

TAYLOR'S WOOD

By Monica White

As a botanist, I have always been fascinated by the history of our landscape and the way in which it has been moulded by the activities of man. And here in Norfolk, which until late medieval times was one of the most heavily populated counties in England, every corner has a story to tell. Taylor's Wood is no exception.

Taylor's Wood is a small triangular woodland of chestnut and oak coppice on the Cley-Salthouse boundary. It is now owned by the Blount family, whose management over the last few years has restored much of its former beauty.

But the area was not always like this. Some 5000 years ago the site, like most of Norfolk, was covered with mixed deciduous woodland which included small-leaved lime, sessile oak, alder and, possibly, beech. Then, about 4,500 years ago. Neolithic settlers wielding stone axes, moved into the area. They slashed and burnt and cleared the land to grow crops. Within a few years, perhaps as few as ten, the thin gravelly soil of the Holt-Cromer ridge became too impoverished to support reliable crops and the Stone Age farmers moved on to lower ground. Tree re-generation was slow on the poor, acidic soils and heathland, dominated by heather, gorse and bracken, developed on the site. It is very probable that this would have returned to woodland eventually but the heathland proved to be a most valuable resource. It provided grazing for the small, hardy goats, sheep, cattle and geese, and winter fodder for the breeding animals. The gorse, heather and bracken were used as a fuel, particularly the gorse which burns with a fierce heat; as bedding for man and beasts; for building and roofing materials; and the heather was used in brewing and for dyes. The continuous regime of grazing and cutting almost completely prevented the growth of tree seedlings so heathland, with a few trees growing in the deeper pockets of soil, became thoroughly established.

During the early Bronze Age the land where Taylor's Wood now stands became a sacred site. Two round barrows or burial mounds (tumuli) were built, dominating the skyline and proclaiming the importance of the local tribe. The area, however, was still grazed, probably by animals being driven from Salthouse heath down to the water in the Glaven Valley, and still cut, so it remained as heathland for many centuries.

In AD 43 the Romans invaded Britain and soon extended their rule over the whole country. They brought many Mediterranean plants with them, including Alexanders (horse pepper), stinging nettles, wine grapes and sweet chestnuts. The climate was warmer and wetter then, and the nuts ripened well. Norfolk had many Romano-British settlements with a flourishing villa and farm at Holt, for example, and quite possibly saltpans at Salthouse. It seems very probable that it was the Romans who planted a grove of sweet chestnuts on the site, adjacent to the barrows and close to the path leading from Salthouse to Holt now known as Bixes Lane and which may well have been there in Roman times.

So, for about 300 years perhaps, the site was covered with sweet chestnuts, grown for their nuts rather than for timber. But the Romans left Britain early in the 5th century AD and England was invaded by Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Danes, all from Northern Europe. They

had little experience of chestnuts as food, but they were skilled wood-workers and had developed sophisticated systems of woodland management to produce timber, and wood of all sizes, on a sustainable basis. And so, at some point in the years between the Anglo-Saxon invasions and the Norman Conquest, the grove of trees was coppiced, and banks and ditches were later built around it to keep out grazing animals. Some traces of these ancient coppices and banks can still be seen. After 1066 the wood became known as Taylor's Wood, the name being derived from *taillez*, Norman-French for coppice.

Taylor's Wood was on common ground, used by the villagers of Cley and, eventually, as happened with many similar common-woods, the coppicing regimes declined and once again chestnut standards grew on the site. The nuts were used as pig food and, just as importantly, for cooking: in stews, as an accompaniment to meat and as flour in many kinds of puddings, and they were also preserved in honey. Then, some time in the late medieval period or perhaps in the 16th or early 17th century, most of the trees were cut down. Many small woodlands in north Norfolk were felled in the 16th and 17th centuries, partly in response to changing agricultural practices, partly because cheap coal brought into local ports was replacing wood as fuel, even in poorer homes, and partly to provide timber for building. Chestnut timber was used often in place of oak, particularly for panelling. So the site reverted to heathland with isolated trees, and this is how it is shown on Faden's map, published in 1797.

The Enclosure Award of 1824 allotted the common land on which the wood now stands to a local landowner who enclosed it and planted chestnuts and oaks. Part of the wood was coppiced to produce palings for fencing, and part was a nuttery – it is said that once a year villagers from Cley were invited up to the wood to picnic and to collect nuts. The rest of the wood formed part of a grand landscaping project in which avenues of trees led to glades around the barrows. Banks and ditches, still very much in evidence, were built around the wood to prevent sheep grazing and damaging the young coppice, and the old name once again became appropriate.

The coppicing continued regularly until the First World War and then intermittently until the 1939-45 War. Then, owing to a fall in demand and rising labour costs, coppicing came to an end. The individual poles, which spring, from the cut trunk (or stool) grew into tall trees, and sycamore, rhododendrons and bramble invaded the wood. But recently the Blount family have cleared away much of the undergrowth, reintroduced coppicing, and have started to replant. Another phase in the history of Taylor's Wood has begun.

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