

**AREA 2a: BINLEY COMMON FARM WOOD 42/37, BINLEY LITTLE WOOD 47/37,
BIG ROUGH 57/29 and LITTLE ROUGH 55/37 (PARISH of BINLEY WOODS)
And
AREA 2B: PILES COPPICE 17/37 (PARISH OF BINLEY WOODS)**

Sources of information are:

- 1. Ecosite notes (HBA)**
- 2. Tasker 1990 *The Nature of Warwickshire***
- 3. Local Record Office 2017/8 (RM)**
- 4. Wager 1998 *Woods, Wolds & Groves (Ph.D thesis)***
- 5. D.R. Morfitt 2000 *The Historical Ecology of the Woods of Binley, Warwickshire (Ph.D thesis)*.**
- 8. Warwickshire Wildlife Trust survey (1985)**
- 13. WCC website 'Our Warwickshire'**

ECOLOGY

Binley Little Wood: a severely disturbed remnant of ancient woodland, mainly birch, also field maple, wild cherry and crab apple; a ground flora is mostly absent. It was probably a grazed common wood until the mid-18th century, when it was finally enclosed and converted to coppice. This former history of grazing has strongly influenced the structure of the wood and probably also the composition, despite more than two centuries since grazing ceased and the wood was enclosed **(Source 1)**.

Binley Common Farm Wood: there is little evidence of management of the wood which has oak with sycamore invasion, understorey hazel, hawthorn, holly rowan. A dry ditch runs through the wood SW/NE **(Source 1)**.

HISTORY

It is recorded in Domesday Book 1086 that the *silvas* (probably wood pasture) **of Binley's two manors** probably amounted to 100 acres. **By the end of the 12th C Binley's woodland is thought to have been further divided** as Henry de Rokeby gave Coombe Abbey half his 'wood', thought to have been Binley as the Hundred Rolls of 1279 stated that the Abbot of Coombe had a foreign wood in Binley of 53 acres **(Source 4)**.

Documentary evidence suggests that there were several small woods in medieval times with stretches of heathland between. Some woods primary and others, e.g. Binley Little Wood, secondary as evidenced by the fact that they overlie broad ridge and furrow marks. **Since the 17th C. Binley Woods was part of the estate of the Lord Cravens of Coombe Abbey.** After the death of the fourth Earl in 1921, the whole estate was bought by local businessmen then re-purchased by John Todd, a retired auctioneer from Yorkshire for £213,000. In August 1923 he sold the estate off in 166 lots, much to outsiders. The majority of the land around Coombe Abbey itself was sold to John Gray, a Coventry builder and developer. The site had been wood and heath land for at least two centuries, the remnants of Binley Common taking in its western edge (= Binley Common Farm Wood). Within a year John Gray felled the ancient woodland and offered building plots for sale **(Source 13)**.

Binley Common Farm Wood (Source 5):

- A 4.1ha remnant of one of the two woods recorded in Domesday Book; fieldnames to the west indicate that it was formerly extended SW to Willenhall.
- **The northern edge** of the wood is defined by a straight bank and external ditch, around 3m in width. The northern quarter of the wood has straight, relatively narrow and probably late-18th century to early-19th century **ridge and furrow throughout**, with a large pond cut through it and therefore post-dating it.
- **The woodbank dividing this section of the wood from the southern three-quarters** and along the southern edge of the wood are straight, 5-6 m in overall width (including the wood ditch) and currently not dateable. It is possible that the northern woodbank represents the edge of a 13th century "trench", a clearing cut back from the wood to protect travellers using the road to the north but it is not possible to prove this. The presence of

coppice stools of ash *Fraxinus excelsior* up to 1.5 m in diameter on both woodbanks delimiting the southern three-quarters of the wood suggests that they are likely to be at least of 18th C origin.

- **The western edge of the wood** has a ditch but no bank; up to at least the mid-20th C there appear to have been two parallel ditches along this edge of the site.
- **The eastern edge** has no boundary features, apart from a metal fence erected 1998/9.
- Of particular historical significance are three coppice stools of small-leaved lime *Tilia cordata* in the SW corner and a clone of service tree *Sorbus torminalis*, both largely relict species confined to ancient woods. Presence of extensive old small-leaved lime coppice supports a medieval date for woodland and may indicate a direct link with prehistoric wildwood (**Source 13**).

Binley Little Wood (Buttons Wood of 1834)

- **around much of the periphery is the remains of a moderate woodbank**, up to 4 metres across, although in part, notably the western corner and along the entire east edge, there appears to be no bank. Within the wood is **ridge and furrow, probably throughout**, although it is faint in the western half and clearest in the eastern half of the wood. The apparent absence of a complete woodbank and the regular shape of the wood suggest that the boundary may not be ancient. Much of the woodbank may be old hedgebank. The ridge and furrow shows that this must be a secondary wood and also dictates the shape of the wood, with its south-eastern end sloping to follow the curve of the ridge and furrow. The SE edge, with no woodbank and a slope to the outside of the wood, may be the remains of the headland, where the plough was turned after ploughing the ridges (**Source 5**).
- The former ridge and furrow and relatively poor ground flora suggest that it may be a secondary extension to a former medieval grove. **It may be the “Grove in Binley called Comeners Grove”**, leased to John Gardener and his wife in 1538 (**Source 4**). The name *Commoners Grove* possibly implies that the wood was originally land set aside as compensation given to the commoners for the enclosing of part of the common by the landlord (**Source 5**).
- **the first certain documentary evidence of the existence of Binley Little Wood is the 1746 Craven Estates Survey**. This shows the wood, now called **Gardners Wood**, the same shape and size as at the present day; within the wood there is apparently a curved track running from the western corner to the eastern corner of the wood. The wood sits amongst a cluster of small fields; without the tree symbols it would appear to be yet another small field itself, in shape and size, unlike many ancient woods such as Piles Coppice which are irregular shapes to which the field pattern around conforms, showing that the wood came first. **Called Binley Little Wood in later 19th C maps** which show the field pattern around completely reorganised from the 18th C pattern, with many former hedges removed. The wood by then was isolated within a larger field, unconnected to the hedgerow pattern. It became surrounded by the expansion of Coventry between 1962-73 (**Source 3**).

The Roughs:

- both woods may derive from former common woodland; the reported presence of wood anemone in both suggests possible continuity with ancient woodland (**Source 5**).
- the woods correspond to area called Westwood where tenants of Binkley, Brandon and Brinklow inter-commoned with their animals c.1550 and probably much earlier. Part was taken into the park of Coombe Abbey (**Source 4**).

Big Rough (Source 5):

- tree communities suggest that this is **possibly a semi-natural woodland**, modified by planting of Scots pine. The oldest ash stools, on the woodbank and also visible within the inaccessible eastern half of the site, were 1m or more in size, suggesting that ash here may be part of the apparent spontaneous increase of ash in woods locally in the past two centuries.
- **the NW edge of the surviving wooded portion** of Big Rough has a straight, relatively acute bank and ditch, The accessible part of the NE edge near the N tip of the wood has a smaller bank. A shallow ditch leads from the interior of the site to the NW edge. The size and structure of the bank and ditch suggest that they are probably not ancient. The ditch has the appearance of a grip, possibly contemporary with the bank and ditch, through which it is cut to reach the wood ditch.

- **the first known reference is in 1746** when it was called **Slemakers Ruff**, fitting a possible origin of the Rough as part of Binley Common. The name Ruff alias Rough suggests in itself that this is unlikely to be an ancient wood. 18th C Coombe Abbey accounts show that this was a coppice wood.
- **a map of 1823** calls it Slaymakers Ruff, with an area of 19A, 2R and 35P. On the OS map of **1834 it is called Big Rough**.
- it was sold in 1923 and by 1939 at the latest the southern half of Big Rough had been destroyed for housing . By 1962 the central area was completely treeless.

Little Rough (Source 8):

- **first recorded in 1746, when it appears in the Binley Survey as Coney Currow Ruff**, the name coney possibly implying a rabbit warren on or near the site. It does not seem to be mentioned in any document, but does appear on all the extant maps after 1746.
- at some time between 1906 and 1919 an oblong extension of 825 acres was added to the SW edge, recorded in the 1923 Coombe Abbey sale catalogue as 'plantation' and distinguished from Little Rough proper, which was a wood 'in hand' and not for sale.

Sources of information are:

- 1. Ecosite notes (HBA)**
- 2. Tasker 1990 The Nature of Warwickshire**
- 3. Local Record Office 2017/8 (RM)**
- 4. Wager 1998 Woods, Wolds & Groves (Ph.D thesis)**
- 5. D.R. Morfitt 2000 The Historical Ecology of the Woods of Binley, Warwickshire (Ph.D thesis).**
- 7. Barton, J., 1983 Piles Coppice - Remnant of an ancient forest? (B.Sc dissertation)**

ECOLOGY

A predominantly small-leaved lime coppice with sessile oak standards and scattered hazel. Ground flora includes wood anemone, primrose, wood sanicle and goldilocks. Sandy conditions with central heathy areas make it rare in the county. Undisturbed for a long time and valuable for birds (redpoll and siskin), invertebrates and fungi; a site for *Schoenus nigricans*. Since 17th C the wood has been ignored apart from the planting of exotic species in the SE corner and along the wedge for game. The few available ring counts on large lime stems suggest that the wood had a last major felling of underwood **c.1930**, although there may have been further felling in the south-western part of the wood c.1948 (see below). Little seems to have been done with the wood since then and the boundaries were apparently not maintained; Mr C. Chattaway remembered cattle getting into the wood in the 1960s when his family farmed in Binley (pers. comm.) **(Source 1).**

HISTORY

This remnant of the Forest of Arden is defined by woodbanks that are probably ancient and a former deer-park bank which suggest possibly no change in size **(Source 1).**

The large area of small-leaved lime coppice, suggest a wood of great antiquity for the following reasons:

- small-leaved lime can produce huge stools where coppicing has been continued for centuries **(source 2)**
- lime is very sensitive to grazing in early years so pasture must have been prohibited or carefully managed here **(source 4).**

Well documented between 1086-1279 as a wood of c.50 acres; one of the two woods noted in the **Hundred Rolls of 1279**, almost certainly on the site of the present Piles Coppice and is likely to have been approximately the same size as the present and the Domesday Book wood **(Source 5).**

- Its proximity to Binley Common Wood suggests it might have been enclosed from the medieval wood of Binley and may have been the **Bynley Copies of Lord Harrington of Coombe Abbey** recorded in the 16th C. **(Source 4).**

- **For the period up to 1746**, there are a few references to woodland in Binley that might be Piles Coppice but none can be established with certainty. "Binley Coppice" occurs in a list of woods in a deed of sale in Latin of the Coombe estate to the Craven family (who followed the Harringtons). If none of these refers to Piles Coppice, it is unaccountably absent from the record for this period. The evidence of earthworks and large coppice stools, especially lime strongly supports the claim for continuity of Piles Coppice as coppiced woodland through the mediaeval and postmediaeval periods. **In 1746 a survey of the Manor of Binley** produced the earliest known detailed and accurate map of Binley, and the first unambiguous documentary record of Piles Coppice for nearly five centuries. It was now isolated from Binley Common Wood by a large area of arable land, though many hedges remained in this area. **By this period all the woods of Binley were isolated from each other and, within Binley, formed separate islands of semi-natural habitat.** North and west of Piles Coppice was also arable, though there was an area of grassland in Binley next to the Brandon boundary near the SW tip of the wood. North of the road between Binley Common Wood and Sleamakers (Big) Rough the land was entirely arable, apart from a small area of grassland near the NW tip of Sleamakers. Binley Common Wood itself had remains of common pasture to its west, north and east and its SE edge abutted on Brandon Wood. Only where the parish met Brandon to the south was the isolation of the woods broken. **By 1778, this isolation was accentuated by the removal of hedges. In 1923 it seems to have been in the ownership of Binley Common Farm** as it was not included in the sale of the Coombe Estate. **By 1983** it was owned by a timber merchant in Coventry and seems to have been sold several times before being bought by Coltman Brothers, timber merchants of Claybrooke in Leicestershire in 1951, who **sold it to the Woodland Trust in 1987 (Source 3).**

The archaeological evidence therefore suggests that this may have been a wood of around 50 acres for perhaps at least 700 years **(Source 5):**

- **much of the W, N and E edges of Piles Coppice have the remains of a bank with external ditch**, up to about 8m overall width. In places the bank is very and the ditch is generally shallow and heavily silted. Where timber trees and apparent hedge remains stand on the bank, its profile is higher and less eroded. This woodbank is neither very sinuous nor zig-zag in shape, unlike many probable mediaeval or earlier woodbanks elsewhere in England (Rackham 1990), but the wood itself forms an irregular shape in the landscape to which other landscape features (such as hedges) once conformed, showing that the wood came first.
- Along the southern boundary of the wood was originally a bank with internal ditch, Much of the eastern end of this bank was recent spoil from ditch clearance but the western two-thirds did not appear to have been recently disturbed. Overall this bank and ditch was about 8m in width. In places it is possible that there was a very shallow external ditch but whether or not this was a continuous feature along the whole of the southern edge was difficult to establish. A large part of the external bank was destroyed by a bulldozer in June 1995.
- From its size (Rackham 1990) it is likely that the **outer earthwork is the remains of a woodbank of medieval**, if not earlier, date along the west, north and east edges. It is similar in size to the woodbanks dated to c.1355 at New Close Wood. Its shape, lacking the sinuosities of many mediaeval woodbanks, is closer to that of Rackham's Period III category of woodbanks, late or post mediaeval. The very eroded state of the woodbank is itself good evidence of its antiquity, although it is possible that the woodbank between the entrance to the wood and the northern tip was destroyed by recent excavation. The evidence for this is, however, very limited and ambiguous (Woodland Trust records)
- **The bank and internal ditch on the southern edge may be**, at least in part, the boundary bank of the deer park of Brandon, which dated from at least 1279. Apart from the northern enclosure, none of the internal earthworks provides any evidence for former permanent subdivision or grubbing of parts of the present wood; the hollows and possibly natural stream beds could not have survived the destruction of the wood.

Reasons why Piles Coppice is a remnant of ancient forest (Source 7):

- Name coppice implies a form of management going back to Normans.
- Remnants of ancient forest survived on land distant from parish.....1mile from church and on boggy land.
- Medieval enclosure used banks on the wood side of a ditch and topped with hedges or fences....the older the boundary the shallower the profile. On northern edge of Piles Coppice is a ditch 1.5m deep and a bank 0.5m high with a hedge containing *Sorbus aucuparia*, oak and hawthorn. On eastern edge is a smaller ditch and bank 0.5m high

with hedge with same species. Along the southern edge a bank all along and a ditch and stream on the inside. All along the western edge is a 1m high x 2m wide bank and a 1m wide ditch, followed by a second lower bank. All adds up to medieval form of enclosure, boundaries usually sinuous.

- Pits in the drier parts of the wood ...charcoal?...suggest a history of coppicing...one is 1.5m cubed dimensions in the SE.
- Irregular pattern of trees makes it unlikely to be semi natural.
- Age of the *Tilia* root systems is c 400 years...unlike these are result of colonisation from elsewhere.
- Other tree species associated with ancient woods are Hawthorn, both *Crataegus spp*, *Prunus avium*, *Ulmus glabra* and *Alnus glutinosa*. Shrub layer spp are: bluebell, yellow archangel, wood rush, wood millet, wood sorrel and primrose.