

Downley Common Newsletter

Quarterly Newsletter of the Downley Common Preservation Society - Issue 8 January 1999

Bonfire

On November the Fifth the annual Bonfire and Torchlight Procession was held on Downley Common and this year attracted a record crowd, no doubt drawn by the fine, dry, starry night. About 340 torches were sold, give or take a few duds, and the bonfire, one of the largest, or at least most extensive in recent years went up spectacularly, surrounded by large crowds enjoying the barbeque and other refreshments laid on by the Scouts and Guides. At the same time our thoughts were with the congregation of Sunnybank Methodist Church which was so recently damaged by fire the weekend before.

With the posts now in place around the Common, it was more difficult for people to casually drop off their contributions of wood for the bonfire in the preceding weeks, and we would like to thank those who took the trouble to wait for the barriers to be unlocked so that they could gain access to the bonfire site. Unfortunately there are always a few who can't wait or simply don't care, with the result that several posts had to be replaced on a number of occasions after they had been broken off or simply uprooted by large trucks, thus causing a lot of unnecessary extra maintenance.

Thanks to all those who helped in the success of the evening and particularly to Hypnos Ltd of Princes Risborough and Office Corp of Downley for providing materials.

Activities on the Common

Now that winter is here, it time to revert to more routine management activities. Working parties will concentrate on maintaining and replacing posts where necessary and performing the constant task of removing accumulated litter. One of the projects outlined in the revised management plan of 1997 is that of grassland management and following the complete cut of the central grassland area that took place last year, it is now time to cut the grassland areas in rotation. Visitors to the Common will therefore see more of a "patchwork quilt" effect developing.

flail those areas that tend to be encroached by scrub. The various glades to the north of the Common need to be constantly kept clear of brambles and small developing bushes and saplings. We tend to concentrate on areas of bracken during the growing season as it naturally

dies back during the winter. However, another all year round task is that of maintaining the small patches of heather and gorse that exist, particularly as gorse is apparently in decline throughout the Chilterns, which makes those patches that exist on the Common all the more precious. In days gone by it was apparently common practice to burn the gorse in order to encourage it to renew its growth in following seasons. However, I don't think anyone quite has the nerve to try such a vigorous approach on our gorse!

Downley Common Preservation Society Working Parties will be out during the winter to carry out these activities, meeting near the Le De Spencers Arms usually on the first Sunday of the month. All those with an interest are welcome to join in.

Coppice Woodlands

The following article is reproduced from the BTCV "Woodlands" publication to provide background information on the coppicing project underway on the Common. 'Coppice' comes from the French word *couper*, to cut. Coppices or 'copses' are woodlands cut on a fairly short rotation of seven to twenty-five years. In most cases, one part of the wood, called a 'coupe', is harvested each year. The coppice trees and their produce are known as 'underwood'. Underwood species, all deciduous, respond to cutting by sending up multiple stems from the stools. Periodic cutting actually extends the life of most underwood trees, so that coppiced ash stools, for example, may be hundreds of years old and contain a record of a sizeable proportion of the wood's management in their annual rings.

The practice of coppicing can be traced back to Neolithic times (4000 BC). Archaeological evidence shows that coppice products were used for numerous rural needs throughout the Bronze, Roman and Saxon periods, and by the 13th century, documents begin to describe restrictions on common rights to the coppice woods and the fencing of woodlands against casual grazing. Coppicing was the most widespread method of woodland management until the mid 1800s.

This long history of coppicing is the reason why ancient coppice woodlands can be seen as the direct descendants of the original forest. It is perhaps a paradox that a coppiced wood, with a structure which looks least like one's idea of the ancient natural forest, is the one that is biologically

closest to it. Early man no doubt 'discovered' coppicing by experience - by cutting down a manageable sized tree, and then finding that it sent up many stems which could be cut again a few years later. In some places coppices were 'improved' through encouraging the valuable species by layering, planting and natural regeneration, to fill any gaps where old stools died. Unwanted shrubs and invasive species such as birch were sometimes removed to favour the desirable species. However, the general pattern of species remained very close to the natural cover, as these practices only slightly altered the existing composition, and did not bring in new species from elsewhere. Planting only became commonplace in the improvement era from the late 18th to the late 19th centuries.

The ecological classification of woodland by stand type is based on observation of existing ancient coppice woodlands, being closest to the natural woodland cover. The system of 'coppice with standards'

is also ancient with records of felling dating from the 1200s. Under this system, some trees are grown as standards, with the coppice beneath. During the reign of Henry VIII, there was a legal requirement that at least 30 standards per hectare (12 per acre) be grown, but at other times numbers varied greatly, according to the demand. Periods of felling occurred during time of war, as well as after the Dissolution and during the Commonwealth.

Every soil type and region had characteristic combinations of coppice species, since the woodmen depended on the 'natural growth of the soil' for the supply of underwood. Some underwood trees were particularly suited to specialised uses, and as time went on there was a certain amount of selection in favour of these. But most coppice remained mixed, to serve a wide variety of needs.

In the uplands, sessile oak was by far the most common species and dominated both the

underwood and canopy of the coppice woodland. Where conditions were difficult, standards grew too slowly and erratically to be worth fostering, so 'scrub oak' coppice without standards developed. Much of this was used for tanbark or charcoal.

The standards were generally felled when small, compared to modern practice, with few being left longer than three times the coppice rotation. Nothing was wasted in the traditional coppice system, with even the 'loppium et chippium' bundled or bagged and sold for firewood.

From the late 18th century, coppicing began to decline. One reason for this was the increased demand for larger timber (mainly for shipbuilding) and the consequent attractions of the plantation system. Many landowners greatly increased the density of oak in their coppice woods through supplementary planting, although much of this was never harvested. In the Chilterns, coppice working as well as pasture-woodland management declined through the encouragement of naturally regenerated beech for the furniture industry. From the mid 19th century, some of the most important traditional uses of coppice products diminished as coke and coal replaced charcoal and firewood for fuel, and artificial substitutes replaced tanbark in the leather industry. In addition, the general agricultural decline of the mid and late 19th century meant that less hazel was needed for sheep hurdles and other farm products.

Since the early 1970s, particularly with the increased use of wood-burning stoves, and demand for thatching spars, commercial coppicing has experienced a modest revival.

Diary

6 January 1999, 8.00pm	Quarterly Meeting	Memorial Hall
10 January 1999, 10.00am	Working party	Le De Spencers
20 January 1999, 1.30pm	Mid Week Working party	Le De Spencers
7 February 1999, 10.00am	Working party	Le De Spencers
17 February 1999, 1.30pm	Mid Week Working party	Le De Spencers
7 March 1999, 10.00am	Working party	Le De Spencers
17 March 1999, 1.30pm	Mid Week Working party	Le De Spencers
14 April 1999, 8.00pm	Annual General Meeting	Memorial Hall