



Chairman's Comments

Dear Members

There will be some members who currently live in half timbered houses, and this is our theme this month. Shrewsbury and Ludlow are two towns which are (or were) predominantly timber towns, and survived as such until the 1960's, unlike London which had its Great Fire of 1666. Shrewsbury still has prime examples of timber framing, such as Butcher Row, and many others. Taking the back roads between Montford Bridge, Shrawardine and Oswestry one can see many timber cottages with thatched roofs. It is with this in mind that we are visiting Pitchford Hall in May (I must reiterate that the list is closed I am afraid), to look at the use of timber in a hall, and quite a big one at that. We will also be looking at the Tree House and some real, live trees in the arboretum as well. Wood is a wonderful material for working and was the main material for building before the Industrial Revolution, certainly in these parts. Many, if not most of the Celtic Hill forts and Norman Motte and Bailey Castles in the Welsh Marches would have been of wood. Next time you are out and about, just look out for the number of buildings that are made of wood, and I think you will be surprised. I think there are a number of gems out there and many others that are taken for granted and not really cared for as in Shropshire this is the main building material for houses before about 1680.

David

Our last talk: Andrew Allott on "The History of Woodlands in the Marches" (Tuesday, 10th April)

Andrew is one of our committee members and author of the book "The Marches" in the New Naturalist series, so he was just the person to talk on this topic. His book covers much more ground than just trees but he restricted his subject matter to trees alone for our benefit and even restricted it further to how trees moved into this area, the Central and Northern Marches of Cheshire and the Shropshire Plain. Andrew provided us with so much information that I make no apologies for providing this Newsletter with a longer than usual report on our talk.

About thirty members and friends attended and were treated not only to the fascinating results of Andrew's researches on this subject but also to his wonderful powerpoint slides which started with a look at what Queensland, Australia, would have looked like 110 million years ago. What, we thought to ourselves, had this to do with The Marches. But when Andrew showed his next slide of the sea and told us that this was what The Marches looked like at roughly the same time, we realised that we were looking at geological time and he was taking us way into, not just the recent introduction of trees after the Ice Ages, but into the very beginnings and origins of environments suited to receive and accommodate trees.

We were shown a fascinating interactive map of the coming and going of the ice ages during the most recent glaciation, with ice repeatedly moving south and then retreating before finally melting completely when we entered the current interglacial period. Andrew showed how Earth temperatures and the dates of glaciations had

been calculated by an analysis of the oxygen and hydrogen isotopes in Antarctic ice cores. So, as the last glaciation is reckoned to have been from 100,000 to 20,000 years ago, we are now in an interglacial period and our woodlands cannot be older than 20,000 years. Yet, even 20,000 years ago it was still too cold for trees to survive and Andrew proposed that we would only have seen woodlands in Shropshire during the past 10,000 years.

As the ice retreated, bare ground of clays and gravels would have been left behind and the first vegetative colonisers would have been ground-hugging plants such as mosses and lichens. Larger plants arrived next, the earliest arriving by wind-blown seed. The actual plants that arrived may be recognised through an analysis of the pollen record. Pollen grains drawn out of peat cores have shown in the Colemere area that Hazel, Birch and Willow all arrived 10,000 years ago followed by Juniper, Oak, Elm, then Scots Pine and, later, Limes and Alder around 7,000 years ago. Early woodlands in Shropshire, Andrew told us, would have been of small scrubby trees.

Only 35 species of tree returned to the British Isles and, of these, only 24 species reached The Marches. For example, Oaks were spreading through Spain to Northern France 10,000 years ago, arriving in the U.K. and Scandinavia about 9,000 years ago. Once the land bridge between the U.K. and continental Europe was breached 8,500 years ago, when the English Channel was formed, it became much harder for trees to arrive. Scots Pine reached The Marches but died out or was eliminated by humans and we were told that all the Scots Pines here today have been reintroduced.

So how extensive was woodland in The Marches at its maximum extent? Apparently, the woodland was very extensive and continuous although some ecologists dispute this and say that there were breaks in the woodland where Roe Deer had grazed (e.g. where “parkland” or “wood pastures” would have been formed – open spaces with intermittent trees) or on such areas as the blockfield of Titterstone Clee or the kettle holes of the Meres, areas inhospitable to trees.

So the timescale of events in the Marches would have been:

10,300 years ago (Before Present): Birch, Hazel, Willow arrived first. Then Juniper, Oak and Elm.

8,500-8,000 BP: Scots Pine was dominant.

8,000-5,000 BP: Mixed broadleaved woodland – Oak, Alder, Elm, Lime, Hazel.

6,300-5,000 BP: “The Great Elm Decline”.

4,000-3,300 BP: “The Great Lime Decline”. (In the Early Bronze Age within 50 years of humans arriving in the area, many Limes would have been removed for their 'bast' and to create areas for agriculture.)

3,200 BP: More deforestation. Some areas cleared permanently.

2,800-2,200 BP: (Early Iron Age) Further clearance of woodland. One third to a half of the Marches was deforested. Three quarters of the more fertile areas was used for agriculture.

2,200-1,950 BP: Scots Pines disappear.

Today, we still have woodland in the Marches. Besides the Forestry Commission lands of Mortimer Forest and Wyre Forest, Wenlock Edge is wooded as is the area around the Wrekin. There still exists natural woodland, possibly in the Downton Gorge area and Bringewood Chase yet only about 10% of the Marches is today wooded. However, Andrew explained that we have more veteran oaks and yews than anywhere in Europe and we have many Ancient Woodlands that have been continuously forested since the 1600s.

This really was a fascinating talk full of new information with many points for us to go away and think about. As a parting “gift” and something further for us to chew over, Andrew delved somewhat into whether it was possible to recreate natural woodland. There are differing schools of thought on this and whether new attempts at creating woodland would also create the much-needed biodiversity that should go with them. However, with only 13% of forest/woodland cover in the U.K. presently, we do need more woodland and any attempts are welcome, whether they come from the National Trust's trees planting on the slopes of Snowdonia, the attempts to recreate the Caledonian Forest in Scotland or our very own attempts by the Severn Tree trust to see more trees put in the ground in Shropshire and mid-Wales.

Thank you Andrew for giving us so much to think about in your great wealth of information and those wonderful explanatory slides.

John Tuer

Our next visit. Pitchford Hall 12th May starting at 10.30am.

This visit is for a restricted number of members and I'm afraid that if you have not already been told that you have a place, it is now too late to apply. However, if after all those that have a place find that they cannot make the visit **please let me know by email or telephone (01743 357252)** so that someone on the reserve list can attend.

To get to Pitchford take the Wenlock Road out of Shrewsbury and immediately after crossing over the by-pass take the right turn signposted to Pitchford. After 4 miles at the finger board on the left pointing to Pitchford Church turn right down the avenue of limes. At the end of the avenue just before the church turn left on to the drive for the Hall and park tidily in the large gravel area at the bottom.

Hilary will be waiting there to take your £10 per head (the Trust is paying £9 the balance of the fee). This entitles members to tea and cake after the walk. The funds from these tours are being used by the family to renovate this incredible house after 25 years of total neglect. We will be shown round the Hall and oldest Tree House in the UK in the second largest *Tilia platyphyllos* in the country and afterwards will be guided through the gardens and an arboretum that was planted in the 1970's and 80's but which has been neglected for 25 years. There are a lot of nettles in the arboretum so you are advised to come with your legs covered up and with stout footwear. The tour could last up to three hours depending upon weather!

The June Visit to the BIFOR experiment on 9th June in the morning

This is advance notice for this meeting near Market Drayton in order that we can judge numbers. There is no restriction on numbers but we need to know whether likely numbers will need one or more guides (15 per group). So please let me know either by email or phone (01743 357252) whether you intend to attend.

The comparatively new Birmingham Institute of Forest Research (BIFOR) boasts a state-of-the-art Free-Air Carbon Dioxide Enrichment (FACE) facility monitoring what is going on in a forest canopy. It is a unique experiment and you can discover more by viewing two short videos available on their website www.birmingham.ac.uk/bifor

The experiment is laid out in the forest of a wealthy land-owner who in addition, not only has a state-of-the-art saw-mill but also a 200 acre plantation of alternative species (including *Araucaria*) specifically designed to test whether they will be suitable for the UK if and when global warming takes place. It may be possible to visit the sawmill and plantation after lunch but as the manager for these is currently on holiday we will not know until the next Newsletter whether visits to these may be possible.

At this time please just indicate whether you intend to be present on 9th June.

Andy Gordon