the Forest to be scenery for luxury hotels, would see the forest variously garbed.

This relic of ancient West-British woodland, for which many feel *hiraeth*, is, of course, something of a sham. (Don't get me wrong: I feel *hiraeth*, though only an incomer. This is a personal view.) Yes: it is heritage – or part of it: the digging and delving and industrial heritage is largely blanketed out. I suspect few walkers and cyclists read the level tracks as former railbeds, and that few visitors to the main ‘facility’, Beechenhurst, realize it is part of the Speech House Colliery site. We tend to look on old quarries and lesser diggings such as old bell-pits as honorary quirks of nature (but campaign against new ones.) Incomers diluted the social culture (*Mea culpa.*) – although TV and the Internet do better jobs.



Wooded since prehistory, “one of the oldest and most valuable of our national woodlands...” I suggest is belied not least by the rarity of old trees and the abundance of rank-and-file evergreen exotics. It is certainly as truly called ‘plantation’ as ‘woodland’. This is an artifact made in large part with ‘natural’ components. Replacement of oaks by natural regeneration is said to have been faltering by the end of the 15th century. It is still referred to as an oak forest, and certainly there are oaks. Both *Quercus petraea* and *Q. robur* are here, of a variety of provenances.¹⁸

It is commonly said to have relatively high biodiversity, and certainly it has diversity. My garden fauna, for instance, includes one dormouse drowned in a bucket, and four reptiles if we count a cast adder skin, and has a background dawn chorus that includes peacocks. But I've not felt biodiversity fatigue here. If you have a fair chance of seeing a fleeing deer or a stubborn wild boar in the forest, or at least of finding badger hair on fence wire, if buzzards are almost guaranteed, and if you catch the stories of wild big felids¹⁹, you may well go home feeling you've had Contact with Nature. I do most nights. And yet....

I prefer to say I have contact with the natural, rather than with ‘nature’. The suggestion that we have thus far protected the Forest of Dean as a sort of refugium where we can meet Nature strikes me as philosophically outmoded or at least over-romantic; and the suggestion, sometimes heard, that in this ‘forest’ we can meet The Wild ... Well yes: but I would like to know how not to notice the cars, the fences, the sheep, the trees in rows. There is wildness, certainly: look into a clump of moss, or admire the butterflies. But this is a *park*, not a wilderness. The butterflies and beech-trees, the shadowy cats, the *forest* (King William's chase) itself ... aren't we supposed to think of them as *services*? And who's the master!? Well: as I write, it's us the Nation. The nasty Selloff has been seen off, and HMG for the moment

stays as curator. But the Selloff has been foraging here before – several times. It now has a friendly Panel of Experts in tow.

References and notes

1. Mark Harper has been diligent in replying to individual queries, and in presenting Minister Spelman's reassurances. Recognising the disquiet in the Forest, he welcomes (25 February 2011) the removal of forestry clauses from the Public Bodies Bill.
2. *Telegraph* 21 January 2011.
3. Herbert Edlin (ed.) (4th. ed. 1974) *Forestry Commission Guide. Dean Forest and Wye Valley*. London: HMSO.
4. FC (England) & Defra (2011) *The future of the public forest estate in England. A public consultation*.
5. The Forest's Verderers define Statutory Forest as "An area within boundaries last delimited in 1833. Contains not only areas of trees and forest waste, but also private and Council owned land ? [sic] Forestry Commission land comprises about 80 per cent of the area." Crown Freehold Land is "Parcels of freehold land owned by the Crown within the Statutory Forest. They are [sic] exempt from commoning privileges. See <http://www.deanverderers.org.uk/glossary.html>
6. On the Forest's history see e.g. the FC Guide; HG Nicholls ((1858) 2010) *The Forest of Dean: An historical and descriptive account*, Milton Keynes: Dodo Press; or Cyril Hart (1966) *Royal Forest*, OUP.
7. I floated this one in 'Down in the forest something stirred', *Town & Country Planning* December 1987, 332-43, but it sank.
8. There does seem to be confusion about the name and status of the Dean woodlands. The Forest does not have AONB status, though some of us thought this imminent in the 1990s. The parliamentary constituency is a much larger area,
9. D.R. Denman (1974) Land ownership and conservation through trees. *Quarterly Journal of Forestry* 68(3) 203-10.
10. This shift is well covered in Sharon Beder (2006) The changing face of conservation: Commodification, privatisation and the free market, at <http://works.bepress.com/sbeder/24/> .
11. Geoffrey Lean (2011) Green groups lost in the woods. *Telegraph* 4 February.
12. For example the minimal response to Lost in Transit? at www.transitionforest.org.uk/forum/ .But as one of the organisers said "I don't see Transition as a conservation movement. Not environmentalist. Not green "
13. For the Council of all Beings ritual see John Seed, Joanna Macey, Pat Fleming & Arne Naess ((1988) 2007) *Thinking like a mountain*. New Catalyst Books, Canada.
14. Quoted by BBC news, 25 January 2010. It feels as though we have gone backwards, rather than had a 'paradigm shift'!
15. Alan Wittbecker Forestry as poetic activity, at <http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/ejournal/ecoforestry/ijeacknow.html> , acc. Jan. 2010.
16. A merit of private ownership, when property was inherited within a family was that one generation prepared for the next two, or more.
17. The recent forestry history is summarised well by Ian Standing (1990) Learning from the past. Management and silviculture in the Forest of Dean, in P. Gordon (ed.) *Silvicultural systems* Institute of Chartered Foresters, discussion proceedings.
18. I think both species have been claimed as the 'proper' one for the Dean. There is certainly a complexity – e.g. J.E. Cottrell, C.J.A. SamuelA1 & R. SykesA1 (2004) The species and chloroplast DNA haplotype composition of oakwoods in the Forest of Dean planted between 1720 and 1993 *Forestry* 77 (2) 99-106.
19. Fletcher M (2010) Britain's hidden leopards – nature's secret, or ours? *ECOS* 31(2) 42-48;

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