

An especially green and wooded land



Puss Moth

All woodland is special; its beauty, calm and the essential role it plays in creating the air we breathe, are hard to dispute. If you own or have access to woodland in the High Weald, you are living alongside woodland that is really special.

An incredible 70 per cent of the woods in the High Weald are “Ancient Woodland” – land that has been continually wooded since at least 1600 – and this makes up an equally amazing 7 per cent of all the ancient woodland in England.

However, ancient woodlands are **not static, historic relics**, to be preserved as they were in a specific period. The woodlands in this area have morphed alongside human activity – industry, politics and economics – and are still changing today.

One constant is the **rich natural habitat** offered by these woodlands which are home to more rare and threatened species than any other habitat in the UK.

The continuity of ancient woodland means that it’s possible for us to see similar scenes as would have been experienced by, say, a medieval farmer or a Tudor charcoal burner. These woods are a hugely significant aspect of the High Weald, they cover 17% of the area, and have contributed to the area being designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or AONB.

Shaped by nature

Although people have shaped local woodland, nature got there first. The “rise” of the High Weald was created about 65 million years ago when layers of sedimentary rock were lifted by earth movements that also created the Alps. Over the following 20 million years the Wealden dome was eroded, revealing a varied geological structure, including sandstones and clay. Erosion then left a **terrain of ridges and valleys with deep sinuous “gills” draining into them**.

Magical streams in wooded gullies

Wooded, Wealden gills are of **national and international environmental importance** because of their unique, mosses and liverworts, humid microclimate and sandstone outcrops. These magical streams and ravines support plants including the Hay-scented Buckler-fern and Coralroot Bittercress. In springtime, it’s not unusual to find 50 to 70 plant species growing in these damp gullies.



Coralroot Bittercress is almost exclusively found in ancient gill woodlands in the Weald.



The topography of the High Weald explains the high concentration of gill woods.

Go for a short walk in a gill valley and on the drier, upper slopes you may find the wood dominated by brambles, bracken, or bluebells; down in the valley you are more likely to find ash and field maple alongside streams, with wild garlic and wood anemones at ground level. A common sight in the High Weald, this mix of plants is uncommon elsewhere in the world.



Buff-tip – the resting moth looks like a broken silver birch twig.

*The typical “tapering” lines of woodland, shaped by the area’s steep valleys and gills, reach out into farmland and heathland, providing wildlife with even greater opportunities for movement and dispersal.*

Creatures great and small

The wildlife of High Weald woodlands is equally varied. For example, it’s not unusual to record more than 60 species of moth in a single night in a High Weald wood. Healthy native woodlands, particularly broadleaved ones, contain a huge range of different wildlife species including mammals such as bats and dormice, birds such as nightingales and woodpeckers and butterflies. In the High Weald, **these wildlife communities are as diverse as the habitats that support them**.

A rich tapestry of individual, yet connected, woods

A key feature in this part of the country – and not simply the proportion of land that is wooded – is the way in which **small woods are connected to one another by historic features such as ancient hedge banks, sunken lanes, shaws and wooded gills**. Not only does this create an attractive patchwork landscape but it also provides “wildlife corridors” which enable creatures to forage and multiply.



Interconnected woods

These interconnected woods can sometimes have a greater concentration of wildlife than larger woods. This is because small woods are less likely to have been affected by replanting and the forestry industry, so are more likely to retain their semi-natural species. Small woods, in turn, are connected to larger woods.. so their wildlife benefits are shared and can be far-reaching.

Our role in the woodland story

The story of the High Weald woodlands is far from over and, just as man has been intrinsically involved with our woodland throughout history, so we have an essential role to play in its future. This may simply involve gaining a better knowledge of the unique woodlands in the area, understanding issues such as deer control and climate change, buying woodland products and getting out and exploring. Or, if you are a landowner, simple woodland management can make a huge difference to this vibrant landscape. Whoever you are, and whatever your role, there is limitless potential for you to enjoy and co-exist with this living legacy.



Vivienne Blakey

Ancient woodlands with public access

High Weald woodland resource, including ancient woodlands.

**1** Owlbeech and Leechpool Woods (Horsham District Council)  
**2** St Leonards Forest (Forestry Commission)  
**3** Buchan Country Park (West Sussex County Council)  
**4** Ashdown Forest (The Conservators of Ashdown Forest)  
**5** Nap Wood (National Trust)  
**6** Broadwater Warren (RSPB)  
**7** Hargate Forest (Woodland Trust)  
**8** Tudeley Woods (RSPB)  
**9** Cinderhill and Brenchley Woods (Kent High Weald Partnership and Kent Wildlife Trust)

**10** Bedgebury Forest (Forestry Commission)  
**11** Darwell Wood (Forestry Commission)  
**12** Brede High Woods (Woodland Trust)  
**13** Beckley and Bixley Woods (Forestry Commission)  
**14** Flatropers Wood (Sussex Wildlife Trust)  
**15** Fore Wood (RSPB)  
**16** Guestling Wood (Woodland Trust)  
**17** Hastings Country Park (Hastings Borough Council)

To find out more about visiting any of these woodlands visit [www.highweald.org/explore/interactive-map](http://www.highweald.org/explore/interactive-map)

HIGH WEALD  
AREA OF  
OUTSTANDING  
NATURAL  
BEAUTY

The Pearl-bordered Fritillary is a rare species harboured by High Weald woodlands.



Kerry Baldwin



Remains of iron extraction pits, St Leonard's Forest West Sussex.

Deer increasingly damage coppice regrowth and woodland plants.



Elizabeth Randall

*Medieval forests were not solid woodland, but rather a mosaic of woods, coppices, wood-pasture, heaths and commons where hunting parties would pursue deer, hares and rabbits, as well as wild fowl and game birds. There are still traces of medieval hunting areas in the High Weald, including Ashdown, St Leonard's (near Horsham) Worth and Dallington Forests. Although rare, large boundary banks and ditches – known as deer “pales” – can still be spotted in these areas.*

Shaped by humans...

The earliest evidence of human activity in the High Weald is from about 8000BC, when Mesolithic **hunter-gatherers lived in glades in the woods**, with minimal impact on their surroundings.

The impact of the early farming communities on woodland in the High Weald may have been considerable and research suggests a significant reduction in the number of trees and an increase in the amount of open land during this time.

**Woodland management was of prime importance to the Roman iron industry** which needed a ready supply of wood for fuel. Archaeological signs of Roman activity include the remains of “bloomeries” (furnaces), their associated slag heaps and mine or “bell” pits.

In medieval times, the High Weald was the centre of the British iron industry, and there are numerous archaeological reminders of this era. These include earth dams, and therefore ponds, that were used to power mechanical hammers and furnaces. Distinct pits mark the spot where clay, sandstone and ironstone were excavated.

**Hunting and land-ownership also left its mark with the creation of forests** (land set aside as hunting grounds for the kings and queen) **deer parks for the gentry and the clearing or “assarting” of woods to create farmsteads**. Earth banks covered with moss and undergrowth are often the remains of ancient boundary markers or livestock barriers.

Park pales had a high bank with a deep ditch on the inside



James Cope

Woodland in the Weald of Kent, Sussex and Surrey



A guide to an outstanding feature and its archaeology and wildlife

Including poster

Front cover photo – Simon Agius

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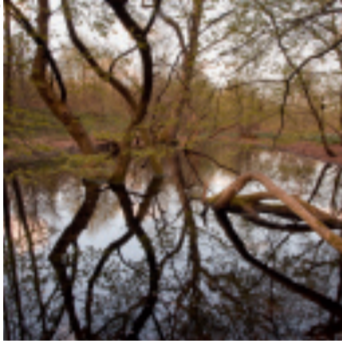
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Vivienne Blakey



Ponds are often the only visible sign of an ancient woodland's industrial past.

*Within living memory, the hop industry has played a part in woodland management, and led to the planting of large areas of sweet chestnut for use as hop poles. As the hop industry declined, these areas are now more likely to be managed and coppiced for firewood.*

Traditional earth burn charcoal production was still being practised as late as the 1950s in the Weald.



By kind permission of Hastings Museum and Art Gallery

Another significant clue to the past, still in use today, are sunken lanes and tracks, formed over hundreds of years. These former drove roads – where pigs and other livestock were herded to forage on acorns and beech nuts (an activity known as pannage) – are distinctive because of their steep, often wooded, sides. The woodland clearings – where drovers returned with their pigs each – year were known as ‘dens’.

**Woodland coppicing continued, for charcoal and to supply the iron industry, into the Tudor period** – with iron production reaching its peak during the Civil War when a large amount of iron was required for making weapons and ammunition.

Since the industrial revolution woodland areas have been cultivated for their aesthetic appeal rather than industry. “Gentrified” estates and picturesque landscaping have appeared, with the introduction of exotic tree species, that stand out from native woodland and can be seen in places such as Scotney Castle, Pashley Manor and Wakehurst Place.



Trees were often planked in sawpits dug in woods.

Nothing stays the same

Although this area is typified by magnificent woodland, the process of clearing and replanting woods; of wood becoming pasture and vice versa, is as much a feature of the area as ancient woodland.

An example of a great change in the High Weald's woodlands was when gills were dammed to generate power for the iron industry. When this industry declined many dams were breached and the ponds reverted to fields rather than the woodland.

However poor soil and steep inclines have protected the High Weald from being intensively cultivated and irreversibly altered – and woodland has protected archaeological features which may otherwise have been destroyed. These combined factors mean that we have been left with a multi-layered reminder of the past.

# Woodlands in the Weald

Planted conifers often reduce light, which means fewer woodland plants can thrive below.

Levelled circular areas 4-5 metres in diameter may indicate the location of a charcoal hearth.

The 'gills' (steep sided ravines) in the High Weald have proved impossible to cultivate and are a stronghold for ancient woodland species

Rounded banks may indicate former coppice divisions or old field boundaries.

Sunken routeways are often associated with previous woodland management or quarrying.

Stubs are old trees repeatedly cut at about one metre above ground level and are a traditional way of marking a boundary.

Wood Anemones are surprisingly slow to spread (six feet in a hundred years!)

Find out more about identifying woodland archaeology at:  
[www.highweald.org/archaeology](http://www.highweald.org/archaeology)

Wild Garlic (also known as Ramsons) grows in gills and are a good indicator of ancient woodland.



Tree Creeper



Coralroot Buttercress



Hornbeam



Wild Service-tree



Wood Mouse



Midland Hawthorn



Merveille du Jour



Hay-scented Buckler-fern



Wood Melick



Silver-washed Fritillary



Remote Sedge



Wood-speedwell



Wood-sedge



Wild Garlic (also known as Ramsons) grows in gills and are a good indicator of ancient woodland.



White Admiral



Wood-sorrel



Alder Buckthorn



Yellow Archangel



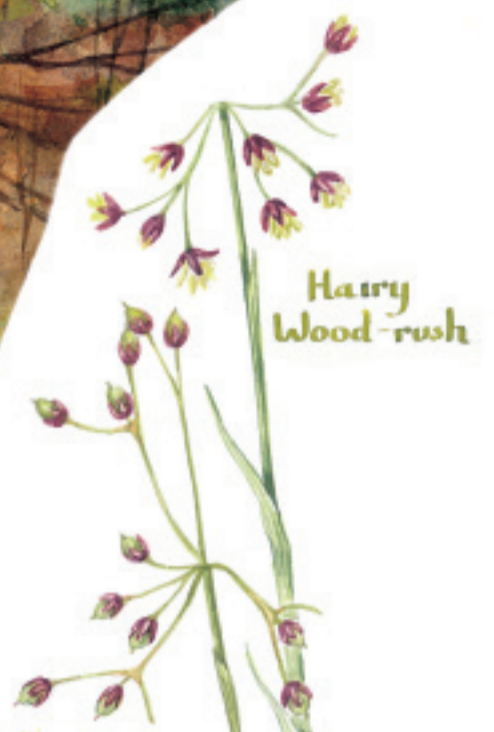
Scaly Male Fern



Yellow Pimpernel



Barren strawberry



Hairy Wood-rush



Enchanters Nightshade



Opposite-leaved Golden-saxifrage



Large Butter-cress