

Parks and Woodland in Medieval Leicestershire

1086-1530

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INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries the meaning of the term 'park' has evolved to reflect changing social and economic factors. The park of the middle ages bore little resemblance to the 19th century municipal park of present day city dwellers. Under discussion here is the hunting park or deer park, the presence of which not only mirrored the structure and functioning of the society of its times but also reflected the nature and purpose of hunting, the attitudes which gave rise to it and the structures which supported it.

Woodland, along with meadow, pasture and arable, together with 'waste' – which is seen here as a secondary source of the last two – was an essential element in the economy of Medieval England. On a finite landscape, however defined, an increase in demand for one category inevitably meant a decrease in one or more of the others. The husbandry of trees took several forms and the level and nature of their management—or lack of it—largely determined the presence, character and extent of woodland at any one time.

The study of medieval deer parks in the county began in 1970 when Professor Leonard Cantor published a pioneering paper in which he listed 34 sites (Cantor 1971). The study of early woodland took off at about the same time when the writer began a systematic collection of references from documentary sources and commenced serious fieldwork. During the last 30 or so years some of the results of the research into both parks and woodlands have been published in various places (see references). This paper collects together some of the findings of that research. First, it reviews the nature, quantity and distribution of woodland in medieval Leicestershire and follows with an examination of the nature, numbers, distribution and functioning of the parks. It concludes with an examination of the relationship between the two.

In no way does this contribution claim to be a comprehensive account of a complex subject; it merely offers evidence and ventures some conclusions on aspects of the present and still very imperfect state of knowledge.

WOODLAND IN THE MEDIEVAL LANDSCAPE

In one form or another woodland dominated by oak, ash and beech is the natural climax vegetation over much of England. Woodland develops inexorably if positive counter measures are not taken; once it is well established its removal by medieval man required a

determined, laborious and usually cooperative effort. It could not be burned down and the removal of large and well established stumps was a major problem. At times when the human population showed marked fluctuations in numbers, or when standards of health and nutrition were low, e.g. during the famines of the 1310s, woodland may well have been seen as less of an asset and more of a handicap to economic recovery. Marauding armies effectively destroyed communities by killing people, slaughtering livestock and burning houses and crops; they did not remain long enough to fell large trees and spoil coppice needlessly. Woodland is a particularly enduring feature on the English landscape and a particular woodland site, still bearing trees, may be older than the parish church serving the same community.

The principal factors accounting for the presence of woodland in pre-industrial times are broadly four. The first is the nature of the geology of an area. This, together with a consideration of the soils, is a useful starting point, and Rackham suggests that very often medieval agricultural resulted in woodland occupying sites that would support nothing else but trees. At the same time he also cautions against the use of geology alone as a reason for assuming a priori the former presence of woodland (Rackham 1980, 33). This point is taken up again later.

Coupled with a consideration of geology and soils is one of topography. Steep and unploughable slopes could often support woodland and grazing. Areas of flat but permanently wet and sticky clay, such as the Lower Lias which occupies much of east Leicestershire, may present similarly serious barriers to cultivation and may have tended to remain under woodland. In parts of Charnwood Forest the topography of the pre-Cambrian geology is so rugged that in places there is almost no soil, yet within living memory the rocky outcrops have seen the growth of oaks of immense size.

The second factor governing woodland is climate. Woodland is resistant to minor short-term fluctuations and even longer-term changes are likely to be seen in the nature of the woodland rather than its disappearance, at least in historic times. An occasional hot summer or violent storm is unlikely to give rise to any major long-term effect.

When natural populations of animal and plant species are suddenly thrown out of balance the results are evident on the landscape. The effects of two extreme occurrences have been seen in recent years with the appearance of myxomatosis among rabbits in the 1950s and Dutch Elm disease in the 1970s. It is difficult to believe that similar large scale catastrophes

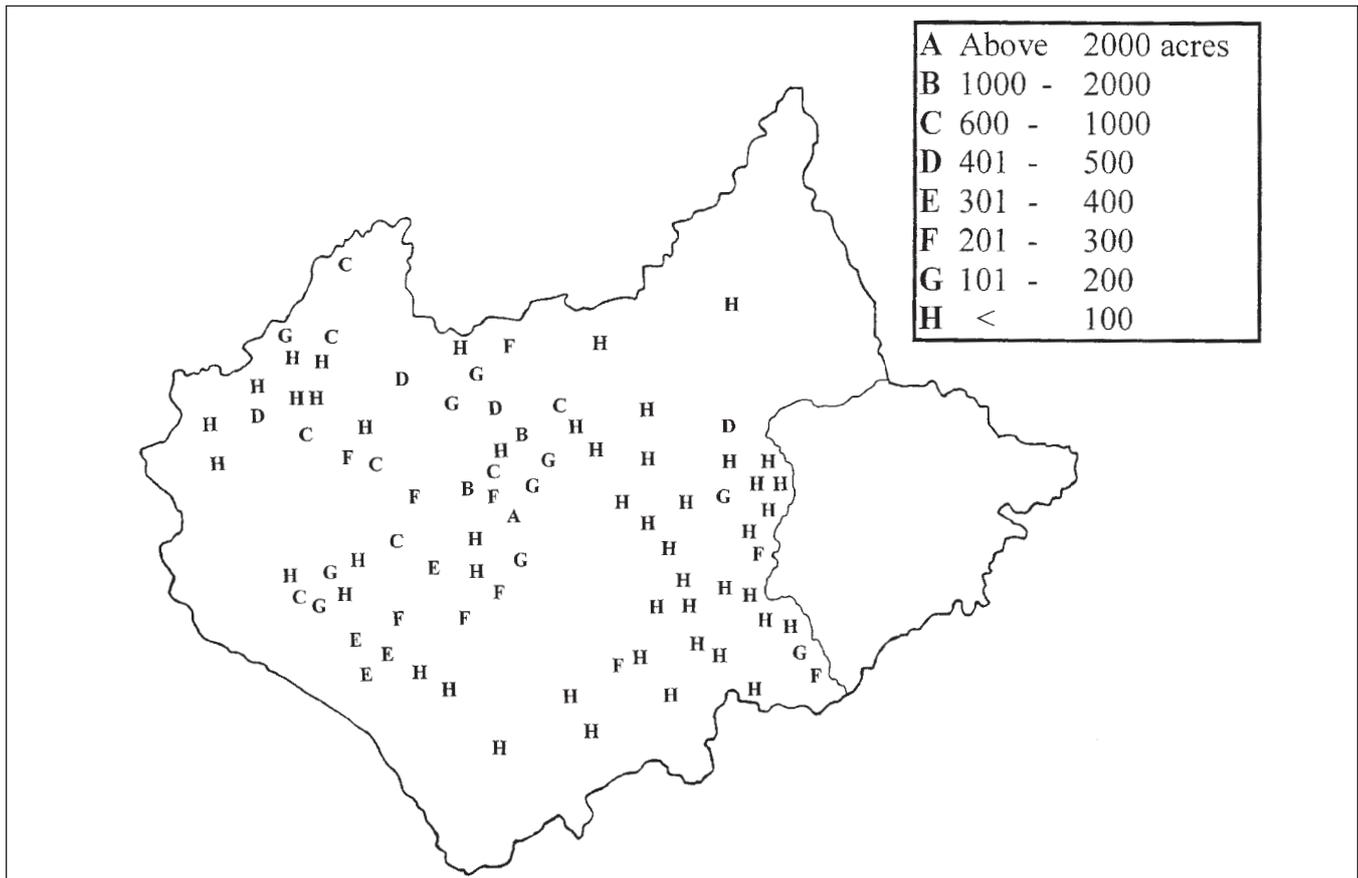


Fig. 1. Distribution of Leicestershire Domesday Woodland.

affecting woodland have not occurred in the past. However, with the exception of outbreaks of diseases collectively known as 'murrain' - which affect cattle, sheep and deer - any local epidemics appear to have escaped the records.

The final consideration is the management of woodland by the local community. This reflects not only their social and economic structure but also the location of their settlements in respect of woodland, their level of population and their state of technology, all seen against the changing demands for arable, meadow and minor forms of land use. Grazing, its density, timing and management (or lack of it), probably accounted for the single most important human factor influencing woodland in the middle ages.

The people of medieval England demanded two kinds of woody products. The first was timber, the large stuff, which was used for major construction purposes such as houses, bridges and cathedrals. Timber was required in various sizes and in different quantities and at irregular intervals. The second product was wood, the small stuff, for heating, cooking, fencing and making all manner of household and agricultural implements and items of transport. It was in daily use and demand was constant and reasonably predictable year after year.

In order to ensure the availability of the both groups of products, woodlands were managed with great care and usually under the system of coppice with standards. The spaces between the standard trees provided grazing

which was available year after year for both wild and domestic animals. With coppice, grazers had to be rigidly excluded after the cutting until such time that the growing shoots would not be damaged. The alternative system, wood pasture, produced open woodland where grass predominated and where scattered standards and pollarded trunk trees allowed grazing at all seasons. Carefully managed, both kinds of woodland provided the pasture and shelter that were the principal needs of the introduced fallow deer, the most important species of the park. Thus deer, domestic grazers and woodland were brought into an intimate relationship that demanded careful management.

It is perhaps worth emphasising here that the term 'woodland' had a very broad meaning during the Middle Ages. At the one extreme were the areas of densely packed stools of coppice hazel, ash and other species. During its cycle the coppice formed thick patches of dense and gloomy vegetation which allowed limited access. On the other hand, many of the areas dignified by the term 'woodland' were little more than areas of pasture or heath with the occasional large tree.

Woodland is flexible in that it can accommodate some increase in the demand for grazing. However, when the land was given over to arable the trees were felled; after the stumps had been extracted the woodland ceased to exist. Where overgrazing effectively halted regeneration of saplings the grassland which developed, especially on poorer soils, may well have degenerated to heath. In west



Fig. 2. An old oak in Donington Park. At least one tree in the park was 800+ years old in 1947.

Leicestershire, the former presence of large areas of heathland at different times is reflected in a legacy of place-names and to some extent in records of the flora. In the northeast of the county, Croxton Park came to include an area of heathland which may originally also have been former woodland

Before the Conquest almost nothing is known directly about woodland on the local landscape. Anglo Saxon charters, the major documentary source, which are so numerous for neighbouring counties such as Northamptonshire, are almost absent for Leicestershire. The early place names referring to woodland, including those highlighted by Rackham, all fit closely the pattern of woodland described in the late 12th century (Rackham 1980, 127-30)

Domesday Book (1086) not only allows a retrospective view of Anglo Saxon England, it also provides a basis for evaluating the landscape during the four decades or so before the appearance of the very early parks and also for the century and a half before the beginning of the flood of park creations which occurred after *c.* 1200. Many writers have commented on how the Domesday entries for woodland should be interpreted and there is no doubt that the debate is far from over. Most conclude that the smaller woods carried the

heaviest tree cover and were managed under the coppice-with-standards regime. In contrast, the larger woods were usually of the wood pasture variety where grazing was as important if not more so than the production of wood and timber.

The Domesday folios list 87 separate woodlands for what is now Leicestershire. (That for the manor of Seal is not included here since the modern parish is now in Derbyshire.) Figure 1 shows the distribution. Eighty woods are listed simply as '*silva*' and the remaining seven in terms that are of no material help to this study. The *silva* woodlands no doubt varied very considerably in nature but there are no other references in the folios to any of them. This is especially unfortunate as knowledge of how the woods were managed at and after Domesday is most helpful to an understanding of the origins of the parks.

Almost all the *silva* woods in Leicestershire are described in linear terms, including the giant 'Hereswood' that measured 4 leagues by 1 league. In contrast, the two tiniest woods, both of which were at East Norton, are stated to be 'three acres' each. A review and interpretation of the entries has been made by the writer elsewhere but two important points can be repeated here (Squires and Jeeves 1994, 26-30). The first

is that not more than 4% of the county was covered by woodland. Rackham gives the figure as 3.3%, which was one of the lowest figures for the entire the country (Rackham 1980, 114). The second is that the woodland is almost entirely confined to four distinct areas: the wood of Hereswode and other large woods around Leicester; the fringes of Charnwood Forest; the areas bordering Derbyshire and finally to a region close by the Rutland border. Much of the east and south of the county, where the land is fertile, gently rolling and intrinsically well suited to cultivation or grazing (especially sheep), apparently had little or no woodland.

Efforts by the writer to locate at least the approximate sites of the largest Domesday woodlands has been in progress for many years. Assistance has been gained from the work of Oliver Rackham who has broken with the traditional view of writers on Domesday Book by discounting the view that the entries for woodland cannot be interpreted in terms of modern acres. His introduction of 'form factors' allows simple arithmetical conversion to the approximate number of modern acres of woods described in linear terms. In each case the middle factor, which represents a midway position between the theoretical maximum and minimum, has been used throughout this study (Rackham 1980, 113-15).

Three important points that arise from the Domesday records for woodland should be mentioned here. First, Domesday fails to mention at least two woodlands, both in the modern parish of Breedon-on-the-Hill, which 12th century records strongly suggest existed, and there are probably other such omissions. Rackham notes under recording in Suffolk and Cambridgeshire (Rackham 1980, 120). In Warwickshire Wager believes that the 'groves' in that county were omitted by the folios of Domesday Book and were additional to the silva entries (Wager 1998, 12).

Second, is the mystery of the nature of Charnwood Forest where Rackham places the 5,000 or so acres of Hereswode. It seems likely that Domesday may have made omissions here too.

Finally, in some parts of the county there are groups of adjacent manors where each manor has listed woodland. At the same time these woodlands, although belonging to the different communities, comprised more or less one large entity. Such was the case of the woods listed for Hinckley (302 acres), Barwell (also 302 acres) and Burbage (202 acres) (Squires 1991, 31-2). It seems very likely that the same condition applied to the woods of Hallaton, Keythorpe and Goadby, each of 68 acres, together with that of Glooston (25 acres). A third possible instance comprises the woods of Holyoaks (101 acres), Stockerston (84 acres), Great Easton (50 acres) and Horninghold (17 acres). However, these aggregations are not reflected on Figure 1. It seems probable that the sharing of woodland resources in these places was a sign of inter-commoning and communal use of a valuable and possibly decreasing resource. The cattle of

some of the inhabitants of Castle Donington even found part of their grazing on the Derbyshire side of the River Trent.

The search for the sites of early woodlands draws on evidence of several kinds. Not infrequently the physical aspects of the landscape offer useful supporting evidence; in some instances and for all practical purposes, such evidence is all. On these occasions we can adopt the helpful notion called 'Inherent Topographical Probability' (ITP), referred to by its critics as 'the eye of faith'. With any site we cannot say that it *DID* or *DID NOT* bear woodland in 1086 or any other date for which there is no documentary support; there are too many imponderables and we can only speak in relative terms and express levels of confidence.

In searching for the sites of local Domesday woodlands the writer has concentrated on those which are recorded as extending over 200 or more acres, calculated by the Rackham method mentioned above. This produces a total of 29 sites. Two hundred is an arbitrary figure and one that of course approximates to the true total. It was believed to be a promising starting point on the assumption that the larger woods of the late 11th century were more likely to leave some indications of their former presence than the smaller ones. However, it must be remembered that, at least in East Anglia, many small woodlands have impressive known survival histories (Rackham 1980, 134). In Leicestershire the suspicion is that some of our smaller woods may have similarly long but undocumented histories and in part at least may have survived to the present (Squires 1991, 139). Of the 29 largest woods of Domesday, the sites of 22 can be described with considerable confidence and four with virtual certainty. Only the wood of Burrough-on-the-Hill (437 acres) appears to have left no clues to its whereabouts.

A particular problem concerns the location of the woods recorded for the manors immediately to the north and northwest of Leicester. These included the woods of Thurcaston (1209 acres), Anstey (605 acres), Glenfield (269 acres), Belgrave (126 acres), Braunstone (126 acres), Kirby Muxloe (68 acres) and Birstall (50 acres), a combined total of approximately 2500 acres. Although these areas together formed an almost continuous sweep of woodland from Birstall and Belgrave in the east to Kirby Muxloe in the west, almost all writers on Leicester Forest have made little effort to account for their presence. These woodlands did not form part of the huge woodpasture of Hereswode which extended southwest to the region of Peckleton. With few scattered trees and such compartmented woodland that it contained, Hereswode appears to have been functioning more as a wood common in much the same way as Rackham describes the condition of 'The Mens' in Sussex (Rackham 1980, 175-6).

At least until the late 12th century it seems that Hereswode on the one hand and the woodlands of the neighbouring manors on the other were two separate administrative considerations. Much of the Domesday

woodland of Hereswode degenerated into pasture and heath at an early date and by the time of the death of the last Beaumont earl of Leicester in 1204, most of the trees had been lost. The area known as Leicester Forest was created by encircling with firm judicial control most if not all of Hereswode together with unknown portions of various Domesday woodlands of neighbouring manors which were decaying into wood pasture and and/or were being assarted. The development of the Frith Park is mentioned below.

The Domesday folios for Leicestershire recorded rising manorial values which reflected rural prosperity and growing populations across most of the county. Such development continued through the 12th century and was in line with that in many other parts of the east midlands and much of the rest of lowland England. Yet within this general pattern the new wealth in Leicestershire is most noticeable in the manors of the east and south of the county. These were the same areas where Domesday Book records so little woodland and where the intrinsic nature of the land produced most wealth from grazing and arable. At sometime, presumably during the 12th century, the two largest woods in this area, i.e. those at Burrough (437 acres and mentioned above) and Prestwold (252 acres), vanished leaving no trace in the record. With the exception of those along the Rutland border most of the medieval manorial economies of Leicestershire east of the Soar were organised around an almost woodless landscape, with the need to draw on woodland from very distant sources.

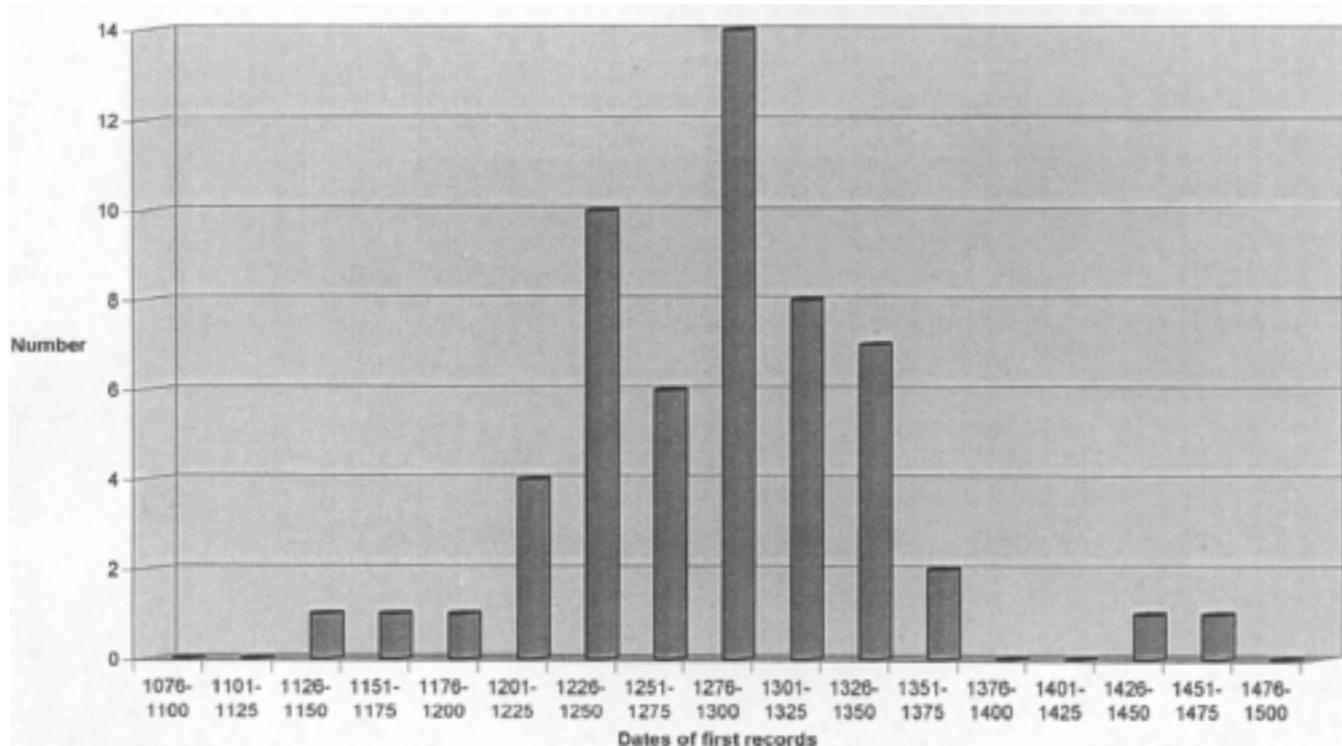
To the west of the same river, where the land carried well over 80% of the Domesday woodland, the retreat of the tree cover is very much more evident. At Alton, the 600 or so acres of wood pasture had gone by the year 1200. Similarly, as we have seen, Hereswode was probably in decline even by the time of the Conquest as the grazers gained the upper hand. Nonetheless, Alton was recorded as woodland. Place name evidence suggests its conversion to heathland and later reclamation for pasture and arable. Other examples of the appearance of heathland are evident at Donington-le-Heath, Staunton Harold, Coleorton and Woodcote.

The woodland surrounding Charnwood Forest also suffered a marked decline. The bulk of Charnwood formed the waste of the four large manors of Shepshed, Groby, Whitwick and especially Barrow and during the 12th century the manorial lords of all four made serious efforts to develop this land. Again, the arrival of the religious houses of Aldermanshaw (early 13th century), Ulverscroft (before 1153), Charley (by 1190) and Grace Dieu (between 1235 and 1241) meant that, because the monks and nuns were skilled in woodmanship, the woodland most likely came under some measure of protection. However, by the early 13th century woodland conservation had become a pressing issue for the manorial lords in almost all areas of the county.

THE MEDIEVAL PARKS

Saxon hunting areas are mentioned in Domesday Book. Liddiard (2003) has presented a strong case for believing

Fig. 3. A chronology of park creation in medieval Leicestershire.



that such areas were greatly under-recorded. He has also maintains they were often the same areas on to which the Normans super imposed their idea of a deer park. However, there are no hunting areas of any description among the Domesday entries for Leicestershire and it would appear on the face of it the post-Conquest deer park in our county was a Norman introduction.

The earliest parks in the county are first noted in the early 12th century. Among the first dozen was the park of Barrow at Quorn, which was established no later than 1135. The great majority of parks appeared during the century and a half following *c.* 1200. The aftermath of the Black Death, which arrived in England in 1348, brought many parks to an end. Changed social and economic factors made the maintenance of many of them too costly for all but the wealthiest or struck a fatal blow at a park's *raison d'être* as an element in a revised manorial economy. Again, the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s unleashed another wave of change on the landscape with the result that hunting parks were either abandoned or were converted to a much different form. Cantor terms these much changed survivors and new creations as 'amenity' parks since their form and function reflected the new ideas and social and economic circumstances of early Renaissance England (Cantor 1971, 12)

Way (1997, 21-2) examined the pattern of the chronology of park creation for Cambridgeshire and compared it with those of the few counties for which there were comparable data: Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and Northamptonshire. The data for Leicestershire (Fig. 3) show the closest resemblance to those for Wiltshire and very little similarity for those of Northants. The reasons for this are not yet apparent but would be worth looking into.

For the purposes of his paper, then, the Middle Ages are considered to span the years 1066-1530 and the three distinct periods in the history of the parks provide a framework for this study: 1066-*c.*1200 when the first parks appear; 1200-1350 when the great majority of parks were established, and 1350-1530 during which many parks disappeared while others changed greatly in nature.

All parks in the Middle Ages, with the possible exception of many of those first established in the late 15th century and very early 16th century, were areas of countryside securely enclosed for the inclusion of deer. This basic purpose nevertheless gave rise to a great deal of variation as regards size, nature and organisation. Although the larger parks supported hunting in the grand and noble manner as extolled by Gaston Phebus and other distinguished writers, the smaller ones could, in effect, have only been simple enclosures. In such areas deer were raised to be cropped under circumstances most resembling simple periodic culling. Steane (1975, 215) supports this idea from his researches in Northamptonshire and makes the point that these smaller parks were not hunting parks. Way (1997, 3), in her study of the parks of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire 1086-1760, goes further and suggests

that the presence of deer was not the definitive or even the most important element in park creation.

Rackham on the other hand maintains that whatever parks were about they were about deer. They also contained woodland to shelter the animals, to supply woodland products and to provide grazing for both wild and domestic grazers. The same writer also points out that 'at a pinch' parks could be established on almost any terrain (Rackham 1986, 125). For the purposes of this paper, a park is defined as an area of landscape securely enclosed for the raising of deer, whether or not they were 'hunted' or provided 'sport'. Most parks were expected to at least pay for their own upkeep and, where possible, make a positive contribution to the manorial economy; to this end they often contained other forms of land use.

A pale that usually comprised a ditch, bank and a wooden fence marked the perimeter of a park. Variations included hedges, walls and open water. At Groby part of the pale included the almost vertical face of a granite outcrop. The smallest parks contained only a few acres of land although the largest might extend over several thousand. Some parks contained only woodland and deer but Rackham suggests that over the whole of England one park in two had some form of compartmentation (Rackham, 1980, 195). Such an arrangement allowed for the better management and protection of the profit-making activities such as grazing by domestic stock, extracting minerals and turf, keeping fish in ponds and managing rabbits in warrens.

If the early researchers have viewed the park primarily as a hunting area, a place of ceremony, excitement and pleasure for its noble owner and a symbol of social standing, some recent commentators have seen park creation primarily as an opportunity by a lord to reorganise a landscape in order to enhance manorial incomes. The debate centres on the presence of the fallow deer, a Norman introduction that does well in confinement and is able to convert local grasses growing on poor agricultural land. These it efficiently converts into high quality meat to which was attached a powerful social cachet (Rackham 1980, 195) A reliable source of protein which could also produce 'sport' and/or recreation was an undoubted advantage to the

Fig. 4. Length of pale of Whitwick medieval park at Bardon.



landowner. Where the raising of deer took place alongside other forms of profitable exploitation, such as those mentioned above, the park, as an entity, can be viewed as an efficient and profitable, and even in some instances essential, form of multiple land use.

One great advantage of the park for a lord was that the land it contained was usually under his sole control and protection, beyond the restrictive practices of the open fields and often free from customary rights. Where emparkment involved the extinguishing of common rights, the lord was obliged to come to some arrangement with the persons affected. At Bardon, 'the tithe meadow at Stanton and the whole of Stanton north meadow had been relinquished by the consent of the village community so that lord Comyn could enclose it in Bardon Park' (Hilton 1947, 41) This act represented a particular cynical move on the part of the manorial lord, John Comyn, and there is no record of what he surrendered, if anything, in return. In contrast at Castle Donington, the king (Edward IV) extended the boundaries of his park there at the expense of his tenants' rights in a place called 'shortewode', but was exceptionally generous by surrendering all his remaining rights in the manor (Farnham and Hamilton Thompson, 1925, 64-5).

To date 56 different parks have been identified as having existed in Leicestershire between the Conquest and the Dissolution. These are identified on Figure 2 together with the dates of their first records. The total includes Ashby Great Park but not the two other smaller parks, Little Park and Prestop Park, in the same manor. Also included is one late 15th century creation which was that at Nevil Holt where Thomas Palmer was granted a licence to impark in 1448. Not listed are the 'parks' of William lord Hastings at Ashby, Bagworth and Kirby where a licence was granted in 1474 but where the terms were never implemented.

The parks of the county varied very much in size. The largest was probably the Frith Park of Leicester, the extent of which is uncertain. Of those parks where the boundaries can be described with confidence or certainty, the largest was at Bardon in the manor of Whitwick. Here the line of the pale at maximum extent ran for approximately 6 miles and enclosed an area of around 1260 acres. The park centred on the summit of the hill and extended over most of the lower slopes (Squires and Humphrey 1986, 18-26) The park of Loughborough came to enclose almost 500 acres and the sizes of the parks of Barrow, Bradgate, Market Bosworth (South Wood) and Castle Donington were all above 300 acres.

Records suggest that anyone who wanted a park and could afford one could have one, provided he was able to overcome any local opposition. It was only when a man wished to enclose land near a Royal Forest or in another place where the populations of the king's deer might be affected that a licence was required. On the other hand, licences were most often granted, at little or no cost to the crown, as signs of royal favour to a subject or in recompense to a creditor.

Apart from the king, who had the most parks, the major emparkers were the wealthier nobles and the senior clerics. Some noble lords had 30 or more parks and appear to have collected them as a matter of prestige rather than as any serious attempt to improve or extend their opportunities for hunting (Cantor and Hatherley 1979). From the mid 11th to the late 14th century Leicestershire was dominated by the earls of Chester, Leicester (and later Lancaster), and Winchester. Local senior park-owning clerics were the abbot of Leicester Abbey together with the abbots of Launde, Garendon and Croxton. The parks of the earls of Leicester and Lancaster, whose power centred on Leicester Castle, were associated with the Chase of Leicester that was administered along similar lines to a Royal Forest but without the protection afforded by Forest Law. (The Chase subsequently became a Royal Forest when the duke of Lancaster ascended the throne as king Henry IV.) Yet the record of emparkment in the county by these earls hardly ranked alongside their efforts in Lancashire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire and Yorkshire (Cantor 1983), and no other noble lines could claim that Leicestershire was important to them in the business of emparking.

The gentry and knightly families of the county are also represented as minor players. The Tatershalls, originally from Lincolnshire, were particularly active, emparking at both Breedon and Cold Overton in 1226. This was the year that Robert Tatershall eventually took livery of his mother's lands at Breedon. The la Zouches (Ashby and Lubbesthorpe), the Harcourts (Cadeby, Market Bosworth and Nailstone), the Hamelyns (Burton Lazars and Wymondham) also had modest estates in other counties that supported parks.

The identification of a medieval park inevitably rests on a firm and clear documentary reference of the period or one of a slightly later date from which one may safely infer the existence of an earlier park. Way (1979, 13-17) has called attention to the sources for references and the pitfalls of using them. Many parks were not static; they expanded and contracted, disappeared and even reappeared according to the fortunes of their owners. The park at Barrow effectively broke up into four more or less equal parts after the death of Roger de Somery whose co-heiresses were his four daughters (Squires and Humphrey 1986, 68) The actual dates of emparkment and complete disparkment are usually difficult to determine since the parks first appear in manorial and public records as going concerns. The first reference to Lubbesthorpe Park describes it as 'the ancient park'. A rare exception is Breedon Park where the date of creation is known. Licences to empark appear to offer more precision but in any particular case one cannot always be certain when emparking was actually carried out, if indeed it ever was.

For Leicestershire there are only four known licences to empark for the period 1200-1350. The abbot of the two monastic estates Launde and Loddington, which lay adjacent to the Royal Forest of Rutland (later Leighfield Forest), took up both of his in 1248 (*Cal. Pat. Rolls.* 1247-



Fig. 5. Market Bosworth.

The site of the northern of the two medieval parks of the manor.

58, 326). During the second period a licence was granted to Thomas Palmer of Neville Holt in 1448 who emparked on a site which adjoined his house and garden (*Cal. Ch. Rolls. 1427-1516*, 100). A further one, noted above, was to William lord Hastings, Edward IV's chamberlain; but the huge acreages concerned at Ashby, Bagworth and Kirby Muxloe together with a lack of later references make it clear that the grant was in effect primarily a show of public recognition of the services by a grateful monarch to a particularly loyal servant.

Attention was drawn above to the idea that there was a tendency for woodland to come to occupy the poorest soils and/or areas of the most difficult terrain from which generations of ploughmen were effectively excluded or which they were prepared to tackle only as a last resort. In 1977 the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) produced a report (revised in 1988) together with a series of maps that show the areas of different soil quality for Great Britain according to their agricultural value. They are graded 1 to 5 in descending order. Grade three is mentioned as being the widest band and included good land of above average quality verging on that falling into Grade Four. The exercise was intended to help planners and other bodies working on a large scale; it was never meant to provide local detail of the sort valued by individual farmers. MAFF stressed the limitations of its data but they have been used inappropriately by, among others, office-bound persons attempting research on landscape topics.

The MAFF survey shows that most of the soils of Leicestershire are classified as grade two or three. There is no grade one, little grade four and almost no grade five. Only the sites of the three parks at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Coleorton and Croxton Kerrial are in each case partly on grade four and none at all are on grade five. Even areas that for centuries supported only heath, such as Bagworth, do not appear on maps as even grade four.

However unrewarding this approach may appear, the detail may change considerably as a result of fieldwork. Soil quality can vary over relatively small distances and certainly within the broad limits claimed by the MAFF

surveyors. Patches of infertile, acid ground may overly otherwise neutral soil; other areas may remain effectively water logged for long periods. The extraordinarily heavy clays of Owston Wood and Prior's Coppice (which is in Rutland) are two examples. The writer has found it at least advisable and usually essential to speak to farmers, foresters and others who have a keen knowledge of the landscape that provides them with a living. The generations who worked the same acres over the centuries had no less an appreciation of what could and could not be done within a particular area of land.

Fieldwalking may suggest or even reveal the course of a long lost pale line. The value of Inherent Topographical Probability should not be under-estimated. At Bagworth, the last remnant of the medieval pale is a fragment of bank beneath a hedge in the corner of a field. Similar lingering remains can be seen at Beaumanor, Burleigh (Loughborough) and Ratby. At Beaumont Leys, there is a mile or so of the bank of the original pale which is hidden in a spinney and which has survived the recent housing and commercial development in the area. Locating the sites of medieval parks and any surviving ancient woodland must be seen as anything but a deskbound exercise.

Landscape evidence from some parts of the county provides additional information about parks and woodlands. Ridge and furrow is perhaps the most widespread feature. In some instances its presence may be related to the establishment, expansion contraction of a medieval or later park. So too may the presence of a moated site or deserted village. The evidence from natural history for determining the antiquity of certain county woodlands has been considered by the writer elsewhere, but we should not expect too much (Squires and Jeeves 1994, 88-98). Most of Leicestershire has been so ploughed, drained, quarried and otherwise turned over and the flora and fauna so sprayed, poisoned and fertilised that whatever evidence for the diversity of the past these sources may provide will only be gained from intense fieldwork and a study of the records which earlier observant naturalists, especially botanists and entomologists, have left behind.

The length of life that a park enjoyed was governed by a number of factors and is seldom related to the remains it has left on the landscape. Parks owned by the Crown and the senior nobles were usually the most resistant to the onset of adverse conditions. However, the lack of a suitable heir could also bring a nobleman's park to an end. Each of the husbands of the four female co-heiresses of Rogery de Somery at Barrow saw no point in trying to maintain his one fourth part of an entity which had been created a century and a half earlier and only made sense as one large unit (Squires and Humphrey 1986, 68-72)

The early park of the nuns of Grace Dieu was originally founded in what today is the northwest portion of Belton parish. But the site was ill chosen: the land was fertile, well drained and on a south facing slope. The park was abandoned and given over to cultivation in the late 13th century and a replacement was established on

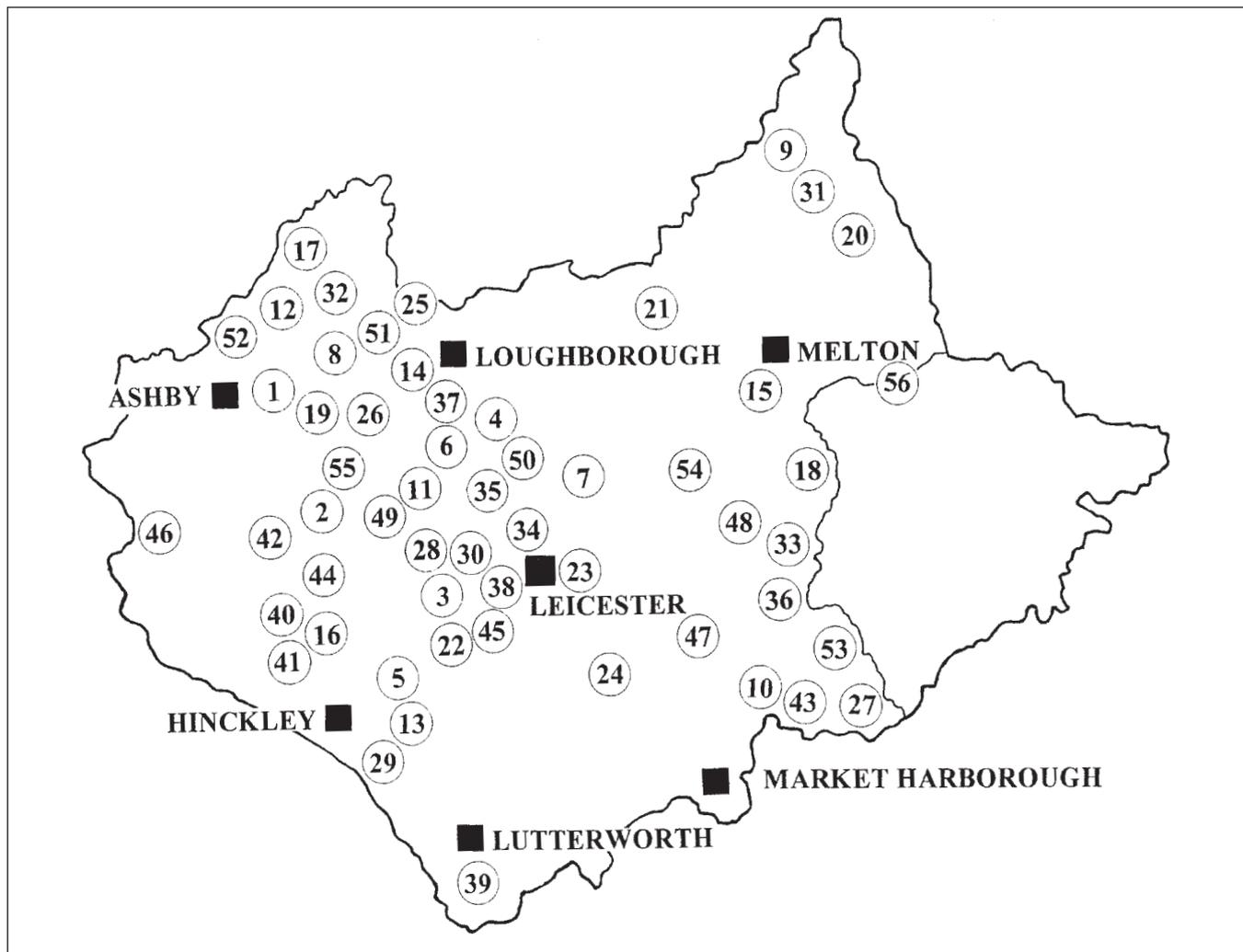


Fig. 6. The Medieval Parks of Leicestershire.

The medieval parks of Leicestershire with the dates of their first records. (This map is an updated version of that in Cantor and Squires 1997)

KEY:

Park	Date of first record
1. Ashby-de-la-Zouch (Great Park)	pre 1270
2. Bagworth	1279 onwards
3. Barn (=Barron's = Desford).	1298
4. Barrow (=Quorn)	no later than 1135
5. Barwell	1209
6. Beaumanor	1295
7. Beaumont Leys	1341
8. Belton	1200 onwards
9. Belvoir	1304
10. Blaston	1327
11. Bradgate	1241
12. Breedon-on-the-Hill	1226
13. Burbage	1266
14. Burleigh (at Loughborough)	1330
15. Burton Lazars	1322
16. Cadeby	1279
17. Castle Donington	1229 onwards
18. Cold Overton	1226
19. Coleorton	1252
20. Croxton Kerrial	1150s
21. (Old) Dalby	1300
22. Earl Shilton (=Tooley Park)	279
23. Evington	1317
24. Foston	1285

25. Garendon	1282
26. Grace Dieu	1306
27. Great Easton	1220
28. Groby	1279
29. Hinckley (=Sceydeley Park)	1297
30. Kirby Muxloe	1474
31. Knipton	1350
32. Langley	1193-1207
33. Launde	1248
34. Leicester Abbey	1352
35. Leicester Frith	1297
36. Loddington	1248
37. Loughborough	1230
38. Lubbesthorpe	1348
39. Lutterworth 'The Park close'.	1640
40. Market Bosworth ('Old Park')	1232
41. Market Bosworth (Southwood Park)	1232
42. Nailstone	1266
43. Neville Holt	1448
44. Newbold Verdon	1360
45. Normanton Turville (= 'Brokensale')	1279
46. Norton-juxta-Twycross	1305
47. Noseley	1278
48. Owston	1279
49. Ratby	1270
50. Rothley	1331
51. Shepshed (Oakley Park)	1219-64
52. Staunton Harold	1324
53. Stockerston.	(1609 'Le Park close')
54. Twyford	1284
55. Whitwick (Bardon Park)	1270
56. Wymondham	before 1320

much poorer land closer to the Priory (Squires and Humphrey 1986, 146-8). Again, Ratby Bury park was abandoned and allowed to return to woodland and scrub after the death in 1310 of its creator Antony Bek, the avaricious and worldly bishop of Durham. It had been expanded over an unsuitable site and was added to his collection of parks. After Bek's death its *raison d'être*, too, ceased (Squires and Humphrey 1986, 136). A similar situation surrounded the huge contraction of the park at Bardon after the death of John Comyn (Squires and Humphrey 1986, 124-6).

There is a single record before 1350 for each of no fewer than 17 of the 56 Leicestershire parks and of these 12 are not heard of again after the Black Death. Most of this dozen were located in areas of reasonably fertile and easily cultivated soils that also offered no particular or obvious advantage to emparkment. Some probably represented desperate efforts to establish social standing rather than serious reform of the landscape. It is perhaps not surprising that they readily succumbed to adverse conditions, for the ravages of the Black Death across the county are all too clear. In 1399 the value of the park of Ashby was nil 'beyond the sustenance of the game' (*Cal. Inqs. Post. Mort.* 1399-1402, 22). At Beaumanor in 1427, even the pasture of the park was worth nothing beyond the salary of the park keeper and the cost of keeping the fence repaired (Farnham 1912, 137).

Of the 32 parks which did survive the Plague, only 16 continued as deer parks, i.e. they contained deer (and by association woodland) to at least 1530. Some pre-1350 parks were quietly disparked but they had become such well established and recognised features of the landscape, in both physical and economic terms, that they continued to be sold, granted, administered and known under the term 'park'. The land within the ancient pale of Whitwick Park eventually became the ecclesiastical and later civil parish of Bardon. In Leicestershire, as elsewhere, the term 'park' is not necessarily an indication of an area anciently enclosed. On the other hand, in this county at least, the occurrence of the term 'old park' has invariably proved to be a reference of a medieval park.

PARKS AND WOODLAND

At this point we are in a position to examine the relationship between the woodland of 1086-1530 and the hunting parks. However, it must be emphasized once again that the evidence for both does not allow for more than what must be regarded at present as a provisional observations.

We have seen that Domesday Book records 87 individual woodlands for Leicestershire and that at least 56 parks are known for the county between the years 1086 and 1530. Twenty-nine woodlands were of 200 plus acres and the sites of 26 of these are known. Of the parks, the sites of 13 are known accurately in manors with 200 plus acres of Domesday woodland and of the same name. In each case it is clear that the wood, in part or

whole, and the park were intimately linked. In addition, there were five parks that were in Domesday manors with 200 plus acres where park and manor had different names. Again in each case, the sites of the parks and woods are known and the two features are similarly linked. These include the large park of Beaumont Leys which originated from part of the giant wood of Thurcaston, and the park of Breedon on the remnants of the wood of Tonge (Squires 2000, 5-8).

The two totals of 13 and 5 however conceal several problems that surround the identification of the areas of a good number of medieval parks with areas of Domesday woodland of any acreage where both bore the same name. This is demonstrated in the origin of the park by Leicester known as Frith Park or more simply 'The Frith'. Cox regards the Middle English name 'Frith' as meaning 'a park' and that it derives from the Old English 'fyrho' i.e. 'wooded countryside' (Cox 1998, 223-4). The park of Frith first enters the records with the explicit appendage 'park' in 1297, but it was well established long before that date (Nichols 1811, 783). At some time its north-eastern boundary was the line of the present Anstey lane from Leicester and it extended in a south-westerly direction to incorporate at least some of the very extensive Domesday woodland noted for the adjacent manors mentioned above, including Glenfield. The western boundary of the park is less certain, although it probably reached the western edge of the New Park of Henry VIII (as shown on the first edition of the 25 inch Ordnance Survey map), which itself was created from the Frith Park in 1526. The creation of the Frith Park did not extinguish the rights of local people and certain inhabitants of town of Leicester to wood and pasture. The surviving records indicate that the Frith was primarily given over to grazing and woodland management and that conservation for hunting was a secondary consideration.

A further 10 parks were established in areas where Domesday records fewer than 200 acres, but a strong element of caution is required when seeking to link park creation to Domesday woodland of small acreages, as determined by the Rackham formula. While it is quite possible and even probable that the two factors are closely linked, as at Stockerston, Kirby Muxloe and Lubbethorpe, there is at present no evidence for six of those remaining and in the case of the tenth, Whitwick, there is an obvious error of identification.

One further observation must be made. There are at least two examples of parks which are included in the total of 13 above, which were established where Domesday records 200 plus acres of woodland but where this woodland is believed not to have been emparked. The first was at Hinckley where Domesday woodland extended over 302 acres in the north-east of the manor but where the well-documented park of Hinckley occupied a woodland site, apparently missed by Domesday, near the centre of the present town (Squires 1991, 31-2). The second instance concerns the park of Shepshed that lay to the north of the modern town on a



Fig. 7. Buddon Wood at Quorn 1973.

This view was taken before the commencement of mining in the early 1970s. Buddon was woodland in 1086 and formed part of the park of Barrow, which was established in the early 12th century.

site between the present Oakley and Piper Woods. It is now beneath the carriageway of the M1 motorway. The wood of Shepshed of Domesday Book was located well to the south of the manor and on the northern fringe of Charnwood Forest. The origins of the present Oakley and Piper Woods (the former first documented to the 14th century) remain a mystery.

Another 23 parks were located in areas where no Domesday wood was recorded. Of these, 13 were parks for each of which only one record exists and that before 1350. It is suggested here, they represent the more modest efforts at emparkment.

For 32 of the county's 56 medieval parks there is at least one record of woodland. The parks associated with Leicester Forest such as Barron's Park, Tooley Park and the Frith Park which were in the firm control of successive earls of Lancaster were particularly well run and productive, at least until circa 1400 (Fox 1940). Buddon Wood in Barrow Park at Quorn, emparked or otherwise controlled, was a major asset to the manor and the extensive woodland at Beaumont Leys sheltered large numbers of deer until as late as the mid 16th century (PRO: DL43/14/6).

The documentary record for the remaining 24 of the county's apparently 'woodless' parks is generally very poor but the following provisional observations can be made. Eight of these (e.g. Cadeby and Old Dalby) were in areas where Domesday Book records some woodland. Nine were in locations where woodland was known in the Middle Ages but where there is no record by Domesday Book, and seven apparently lacked any connection with known woodland from any period. It is possible that some Leicestershire parks were devoid of woodland but one suspects an absence of woodland records is the more likely explanation.

The twin prime reasons for emparkment in Leicestershire appear to have been control and conservation of woodland and a desire to maintain a permanent presence of deer for social, sporting and culinary

purposes. We must be careful not to over emphasise or carry further to the smaller woodlands the apparent strong correlation found with the larger woods between park creation and Domesday woodland. In Leicestershire at least there are too many unknown factors at present.

Launde Park in southeast Leicestershire illustrates the problems. It is first heard of in 1248 when the prior and canons of the Abbey there had licence to enclose 'their wood situate on the borders of Rutland with a ditch and a fence, and to convert it into a park' (*Cal. Pat. Rolls.* 1247-58, 326). The wood concerned was part or all of the wood which is still known as 'Park Wood'. The religious house was in existence by 1125, which was about the time of the creation of the Royal Forest of Rutland, later known as Leighfield Forest. After the Leicestershire portion of the Forest was eventually disafforested in 1235 the prior found himself free of Forest jurisdiction. However, there is no woodland recorded for Launde by Domesday Book. There are no further mentions of the park until an Elizabethan enquiry into felling of trees in 1564. The medieval record of woodland for Launde is poor but the archaeology of the site and botanical evidence point to the antiquity of Park Wood.

The circumstantial evidence for the antiquity of the neighbouring Launde West (Big) Wood is even stronger. Were the two woods, in part or whole, in existence in 1086 and were missed by Domesday or was one or both silently entered under the head of another manor? The archaeological, botanical and place name evidence point firmly to a long and continuous presence of both woods, but the soils and the natural topography do not suggest an area particularly unsuitable for cultivation and, as already mentioned, the documentary evidence is missing.

Considering the data in another way, of the 17 manors with 300 plus acres of Domesday woodland no fewer than 14 were incorporated in part or whole into medieval parks. The three exceptions were the wooded manors of Alton and Bagworth (both 605 acres) where the woods had probably been reduced to heathland or arable by the time the movement for emparking got underway, and at Burrough-on-the-Hill. Of the 11 Domesday woods of between 201 and 300 acres only 4, possibly 5, were emparked in part or whole and likewise of the 8 manors with woods of 101 to 200 acres there were three with parks recorded.

If one looks at those 48 manors for which Domesday records woodlands of less than 100 acres only 11 had parks later. Of the remaining 37 only 11 had any history of woodland in the medieval period. The other 26 apparently lost their woodland shortly after 1086 and remained woodless throughout the Middle Ages. These 26 were predominantly situated on the southeast margins of the county. Their losses represented a severe contraction of woodland, which then became confined to a very small number of manors. This loss is all the more interesting if one believes that the Domesday woodland for the four manors of Goadby, Glooston, Hallaton and

Keythorpe were one physical entity (or were nearly so) totalling about 330 acres. Presumably the manorial lords concerned were unable or unwilling to empark before the woodland was lost.

Again, we must treat such statements with caution on account of the relative poverty of the records on which they are based. In addition, we must consider such possible problems as changing manorial boundaries and wandering of place names. A further difficulty is exemplified at Tugby. Here Domesday records 17 acres of woodland but there is no further documentary reference to woodland until the early 18th century. However, the botanical richness of the wood known today as Tugby Bushes points firmly to the view that woodland has occupied the same site for many centuries.

PARKS AND WOODLAND – A SUMMARY

The relationships between woodland and parks in medieval Leicestershire and particular problems encountered during research into them have been described. The pattern of woodland in Domesday Leicestershire was one that probably reached back to Roman times and possibly to prehistory. The hunting park was essentially a Norman introduction imposed on an ancient landscape.

It was seen that the larger areas of 300 plus Domesday woodland acres were almost invariably emparked, at least in part, and that the smaller the woodland less was the likelihood that this would take place. Why some of the medium sized woods escaped emparkment is unknown. A little under half this county's parks were established in areas without a legacy of Domesday woodland. Of this fraction, half were probably distinctly modest efforts of landscape planning and control but the existence of both groups strongly suggests the otherwise unaccounted for presence of woodland.

The post Domesday contraction of woodland which park creation attempted to curb was not confined to the well-wooded areas to the northwest. A group of small woods in the southeast of the county disappeared and this in effect restricted the opportunities for emparking even further and to a few tiny areas. If all medieval parks contained at least some woodland as defined above, in some cases derived from unknown sources, there must have been many areas of undocumented woodland 'silently' occupying the landscape.

The distribution of the Norman parks reflected the distribution of the larger woodlands but not of the smaller ones. Factors other than the availability of large areas of woodland determined the parks place in the manorial economy, usually as a profitable element. The balance of 'good' land and 'poor' land and how each category was organised and reorganised was in practice a very local affair.

In Leicestershire one of the main links between scarce woodland and medieval parks appears to have been a

timely movement towards the conservation of a vital and fast disappearing resource. It was equally the reorganisation of landscape around the presence of deer as a status symbol, a means of pleasure, and a source of food.

Considerations of woodland apart, a more thorough appreciation of the impact of the parks on the medieval landscape depends upon an assessment of a number of other factors. What was the relationship between the site(s) of a lord's park(s) and his main dwelling and with other structures such as moated sites? How was the manorial economy affected and how much hardship (or benefit) did the lord's tenants sustain? Proprietors sometimes took the opportunity of reorganising more than just the land which lay within the park, as is shown by the activities of Thomas Grey, father and son, at Bradgate. Further, in many instances park creation is known to have had a significant effect on routeways both within a park's immediate area and also between neighbouring settlements (Squires and Humphrey 1986, 37-40, 44, 54). Finally, it may be instructive to investigate the level of park-related unrest and disturbance when ordinary people sought to re-establish common rights and, at a higher social level, when bands composed of the local nobility ventured out bent on destroying a rival's property.

Clearly, the most promising approaches must focus on a closer examination of the means, motives and opportunities of the emparkers themselves and a more detailed mapping of the remnants of the landscapes they reorganised. The study of emparkment presents a promising route into unlocking some of the mysteries of our county's medieval landscape.

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