

HISTORY EXPLORER

Ancient forests

Charlotte Hodgman and Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough explore **Sherwood Forest**, Nottinghamshire, an ancient woodland that for centuries nourished both body and imagination

With its lush greenery and cool shade, Sherwood Forest is a verdant oasis in the heart of Nottinghamshire.

Above me, boughs rustle gently in a light breeze and birds chirp their merry song in the sunshine. The 180-hectare country park is now part of the Sherwood Forest National Nature Reserve, which is home to 900 veteran oak trees, including the Major Oak. This arboreal behemoth is said by some to be over 1,000 years old – and its greenery, according to folklore, hid Robin Hood and his Merry Men from the Sheriff of Nottingham.

The legend of Robin Hood – along with the allure of fresh air and green space – draws many people to Sherwood Forest. But the history of this green expanse stretches back long beyond than the Middle Ages, says Dr Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough. Associate professor of medieval history and literature at Durham University, with a particular interest in Viking and Anglo-Saxon history, she is also presenter of a new

three-part BBC Radio 3 series on ancient woodlands due to air from June.

“Just over a decade ago, an open-air Viking Age assembly site was discovered in Sherwood Forest, most likely used as a meeting point by Norse settlers in this part of England,” Barraclough tells me as we follow a rough path through the trees. “The site has been known since at least the 14th century as Thynghowe – a combination of *Ping*, the Old Norse word for assembly place, and *howe*, derived from *haugr*, meaning ‘mound’.”

On a global scale, the history of forests dates back much, much farther; fossil evidence suggests that great wooded areas first came into existence around 400 million years ago. “When we talk about ancient forests, though, we’re really looking at woodlands pre-1600, before they start to be planted in a more organised way,” explains Barraclough.

Living off the (wood)land

Human occupation of Sherwood can be traced back to prehistoric times: flint tools discovered here suggest that the area was used by early hunter-gathers. However, the first recorded mention of the name Sherwood – or, rather, ‘Sciryuda’, meaning ‘the woodland belonging to the shire’ – dates from AD 958.

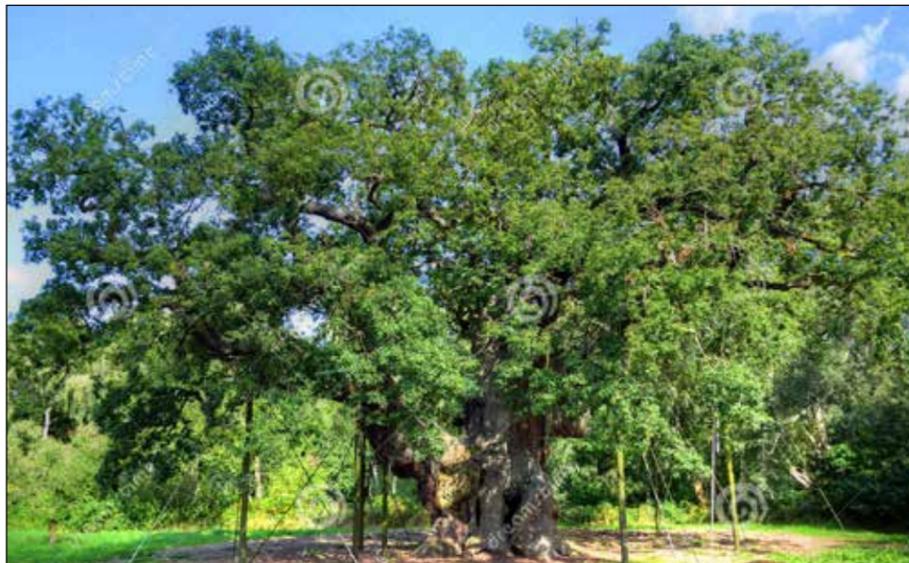
William the Conqueror is shown hunting in a 14th-century illustration. He and his successors established royal forests across England



“Trees yielded fuel and charcoal, animals could be grazed here, crops could be grown”

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Lee Warren Photography

Sunlight dapples a clearing in Sherwood Forest, which was an essential resource for peasants centuries before it became a tourist attraction



The wide-spreading branches of the Major Oak, believed to be 800–1000 years old, are now supported by struts. By tradition, this ancient tree sheltered Robin Hood and his men

“This idea of forests belonging to communities is really important,” says Barraclough. “For us, forests are pleasant places to visit – but for an Anglo-Saxon peasant living in the area before the Norman conquest, access to a forest was essential for survival. Trees yielded fuel and charcoal, animals could be grazed here and, though there were no formal field systems, there were spaces where crops could be grown.”

It’s important to bear in mind that forests were not exclusively areas of woodland. “In the 13th century, Sherwood Forest, for example, covered an area of around 100,000 acres – a fifth of the county,” says Barraclough. “This area wasn’t all wooded, but encompassed heath, moorland and scrub land, as well as villages and towns. Forests were far more a part of everyday life than they are today.”

King Harold’s defeat by the Normans at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 ushered in a new era for England’s forests. As William the Conqueror galloped victoriously across England, imposing his rule, he implemented the French royal tradition of setting aside areas of land for hunting. The idea developed during the reign of the Frankish king (and later Holy Roman Emperor) Charlemagne, in the late eight and early ninth century, when the Latin term *forestis silva*, meaning outside or beyond common law, was applied to areas of land used by the king for hunting.

“[WILLIAM I] MADE MANY DEER-PARKS... WHOSOEVER SLEW A HART, OR A HIND, SHOULD BE DEPRIVED OF HIS EYESIGHT”

“Interestingly, the word ‘forest’, derived from *forestis silva*, arrived in England with the Normans in 1066, used as a legal term to denote parts of the landscape that were under royal control,” explains Barraclough.

By 1086, some 25 royal forests had been established in England, including the New Forest and Sherwood. The ruins of a hunting lodge in Clipstone, once at the heart of Sherwood Forest, are testament to the royal love of hunting in the Norman and medieval periods. The lodge, which overlooked one of the forest’s three deer parks, was used by eight kings, from Henry II to Richard II.

Forest law

“The creation of areas of land that sat outside the law was an entirely new concept in England,” says Barraclough. “A new system of forest law was introduced to protect the ‘venison and the vert’ – the animals to be hunted and the greenery that sustained them. By 1200, something like one-third of the land in southern England had been set aside as royal forest. That must have had a massive impact on the lives of ordinary people. Those who dared to break forest laws could be punished, usually with a fine that bolstered the royal coffers.”

Punishments for poaching the king’s deer were especially harsh. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: “He [William I] made many deer-parks; and he established laws therewith; so that whosoever slew a

hart, or a hind, should be deprived of his eyesight... His rich men bemoaned it, and the poor men shuddered at it.”

For nearly 150 years, the crown dictated the land used by ordinary people. But in 1217, two years after Magna Carta clipped the wings of the monarchy, a Charter of the Forest was approved. Sealed by Henry III in the second year of his reign, this less-known but equally important charter curbed the power of the monarchy to seize forest land, and re-established the rights of ordinary people to access the forests as they had done before the Norman conquest.

The Charter of the Forest was one of the first laws to regulate the use of natural resources. It gave free men a basic right to use public lands and resources, including using the forests to obtain wood and water, and permission to “drive... swine freely without impediment”. The issue of poaching was also addressed and the harsh punishments for hunting the king’s deer revoked. In 1225 the definitive Forest Charter was issued; it was to become the longest standing statute in English history, repealed as recently as 1971, when it was replaced by the Wild Creatures and Forest Laws Act.

The Domesday Book recorded that in 1086 woodland covered about 15 per cent of England, a figure that by the end of the 13th century had dropped to as low as four or five per cent – a tiny proportion of the estimated 50–60 per cent of England covered by trees around 3,000 BC.



An 18th-century painting of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, set in the Forest of Arden

DREAMSTIME/BRIDGEMAN

VISIT

Sherwood Forest



Edwinstowe, Nottinghamshire, NG21 9HN
visitsherwood.co.uk

Over the following centuries, wood was used in ever greater quantities in emerging industries such as printing. A boom in ship-building during the reign of Henry VIII also had an impact on English forests. According to the Forestry Commission – established to rebuild timber reserves depleted during the First World War – constructing a single Tudor warship would have required about 1,200 trees, clearing an area equivalent to 40 football pitches. The Industrial Revolution, too, also contributed to the decline in England’s woodlands. By the early 20th century, Britain’s tree cover stood at just five per cent.

Forests of the imagination

But as their functional uses shrank, forests began to take on a new role – in the imagination. “There is a darker, more imaginative side to forest history,” says Barraclough. “The legend of Robin Hood and his men hiding out in Sherwood Forest is one of many such tales linking forests with outlaws. The idea that forests are places that exist beyond the law – as indeed they once did – promotes that association. And it’s an idea that existed outside England; the Old Norse word for outlaw is ‘skógarmaðr’ – ‘forest man’ – hinting at an association between outlaws and forests in the Norse world.”

Indeed, forests have provided numerous artists and writers – from William Shakespeare to JRR Tolkien and many more – with material.

“The ultimate forest of the English imagination has to be Shakespeare’s Forest of Arden,” comments Barraclough. “*As You Like It*, written around 1599, is set there. In the play it is a place of magic and mystery – something very removed from everyday

life. Shakespeare is brilliant at conveying the idea that forests are places in which anything can happen. Woodland is a place to hide, a place where lovers can meet in secret and, notably in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a place where magic and fairies can exist.”

In the 19th century a more romantic idea of the forest emerged, as somewhere to be admired rather than merely used. “The revived interest in forests in the late Georgian and Victorian periods was in part due to romantic novels such as Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*,” says Barraclough. “That work, originally published in 1820, introduced the connection between Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest, and depicted the famous outlaw meeting King Richard I here. Literary tourists were soon flocking to Sherwood to explore the forest described so vividly by Scott in his book. The ancient oaks, many of which still stand, only served to fuel the association with the medieval forest.”

Sherwood’s most famous tree, the Major Oak, was a particular draw – as it still is today. Huge branches spider out from its massive trunk, supported by a series of struts. Its dark, gnarly appearance is reminiscent of other darker forest stories, such as those found in Grimms’ *Fairy Tales*.

“Forests aren’t always the tranquil, picturesque places imagined in romantic literature,” comments Barraclough. “Think of Tolkien’s Mirkwood – a dim, enchanted place where huge spiders and dark magic lurk. But the different ways in which forests appear in our imaginations is part of their continuing charm. When you walk through a forest – even on a glorious day like this, when the sun is shining and the birds are singing – there are still areas of darkness. It’s easy to imagine any number of creatures lurking behind trees and bushes.”



Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough (left) is associate professor in medieval history and literature at Durham University. She has presented several documentaries for BBC radio. Words: Charlotte Hodgman

DISCOVER MORE

RADIO

► Eleanor will be presenting a **three-part series on ancient woodlands** on BBC Radio 3, beginning in June



FOREST HISTORY FIVE MORE PLACES TO EXPLORE

1 Forest of Arden

WARWICKSHIRE

Where Shakespeare set a comedy

Stretching from Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire to Tamworth in Staffordshire, and enveloping the cities of Birmingham and Coventry, the Forest of Arden is the setting for Shakespeare’s play *As You Like It*. Today, only scattered small patches of the once great forest remain, including Smith’s Wood. woodlandtrust.org.uk

2 Savernake Forest

WILTSHIRE

Where Henry VIII met his third wife

The first mention of ‘Safernoc’ appears in the records of Anglo-Saxon king Athelstan in AD 934. Part of it was designated a royal forest in the 12th century. It is home to the Big Belly Oak, believed to be over 1,000 years old, and is said to have been the site of the first meeting of Henry VIII and his third wife, Jane Seymour. forestry.gov.uk/savernake

3 Puzzlewood

FOREST OF DEAN, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Where Tolkien found inspiration

Said to have inspired the fabled forests of Middle-earth in JRR Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, this 5.5-hectare woodland is renowned for its strange rock formations. The forest has been occupied since Roman times; in 1848, a hoard of more than 3,000 3rd-century Roman coins was discovered in a cave in this wood. puzzlewood.net

4 Banagher Glen

DERRY/LONDONDERRY, NORTHERN IRELAND

Where legends abound

It’s said that after St Patrick tried – and failed – to drive the last snake out of Ireland, he trapped it in Banagher Glen, one of the oldest ancient oak woodlands in the country. discovernorthernireland.com

5 Charter of the Forest

LINCOLN CASTLE, LINCOLN

Where a charter is held

A copy of the original Charter of the Forest – sealed by Henry III, and one of only two in existence – can be seen at Lincoln Castle alongside Lincoln Cathedral’s Magna Carta. lincolncastle.com