

Imagine... a bloodthirsty dragon rampaging through the Forest



Hermits and dragons!

Legend has it that a French hermit lived here in the 6th century. It is from him – St Leonard – that the Forest takes its name.

St Leonard famously fought and killed a dragon in the Forest. But, injured during the long battle, it is said God made white lilies spring from the ground where the Saint's blood fell. At Lily Beds, there is a wild colony of white lily of the valley – could this be where the giant serpent was slain?

As St Leonard's reward for freeing local people from the terrible dragon, snakes were banished from the Forest and nightingales, which had disturbed his prayers, were silenced.



Beware, smugglers about!

Smugglers are said to have used St Leonard's Forest as they stole their booty towards London. The myth of the fearsome site dragon is thought to have been used to keep inquisitive locals and tax inspectors away!

Pic: Mick the Smuggler, during The Company's 2011 site production of "Where Be Dragons"

A Forest for hunting!

A forest, in its historic meaning, is not a place full of trees but a park invested with special powers to protect the deer within it - for hunting by nobility or royalty. St Leonard's Forest was a medieval hunting forest: one of four spread between Horsham and Tunbridge Wells in an area known as the Weald Forest Ridge.



Racing the Devil!

Mick Mills - a local braggart and probable smuggler - boasted he could outrace anyone. The Devil took up the challenge: the prize, Mick's soul!

Mick won. But the long straight path along which they ran - now known as Mick Mills' Race - was burnt into the ground and no tree said to grow along it. Look for this blue dotted line on the map!



Explore St Leonard's Forest and find out more fascinating history. See evidence of medieval rabbit farming and mining to make cannons!

Imagine... having X-Ray vision

Understanding our past use of land can be difficult, particularly when trees prevent you easily seeing the ground.

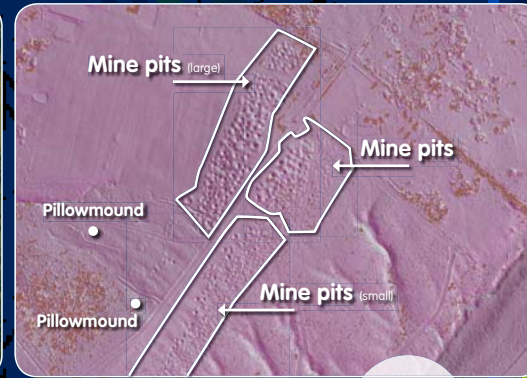
But what if you could look through the trees?

An innovative, aerial laser survey - called LiDAR - has been undertaken at St Leonard's Forest. It has revealed fascinating facts about the Forest and shown that the woodland we see today was not always present.

Mining and rabbits have been the two most notable influences from the past!



Before



After



The rabbit economy

Rabbits were originally from the Mediterranean, and were introduced to this country for their fur and as food. But, like anyone used to warmer climes, they didn't thrive in the damp British weather. So their farmers built them nice, cosy mounds to live in!

Up to 80 metres long, many of these broad rabbit mounds survive amongst the present-day woodland. Archaeologists call them "pillow mounds", reflecting their pillow-like shape. Some were even constructed on really steep slopes; showing how important marginal land must have been.

At the height of rabbit farming in the 17th century, St Leonard's Forest was known as the Great Warren. Look around you and imagine this landscape of open heathland, scrubby birch, and a rabbit economy.

To find out more about local archaeology, please contact the West Sussex CC Historic Environment Record. T. 01243 642119. E. her@westsussex.gov.uk

Knights Street



Mine pits

Especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, the High Weald was the centre of Britain's iron industry: with around 100 forges and furnaces spread across the area. At its peak, it produced almost all the cannon and cannonballs for wars such as the Spanish Armada.

Mine pits were dug to extract the below ground iron ore and they litter this part of St Leonard's Forest. They are much bigger than the average pit found in the area; perhaps reflecting harder rock or stronger workers!



Our thanks go to the organisations who have supported our work on St Leonard's Forest.



Local Forestry Commission Office:
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www.forestry.gov.uk

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Imagine... a forest teaming with WILDLIFE

BEAUTIFUL BUTTERFLIES

Both the peacock and comma are attracted to bramble blossom. Look out for them in high summer in sunny clearings with blackberry thickets.

CREATING OPEN SPACES IS KEY TO GOOD WOODLAND MANAGEMENT

Sunny rides and glades in woodlands create ideal "edge" and heathy habitats, which attract a wealth of wildlife. So at St Leonard's Forest, the Forestry Commission is working, in partnership with other organisations, to maintain and enhance the open spaces within this woodland setting.

A HELPING HAND

The Forestry Commission have put in place mowing programmes on site: to create and maintain short grass and heather at ride edges. Small clearfells of trees are also undertaken to create temporary rotational open space.



DID YOU KNOW?

Considerable areas of heathland have been lost in England in the last 100 years, including in the High Weald. But they are highly treasured habitats. Heaths are cultural landscapes with historical associations, and they have a unique and endangered biodiversity.



St Leonard's Forest



The Forest supports a diversity of woodland breeding birds including nightjar, wood warbler and all 3 British woodpeckers.



LEND A HAND

The Friends of St Leonard's Forest are a group of conservation volunteers working to help improve the heathland biodiversity of the Forest. Tasks include removing invasive birch and scots pine seedlings, rhododendron control, and creating habitat piles for insects, small mammals and ground-nesting birds.

www.friendsofstleonardsforest.org.uk

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In partnership with:
Gatwick Greenspace Partnership
T 01293 550730

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