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Chapter 6

Ancient woodland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

Studies of ancient woodland usually skip rapidly through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries before bemoaning the ravages wrought by the large-scale replantings and grubblings-out of the twentieth (see, e.g., Rackham 1986a, 92–7). Yet in some ways this neglect of recent history is a mistake. If woods, as we have emphasised, are best understood as dynamic environments, constantly changing, then much of their present character is arguably the consequence of relatively recent developments, rather than simply representing the survival, untouched through the centuries, of an ancient habitat.

The background

In the period after 1700 the landscape, and the place of woodland within it, was shaped by four main developments, all interconnected in complex ways. Perhaps the most important was the transition to a coal-based economy, something which was essential for a take-off into a modern industrial society: as Wrigley has observed, if coal had not existed England would, by 1815, have required at least six million hectares of managed woodland to meet its energy requirements – nearly half its total land area (Wrigley 1988, 54–5). In national terms this transition may have occurred as early as the seventeenth century, in the sense that this was the time when coal began to provide more thermal energy than organic fuels. But at a regional or local level the picture was much more diverse. Coal was a bulky commodity, valuable but expensive to transport, and its gradual adoption as the principal source of heat and energy throughout England would have been impossible without major improvements in transport infrastructure. From the late seventeenth century major roads in England began to be improved through the institution of 'turnpike trusts', bodies – created by acts of parliament – which would adopt sections of road, erect toll gates, charge tolls and use the proceedings (after a suitable cut had been taken as profit) to keep the route in adequate repair (Albert 1972; Langford 1989, 391–408). More important were the progressive improvements made to navigable rivers and, from the 1750s, the creation of a national canal network. Although canals were few and far between in Norfolk itself, their construction on the coalfields of the north made transport easier and coal cheaper. This said, the impact of 'navigations' within the county should not be underestimated. The Little Ouse was improved as far upriver as Thetford as a result of an act of 1669–70; improvements were made to the Nar in 1759, ensuring that it was navigable to West Acre (Davison 2005; Boyes and Russel 1977); and the Waveney was made navigable between Beccles and Bungay in the 1660s. In the 1770s the Aylsham Navigation extended navigation on the Bure for some 15 kilometres above Coltishall, as far as the town of Aylsham (Spooner 2012), while in the 1820s the construction of the North Walsham and Dilham Canal increased the navigable extent

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of the river Ant by some 14 kilometres. Coal was the main commodity transported on these waterways (Spooner 2012, 120–3), and it finally penetrated almost every corner of Norfolk, and of England, with the spread of the rail network in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the first line into the county being constructed in the 1840s. As a consequence of these developments, the consumption of all traditional fuels – peat, gorse and heather as well as wood – seems to have declined, gradually but steadily, from the later eighteenth century (Warde and Williamson 2014, 77–8).

One indication of this decline is provided by the history of fuel allotments. As noted earlier (above, p. 80), in recognition of the way that the local poor had come to rely on gorse, peat and other material cut from commons for fuel, parliamentary enclosure commissioners often allotted an area of land which could be used to provide them with domestic firing – often low-lying peatland or gorse-covered heath. No fewer than 250 parishes in the county had such fuel allotments, some relatively small but others – as at Bridgham or Feltwell – extending over more than 100 hectares (Birtles 2003, 307–9). Yet, right from the start, many were not, in fact, directly exploited but instead rented out by the committees that controlled them, and the proceeds used to buy coal for the indigent; and the proportion so managed increased rapidly through the nineteenth century. No less than 55 per cent of allotment land was already being used in this way by 1833; by 1845 the figure had risen to 60 per cent; by 1883 it had reached 81 per cent; and by 1896, 92 per cent (Birtles 2003, 205). The cutting of traditional fuels on most surviving commons in the county also appears to have come to an end in the middle decades of the nineteenth century: extraction from Whitwell Low Common had thus ceased by the 1870s because ‘the houses and fireplaces of the commoners are unusable for the burning of turf’ (Birtles 2003, 206). The decline in the use of wood for domestic firing was much more gradual, but significant nevertheless. There was growing hostility, from the later eighteenth century, to pollarding, especially on the part of large landowners and their land agents; in addition, hedges seem to have been cut less systematically for fuelwood and, from the middle of the century, new hedges were generally planted solely with hawthorn, rather than with species more suitable for burning (Warde and Williamson 2014). Insofar as coppiced woods had been regarded as a source of fuel, their exploitation for this purpose likewise declined in the face of the increasing availability of coal, especially from the later nineteenth century. But of equal importance was the fact that, with the progress of industrialisation and continued improvements in transport systems, manufactured items, often made partly of cast iron, could be substituted for those previously constructed from the poles cut from coppices. In fact, the story is rather more complex than this, as we shall see, but overall the economic value of underwood tended to decline, gradually but steadily, in the period after the mid–late eighteenth century.

A second key development in this period, again of critical importance for the development of woodland, was the spread of enclosure. As we noted earlier, large areas of open field had existed in medieval Norfolk, alongside extensive tracts of heath and other common ‘waste’. Much open arable was enclosed by informal, piecemeal methods in the course of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but extensive areas remained, in the north and the west of the county especially. Piecemeal enclosure had, moreover, little impact on areas of common land, in which use rights were shared rather than properties intermingled, and large tracts thus survived into the nineteenth century throughout the county. New agricultural methods, rising food

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prices and the declining importance of heaths and other commons as sources of fuel ensured that they were then progressively enclosed, usually by parliamentary acts, and especially during and immediately after the Napoleonic Wars (Turner 2005; Wade Martins and Williamson 1999). Much land, formerly exploited and managed in common, was thus now privatised, and could either be turned over to agricultural use or exploited in new ways by its owners – one of which was as woodland.

Enclosure had other, more direct effects on particular types of existing woodland. As we have emphasised, although wood-pastures declined steadily through the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many still survived on commons at the end of the eighteenth century, if only in vestigial form. Parliamentary enclosure invariably led to the final destruction of such survivals. Many enclosure awards include references to trees growing on common land and contain claims submitted in anticipation of their destruction. The award for the enclosure of Pulham St Mary Magdalen, for example, describes how the Reverend Jeremy Day claimed for 'thirty-eight poplar trees growing on the waste contiguous to the lands of the said estate, and planted, reared and protected by a late proprietor thereof' (NRO PD510/19). The statement of claims for the mid-Norfolk parish of Shipdham similarly record that many of the claimants had the rights to a 'planting' of trees on the common: John Platfoot, for example, held three commonable messuages with rights to common pasture, to cut flags and furze for fuel, and to excavate clay for repairs, and also claimed 'the planting of trees standing upon the said common pasture, opposite and adjoining the said premises respectively' (NRO BR90/14/2, p. 4). Many people in the parish made similar claims: John Mendham thus requested compensation for four trees 'standing and being on the said common, in front of the said messuage'. This particular award is especially informative in that it makes it clear that the majority of trees were, as we would expect, pollards rather than standards. The earl of Leicester, lord of the manor, thus claimed in respect of five messuages the value of:

All trees, and all bushes and thorns planted or set by him or his predecessors, or his or their tenants, upon the said commons and waste grounds, contiguous or near to any of his said messuages or farms, which have been usually lopped, topped, pruned, or cut by him or his predecessors, or his or their tenants. (NRO BR90/14/2, p.17)

Lucas Strudwick, lord of the three other manors in the parish, similarly claimed compensation for:

All trees (not being timber trees), and all bushes and thorns planted or set by him or his predecessors upon the said commons and waste grounds contiguous or near any of his said messuages or cottages, which have been usually lopped, [etc.]

Most such trees were, to judge from the available evidence, felled soon after enclosure. Some commons, such as Fritton in the south of the county, escaped enclosure and here pollarding seems to have continued, albeit perhaps on a declining scale. But on the whole parliamentary enclosure saw the final destruction of the county's remaining common wood-pastures.