6 Trees – (almost) everywhere!

The change to Black Hill that is most obvious to the 21st century observer, took place in the aftermath of the Second World War. In fact, there were 3 separate legal conveyances. Firstly, in 1946 Colin Jackson leased Black Hill to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries for 999 years. Then in 1947, he sold the freehold of the whole Cwm Estate including Black Hill, to the Little family of Mitcheldean, Gloucestershire. Five years later, Thomas Little sold the moorland of Black Hill as well as the existing woodland of Purslow Wood (about 3 km to the east). Again the purchaser was the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. It was through the MAF and its agency, the Forestry Commission, that the UK government sought to rectify the massive wartime felling of trees[1] which left the country needing to import large amounts of timber and was strategically weakened as a consequence.

From 1946 until the present day, the Forestry Commission (FC) - since 2019 the agency within the FC responsible for managing England's forests has been named 'Forestry England' - has planted and managed coniferous woodland and this type of vegetation has dominated the landscape of Black Hill. While the transformation from extensive farming use before WW2 to coniferous forestry in the present day is valid as a simplification, within the 80-year span of time there have been changes in the way the FC has operated and these changes in policy have had an impact 'on the ground'.

In an article published in 2015[2], 4 historical phases in forestry policy and practice are recognised in Britain. An attempt will be made to relate these phases to Black Hill and the Parish land within it. In particular, how FC practice has had an impact on the visual environment, public access and wildlife.

1- *Mono-functional forestry (industrial forestry): 1919 to mid-1960s[3]*

Since the Forestry Commission only began to operate on Black Hill in 1946, and allowing for the time between surveying and publication, whenthe 1953 map (fig. 27) was published, a few years had elapsed. During this period

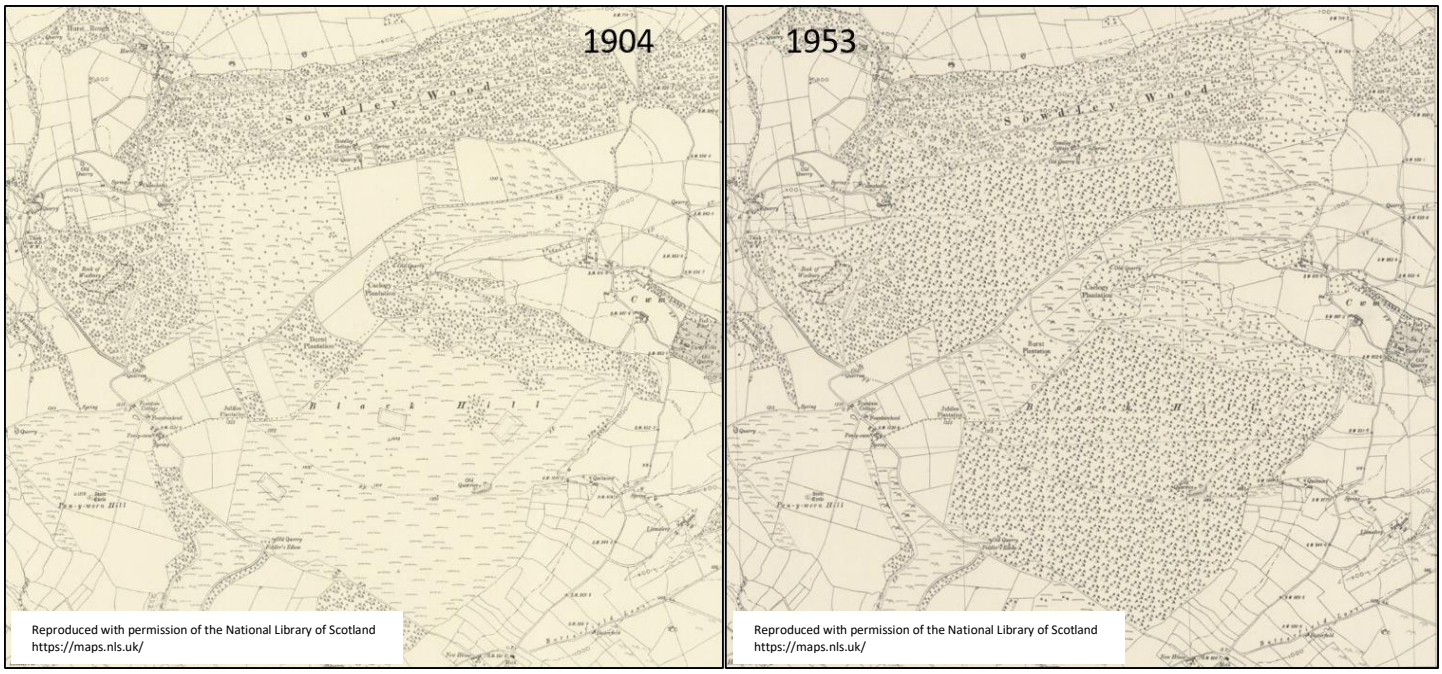


Fig. 27 – OS maps of the Black Hill area published in 1904 and 1953. The FC afforestation around Black Hill shown on the 1953 map, had taken place since their lease was signed in 1939.

[1] *A BBC Countryfile article states 'The Second World War only reinforced the need for state control of forestry. The war effort once more demanded timber; 11% of all woodlands had been felled by the time of the 1947/9 census' from: https://www.countryfile.com/wildlife/trees-plants/history-of-britains-forests-and-woodlands-celebrating-100-years-of-the-forestry-commission*

[2] '*Forestry paradigms and policy change: The evolution of forestry policy in Britain in relation to the ecosystem approach' by Susanne Raum, Clive Potter - members of the Centre for Environmental Policy, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Imperial College London. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264837715002562*

[3] *While the 1919 date was fixed by the establishment of the FC in that year, the boundaries between the 4 phases is blurred by the time lag between significant national or international events (which can often be defined by a particular year) and the impact that those events have had 'on the ground'. For example, The Countryside Act of 1968 was part of the erosion of the long-held view of forests as being purely for economic gain by requiring local authorities and other bodies to consider "the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty and for the benefit of those resorting to the countryside" - HMSO 1968. Countryside Act 1968.*

the ‘industrial forestry’ management approach held sway. Even by 1953, the FC had had a significant effect on the mapped and visual landscape – see fig. 27. Two large blocks of planting had taken place. Firstly, the northern section in Clun Parish between Sowdley Wood and the Broad Road[4] and secondly the southern area running NE from Fiddler’s Elbow/Woolley’s Plantation[5] towards Cwm in Clunbury Parish.[6] Interestingly, the second area appears to have included planting across the turbary/recreation ground – Whinberry Hill. Whether such planting by the FC actually took place is uncertain. The alternative being that the Ordnance Survey were unable to distinguish between the recently planted conifer tracts and the Parish-owned land which should have been unplanted, and categorised the whole area as coniferous woodland.

A buffer zone of rough grazing was left to the north west of the Black Hill planting and beyond this zone the Sowdley Wood area of intensive planting continued beyond the Broad Road. Burnt Plantation seems to have been a less intensively planted area of coniferous woodland connecting the two main blocks. The area of rough grazing/mixed woodland running from Caelogy Plantation to the east south east to Cwm Villa (now called Cwm Hall) also appears to have been left unchanged initially. Between the date of the 1953 map and 1973, all three of these areas were planted with the last of them on the steep slope towards Cwm which was used for larch and other species rather than solely spruce.

The main, roughly rectangular, block of more than 300 acres (120 hectares) of Black Hill will have been closely planted probably with Sitka Spruce at a 2m x 2m spacing. If so, there will have been approximately 300,000 plants on Black Hill. As far as the Clunbury Parish land is concerned, in all the relevant legal contracts, exceptions are made to allow the designation for Turbary and Recreation Ground usage to continue. So, though these areas are not demarcated on either of the OS maps shown in fig. 27, it is believed that planting by the FC across these areas may not have taken place despite the 1953 map using the coniferous forest symbol throughout. This assertion is made on the grounds that most of the ground in the Parish land does not seem to have been disturbed to the extent that FC operations normally cause.

Once planted, the rows of young trees will have been allowed to develop without a great deal of management being necessary. Perimeter fencing will have been erected to deter deer and sheep and the maturing trees may have had lower branches removed to improve future yield but in most respects the ‘crop’ should not need much intervention. After about 20 years, so in the case of Black Hill in the mid-1960s, thinning of some trees may have taken place although with its exposed site, the high risk of windthrow[7] may have meant that thinning would not take place. Further enquiries need to be made concerning the ways in which FC management strategies have been applied on Black Hill.[8] Maturity, in the case of the first plantings of spruce on Black Hill, will have happened in the early 1980s by which time FC policy had changed somewhat. The consequences of these changes will be considered in part 2.

At the time when it came into public ownership, Black Hill benefited from a number of footpaths around or across it – along most of the SE, NE and NW boundaries, roughly across the middle of the planted area from Jubilee Plantation past an old quarry to Quilmore and also from the old quarry to Cwm at the NE corner of the forest. These paths are shown on both OS maps in fig. 27. In addition to these well-established routes, the FC will have created forest tracks suitable for machinery movement and truck access. The routes were created at an early stage even though the tracks would only become necessary for the clear felling operations that lay ahead. During the first or ‘industrial’ phase of the FC’s operations little attention was paid to providing access to the public and indeed with the potential threat of fire that human activity would bring, the authority could justify taking steps to discourage walkers, cyclists, horse-riders from entering their property. So despite the presence of several routes over Black Hill, several came to be disused and planting operations may have obliterated others. A comparison of figs. 27 with fig. 28 (rights of way are distinguished from other routes only on fig. 28) shows that authorised access to Black Hill had been significantly limited to just three routes – the E-W bridleway from Pen-y-cwm to Cwm, a footpath on the SW

[4] *The Broad Road is the name used on the 1800 map (Map 3) for this part of the ancient routeway which crosses Black Hill running roughly ENE from Fountain Cottage. The route has been used since pre-Roman times and in this section forms the boundary between Clun and Clunbury parishes.*

[5] *Fiddler’s Elbow refers to the sharp bend in the road which runs along the western edge of Black Hill. The name has been used on the OS map in fig. 28.*

[6] *The attention of this article is on the second area which lies in Clunbury Parish.*

[7] *Windthrow refers to trees uprooted by wind. Windthrow can increase following logging, especially in young forests managed specifically for timber. The removal of trees at a forest's edge increases the exposure of the remaining trees to the wind.*

[8] *The current FC management plan for Black Hill has been requested but not received (13 April 2026).*

border of the forested area and the Broad Road running ENE from Pen-y-cwm which was at this time classed as a minor road.

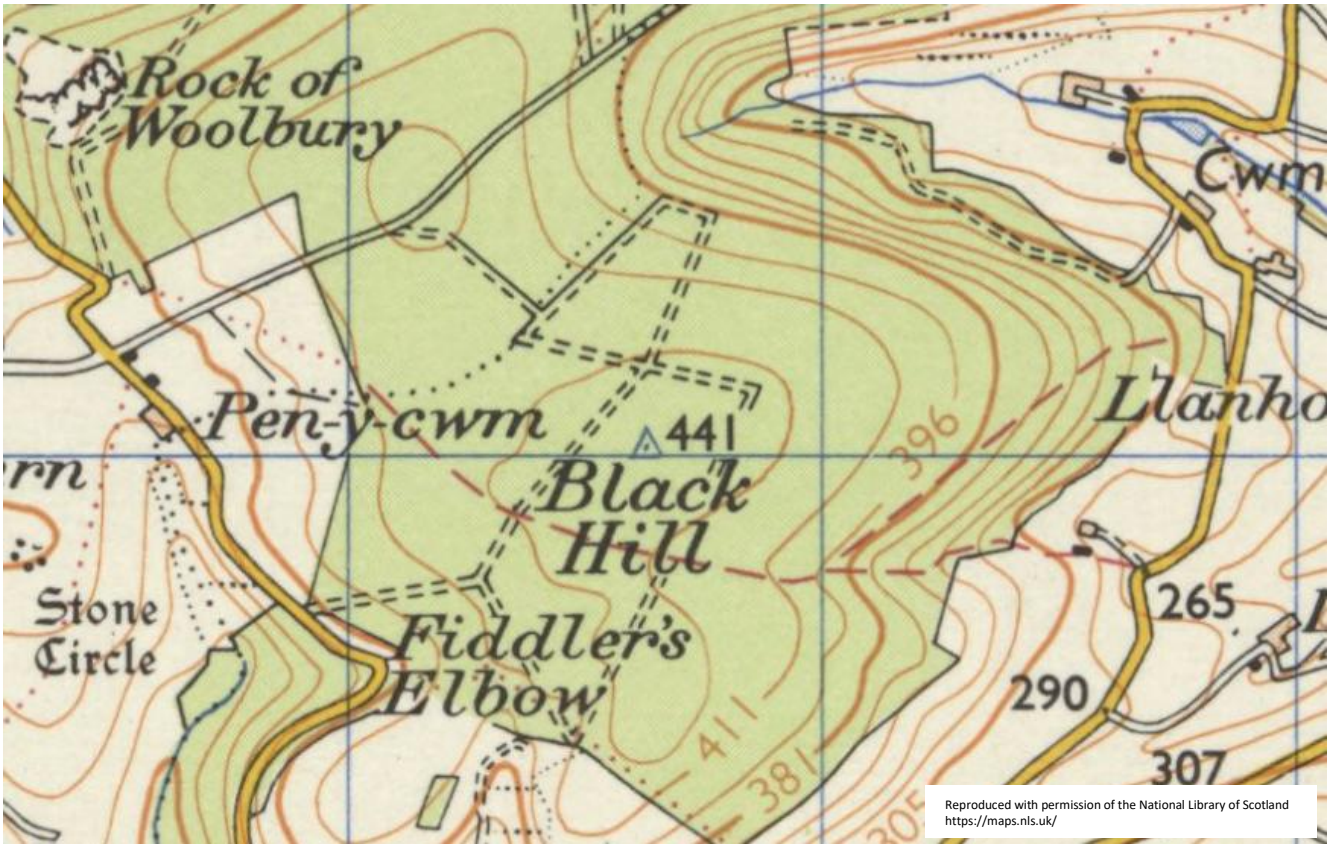


Fig.28 - 1:50,000 OS map extract. Revised 1965 to 1972. Published 1974 showing footpaths (dotted line), bridleways (broken lines) and forestry tracks (double broken lines). Only the routes coloured brown have public Right of Way.

2 - Multi-functional forestry: mid-1960s to early 1990s

The Countryside Act of 1968 has already been noted (footnote 34) as having an effect on FC policy but there were other external influences which shifted the authority's practice and brought about more engagement with the general public. An HM Treasury review[9] of the economic costs and benefits of British forests concluded that without including the value of amenity and recreation, afforestation would fail to produce the 10% expected return on public investments. So to be economically viable, the FC would have to respond to a broad range of lobby groups[10] which collectively wished to see British forests become more than 'timber factories'.

International influences also came to bear on forestry policy in Britain. For example, after Britain's entry to the European Union in 1973, the *EU Bird Directive* of 1979, and in the same year the *UN Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats* are examples of legal obligations for the UK government. The response was *The Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981* which was amended in 1985[11]. The latter legislation instructed the FC to keep a '*reasonable balance*' between production of timber and '*conservation and enhancement of natural beauty and the conservation of flora, fauna and geological or physiographic features of special interest'.* Despite the challenge posed by interpreting the word 'reasonable', this broader view of the purposes of Britain's forests is central to the second phase of FC policy and practice.

The following paragraphs are largely based upon aerial photographs taken in 1973 and 1983 extracts of which are shown in the first two images of Fig. 29. The conclusion reached here is based on observation of not just the extracts

[9] *HM Treasury 1972. Forestry in Great Britain: an Interdepartmental Cost/Benefit Study London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.*

[10] *E.g. Forestry Action Group, Ramblers Association, British Association of Nature Conservationists, RSPB, Nature Conservancy Council and others.*

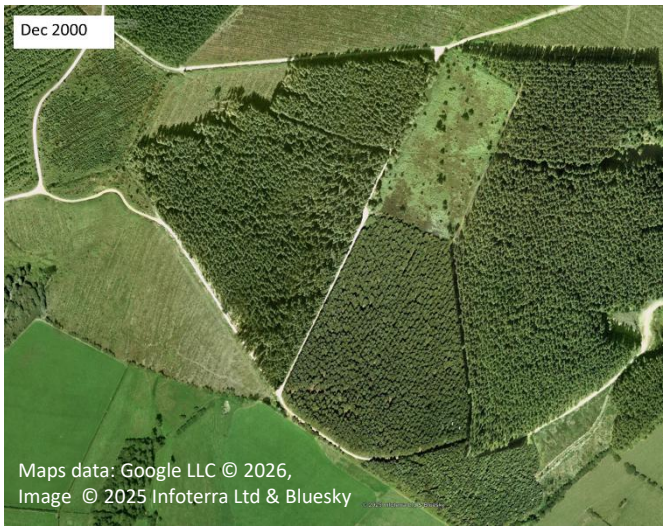
[11] *HMSO 1981. Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and HMSO 1985. Wildlife and Countryside (Amendment) Act 1985. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.*

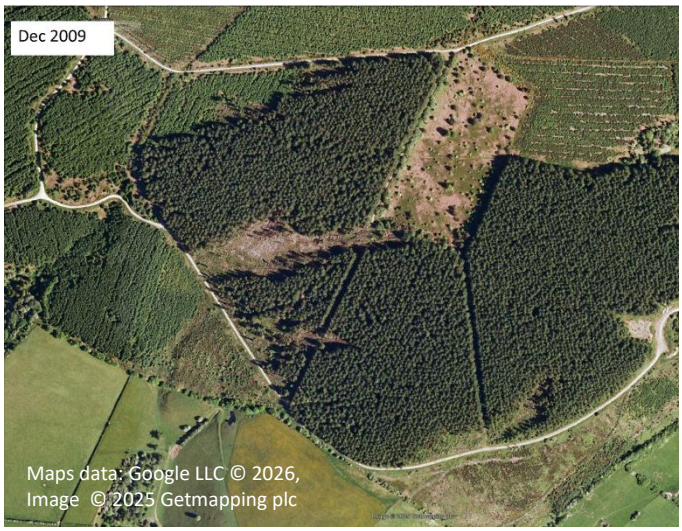
shown in Fig. 29 which focus on the Parish land and its immediate surroundings but the aerial photos covering the whole of Black Hill.

The strong impression that one gets looking at the black and white images is of uniformity. Apart from several clear tracks, the forest resembles the surrounding farming fields in terms of its monoculture - one difference being that the size of the forested 'fields' is greater. Nor are there big contrasts observable between the two dates although the extra decade of growth is suggested in the later image. These observations correspond to what one might expect when looking at forests planted over a relatively short period of time some 20 to 30 years earlier, as described before. One is also led to the conclusion that despite a shift in emphasis in policy which could affect the ways that trees would be harvested and replanted in the future, existing forests which by the early 1980s had trees approaching maturity were unlikely to change much as far as the visual landscape is concerned. Economic necessity dictated to the FC that such forests would be allowed to reach maturity before being harvested. Any shifts towards greater '*enhancement of natural beauty and the conservation of flora, fauna'* could wait at least until after the first 'crop' of trees had been taken. One would particularly understand such a delay with respect to forests in remote and less populated parts of the country and Black Hill would probably fall into this category.

During this period, the Parish Land appears as a mosaic of lighter and darker shades. The lighter features on the 1973 image are probably individual trees while the grey areas are likely be patches of bracken, heather and whinberry. The FC appears to have used a wide route running vertically across the Parish area while a clear straight border has been created separating the turbary and recreation ground from the forest. Two smaller routes cross the area leading from a point near midway on the east side where the 'old' bridleway emerges from the forest.

Visitors to Black Hill in the 1970s and 1980s would have had a choice of routes through the trees. Most of these were by their nature created as forest roads suitable for the equipment and vehicles used by the FC. Use by pedestrians, horse riders and cyclists would not be prevented though at times of active forestry operations, some disruption would take place. Not all of what appear to be routes on the 1973 images would have been useable by visitors. Some of these 'routes' have been left unplanted by the FC. The reason for doing so nowadays might be to create ecological corridors, however until the 1980s these 'rides' were more likely for practical reasons such as wind management and reducing the risk of extensive windthrow and as risk firebreaks. As such, the surface would be rough, become overgrown and unattractive as routes for people. The 1983 image shows these rides to be largely closed up by undergrowth. In 2026, most of these 'routes' are impassable so access to the turbary and recreation ground is restricted to the forest roads along the northern and western boundaries and the old footpath from the east, which itself, is quite indistinct.





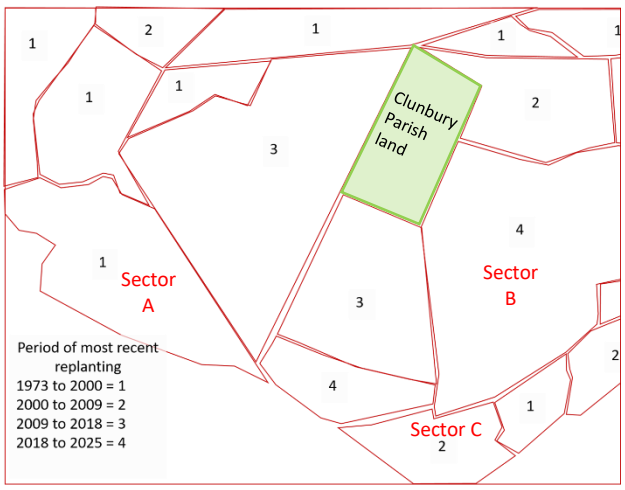


Fig. 29 – a sequence of aerial photos of the Parish land and the surrounding stands of timber. These extracts extend to about one third of the total forested area of Black Hill. The other two thirds lie to the north, east and west.

The diagram on the left identifies when each stand of timber was harvested (and replanted) in relation to the sequence of images. So those areas labelled "1" were replanted sometime between 1973 and 2000, and in fact in this part of Black Hill, all the replanting was between 1983 and 2000.

Sources
1973 and 1983 Shropshire CC by permission of Shropshire Archives.
Other dates – Google Earth and as shown on each image.

Whether moving along the forest roads of Black Hill on foot, saddle or horseback, the view would be restricted by the proximity of the dense woodland. Only where the route comes close to the edge of the forest or if the track drops away significantly, would anything of the surrounding hills be seen. One such point lies about 360 metres

Fig. 31. A recent view looking south from the edge of Black Hill across Woolley's plantation to Caer Caradoc.

Fig. 32. The Forestry Commission clearing used to store and load timber onto trucks.

south-south-west of the south-west corner of the Parish land where the FC land adjoins farmland. The area on the other side of the fence is now sheep grazing land (fig. 31) but historically speaking it is known as Woolley's Plantation – Aaron Wolley (aka Woolley) being one of the landowners awarded land on Black Hill in the 1854 Inclosure Award. The 1904 map (fig. 27) shows the area as coniferous woodland but by the time that Black Hill was afforested, Woolley's Plantation had been cleared.

Three other areas, visible on both 1973 and 1983 images are distinct from the coniferous woodland. Two of these lie to the east of the Parish land and one to the west – at Fiddler's Elbow and close to the main access point where forest roads meet the public road from Clun to Obley. Two of these quarries were identified on the 1854 Award and were to be used by the landowners for road making and maintenance. They may also have been exploited by the FC to build the new forest roads in the early period of their occupation. The third area, to the south-east of Whinberry Hill, is also a quarry but it is also the area where the FC classify and store felled timber while awaiting collection (fig. 32).

While the two images from 1973 and 1983 show very similar overall characteristics – coniferous forest broken only by the Clunbury Parish land, forest roads and occasional clearings – there are some variations in the detail. It does appear that by 1983 the density of the forest, especially to the west and south of the Parish land, has reduced. Though there may have been some damage by storms, the gaps may have been caused by thinning operations carried out by the FC foresters to improve tree health, allowing continued growth of the remaining trees while also providing a small but marketable supply of thinner trunks for use as fence posts, pallets etc. These thinning operations will have had little impact on the landscape for any visitors travelling along the routes across Black Hill.

3 - Sustainable forest management: early 1990s to 2006

The concept of sustainability gained huge international attention in many spheres of activity after the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. The principle of sustainability in forestry management has been translated by European and national authorities into legislation, policy and practice. In Britain, the FC published two key policy statements 'Sustainable Forestry: The UK Programme' (1994) and in 1998 'UK Forestry Standard: The Government's Approach to Sustainable Forestry' which outlined best forestry practice and was supported by Woodland Grant Schemes which were available to farmers and private landowners to establish new woodlands or manage existing ones.

These initiatives sought to shift further away from a purely 'industrial' approach to managing the forests of the UK[12] to one in which the economic objective is balanced by social and environmental ones. Fig. 33 shows how the three objectives coincide to contribute towards 'resilient forests'. While this general model was accepted on a broad scale, it was also recognised that management objectives and local circumstances would vary from woodland to woodland

[12] *Devolution for forest management from the Forestry Commission began in 1999 when separate bodies for Scotland and Wales were created. Responsibility passed to the devolved parliaments in Edinburgh and Cardiff.*

and so the point of balance between the three objectives would not be identical. This flexibility meant that some forests would be considered suitable for meeting the recreation/access objectives while others, perhaps nearby, would have a greater role in meeting environmental or social objectives.

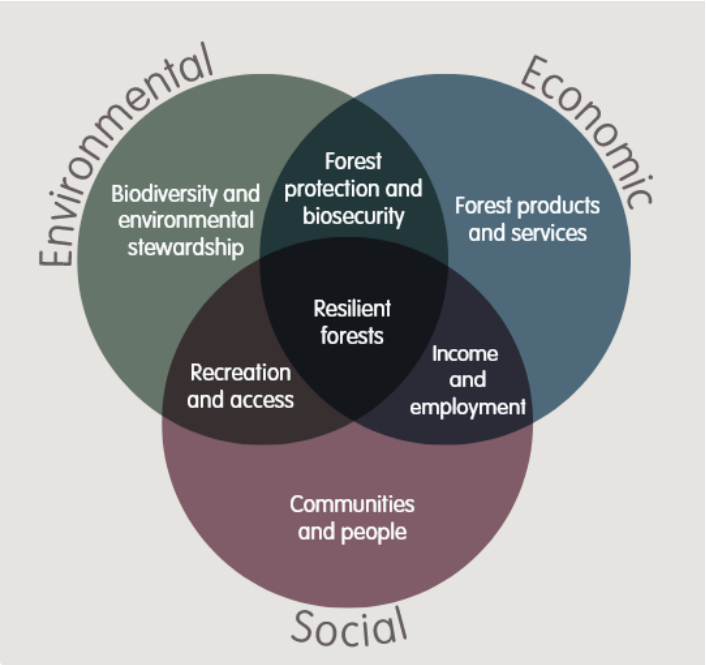


Fig. 33 diagram showing the balance between Economic, Environmental and Social objectives enshrined in the concept of sustainable forestry management adopted by the UK government around 1999.

If the general model of sustainable forestry is considered with respect to some of the Shropshire Hills area, interesting differences can be recognised. With their Iron Age hill forts and steep slopes, both Bury Ditches (FC managed) and Burrow Hill (privately managed) have heritage and cultural value and possess the potential to achieve educational and well-being aims. Hopton Wood linked to Bedstone and Bucknell Hills provides an extensive area which has been enhanced for public use by the creation of a sizeable car park and mountain biking trails.

There are also two nearby areas of woodland - Lurkenhope and Clunton Coppice - where environmental objectives are at the forefront of management practice. Both areas are managed by Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

Unlike most other nearby woodlands managed by FC, the broad, gently sloping nature of Black Hill means that mechanical forestry operations can proceed efficiently. In addition, poor road access is probably the major factor in determining that the area would be difficult to use for public recreational activities. For these reasons, the economic objective may have been considered to be the highest objective for Black Hill itself.[13]

What evidence can be identified in support of the notion that Black Hill was managed between 1990 to 2006 with economic aims ahead of social and environmental ones?

The second pair of aerial photos in Fig. 29 dated Dec 2000 and Dec 2009 from Google Earth provide some useful information for this period. Comparison with the 1983 image shows that much clear felling took place in the last two decades of the century. This was the harvesting of the now mature trees which were planted in the first planting period in the 1940s. Several tracts particularly to the north and west of the Parish land have been clear felled and replanted in this period – numbered 1 on the diagram at the bottom of Fig. 29. The fact that the regrowth in the 2000 image is visibly greater in some tracts compared to others shows that the reforestation took place in different phases rather than all at one time. However, **all** the tracts have been replanted by 2000 to a large extent. None have been left as cleared spaces. Leaving cleared spaces after clear felling - to encourage biodiversity - is a practice that has been adopted in some other FC forests in the past and has also been adopted at Black Hill after some felling in the 2020s. The failure to leave cleared spaces during the 1990 to 2006 period is an example where economic aims have superseded environmental ones on Black Hill. Having said that, some tracts to the west of Whinberry Hill were not planted as densely as had been the case in the original planting. In

Fig. 34 – 2026 view showing mixed planting on both sides of the road lead from Fiddler's Elbow towards Obley.

[13] *The assertion is being made by the author using visual and map evidence rather than being based upon any statement or document produced as a management plan for Black Hill and will be revisited once management plans (which have been requested) have been received and studied.*

addition, some diversification of tree species and the inclusion of some deciduous species took place during this period of reforestation which appears in other respects to be similar to the original post-war planting. Examples of diversification can be seen close to the unofficial car park near Fiddler's Elbow where copper beech are among the mix of trees that have been planted by the FC on their land south of Fiddler's Elbow – see fig. 34. Species diversification has taken place in other tracts where reforestation has taken place especially along the edges of those tracts creating a buffer zone with an uneven edge to the lines of sitka spruce (see fig. 35).

At nearby FC forests where the social objective is prominent, for example Bury Ditches and Hopton Hill, facilities have been provided which can be used by visitors. Purpose built access roads lead the visitor to car parks which have been provided with information boards and picnic tables. At Bury Ditches, a footpath has been built linking the car park with the hill fort and the whole hill fort area has been left unplanted so that visitors can appreciate long views and the impressive nature of the fort itself. The summit which is within the ramparts of the hillfort, is marked with an orientation 'table' which provides details of surrounding features. At Hopton Hill, while walking and family visits are encouraged, the main emphasis is on mountain biking. Trails of different severity have been marked out, graded and signposted. Commercial links have been made with a cycle business in Ludlow who gain commercial benefit and advertising opportunities from the arrangement and are partners in the management of the trails. Both these forests have dedicated pages on the Forestry England website providing details of access and encouraging particular leisure activities and public participation[14]. It is believed that all these facilities were initiated during the 1990s and early 2000s since when changes and improvements have also been made.

By contrast, no encouragement is given to visitors to go to Black Hill. Car parking for a number of cars is available near Fiddler's Elbow where the road verge has been widened and roughly surfaced. However, non-visitor traffic uses the road therefore a potential safety hazard exists for users of the car park. At times, the 'car park' has been used to store piles of cut timber ready for collection so visitors were prevented from parking. Access to the forest is marked by a barrier across the forest track. Pedestrians can make use of an unofficial diversion around one end of the barrier but other users, e.g. riders, cyclists or wheelchair users, could only gain access with difficulty – see fig. 35. Apart from the FC name board, the only information provided is in the form of warning signs such as 'No off roading'. Other potential access points around the perimeter of Black Hill forest are managed in a similar way. The idea that Forestry England do not wish Black Hill to be a destination for visitors is reinforced by the fact that their website has no information about the forest at all, not even a recognition that the forest exists. Not surprisingly, the forest tracks of Black Hill are normally empty of visitors and limited to local dog walkers, birdwatchers or others who are familiar with the area.

Fig. 35 the access to Black Hill forest across the public road from the car parking area.

So while the social objective has been largely ignored as far as Black Hill is concerned in favour of the economic one, can the same be said for the environmental objective? Again, the 2000 and 2009 images in Fig. 29 are informative in this respect.

Two sectors at the western edge of the 2000 image, due west from Whinberry Hill, show evidence of a slightly different approach in the replanting that had recently taken place. These sectors can be contrasted with the sectors along the northern edge where the practice has been to plant spruce densely, employ all the available space and, by doing so, create a sharp edge at the track. Around the edges of the two western sectors, a lower density of planting has been used using different species and the planting of spruce has been done so that the edge is uneven when viewed from above. The effect of this replanting approach when viewed from ground level is to present a more natural look to the edge of the forest.

[14] *https://www.forestryengland.uk/hopton-wood and https://www.forestryengland.uk/bury-ditches*

Fig. 36 shows the way that a similar approach has been adopted around the access point to Black Hill near to Fiddler's Elbow. The key to fig. 36 describes the replanting method and some other features in that part of the forest.

Another interesting feature of the 2009 image on Fig. 29 is an area of forest clearance to the west of the Parish land. This feature is another suggestion that environmental considerations had a stronger influence on forest management in the early 2000s than hitherto had been the case. The cleared area measures about 260m long and though only 25m wide at the end closest to the Parish land, it widens out to about 90m before narrowing to about 50m at the western end.

Fig. 36 – 2009 image showing species diversification and other features in the south-west part of Black Hill forest at the forest access point and close to Fiddler's Elbow.

Key 1 – running along the forest perimeter, a narrow band of deciduous species has been planted. Behind that band is a buffer zone where natural regeneration can take place. Then there is the intensive coniferous planting but with a 'ragged' edge. The buffer zone and ragged edge to the coniferous planting remain to the present day. See also fig. 37.

2 – Another example of low density, deciduous planting and an uneven edge to the conifers. Again, spaces between trees allows for natural regeneration to take place.

3 – A recently (in 2009) clear felled sector. Replanting with diversified species has since taken place.

4 – The 'car park' being used for storing felled timber.

Its shape and orientation (roughly WSW to ENE) encourages the idea that the clearance was made as a wind management exercise. However, since the area was quickly replanted, any storm protection that it provided would have been short lived. A more likely explanation is that the clearance is further evidence that management practices at Black Hill were beginning to contribute to the environmental objectives of the FC. The replanting in the cleared area was not done in straight lines nor was it replanted with spruce. However, since the areas on each side **were** replanted with spruce, the effect was to produce a patchwork of diversified species which again creates a more natural appearance to the forest. The effect of the mixed planting regime can be seen a few years later on the 2018 and the 2025 images on Fig. 29 in several sectors of Black Hill.

So while Black Hill offers no evidence of FC activities leading to habitat creation or restoration nor the reintroduction of any animal species, all of which have been attempted in certain FC managed forests in Britain, there is clear evidence of diversification of tree species, sustainable thinning practices and some natural regeneration of cleared areas in the period from 1990 to 2006. The environmental objective had not been overlooked in the way that Black Hill has been managed but the economic objective continues to be paramount in this period.

4 - Recent shifts in forestry: 2007–present.

Sustainability was the key word in forestry management in the UK for the period up to 2007 and policy and practice attempted to meet the three objectives - economic, social and environmental. Around the turn of the century, international thinking shifted somewhat to view the three objectives of sustainability from a holistic or **ecosystem** approach, while continuing to seek overall sustainability. The ecosystem approach, which had roots in the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 1995, gradually came to shape UK policy in the succeeding years and DEFRA published several policy statements in 2007 which placed an ecosystem approach into the heart of the work of the Forestry Commission, Natural England and the Environment Agency directing them to *"ensure that its principles (i.e. an ecosystem approach) are clearly reflected in their corporate plans, strategies and delivery plans and that the approach is then effectively operationalised at all levels within their organisations".*

The UK Forestry Standard, the document designed as a benchmark for sustainability, which was first published in 1998, and had been updated in 2004, was further revised in 2011. The 2011 document introduced the term *ecosystem services*[15] into the way that forests were to be managed in the future. The 5th and current version of the UK Forestry Standard published in 2023 and updated in March 2025[16] contains the same definition and approach.

All versions of the UK Forestry Standard acknowledge that forest management requires long-term planning and that the achievement of objectives may not be achieved during one rotation of planting and harvesting. In effect, this means that measuring progress towards achieving the objectives needs to be done over several decades rather than single years. Also, the success of the holistic ecosystem approach will be measured not around an individual forest but at the regional, national and even international scales and involve such considerations as human well-being, flood resilience, atmospheric quality and resilience to climate change. For these reasons, any assessment of the contribution made by Black Hill at this stage would be inappropriate and greatly premature. However, it may be possible to recognise steps which have been taken locally, which can be seen in the landscape and which, in the future, may be seen as contributing to broader goals.

In practice, and when considering individual forests, the FC can meet its obligation to incorporate ecosystem services in its practices this could include such measures as –

1. Resilient Forest Design: Shifting away from monocultures to planting diverse species and using tools like Ecological Site Classification (ESC) to ensure trees are suited to future climate conditions.
2. Active Habitat Management: Creating "patchworks" of different habitats, including managed open spaces, using techniques like low-intensity grazing to boost biodiversity.
3. Sustainable Harvesting and Protection: Using low-impact machinery to avoid soil compaction and timing felling to avoid bird nesting seasons.
4. Integrated Land Use (Wilding): Integrating wilding activities within productive forests, targeting areas for enhanced natural processes.
5. Continuous Cover Forestry: In some areas, removing only a few mature trees at a time rather than clear-felling, keeping a mixture of tree ages.
6. Water and Soil Care: Protecting water quality and enhancing soil health to ensure the long-term, sustainable delivery of natural benefits.

An attempt will be made to see what evidence can already be found concerning forestry practices in use at Black Hill which could contribute to any of the six strategies listed above.

Some diversification in the replanting regime in the early years of the 21st century has already been recognised and described. Comparison of the 2009 image in Fig. 29 with those from 2018 and 2025 shows some further examples of

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[15] *The 2011 UK Forestry Standard includes this definition of ecosystem services in its glossary – "Ecosystem Services - the benefits people obtain from ecosystems. These include provisioning services such as food and water; regulating services such as regulation of floods, drought, land degradation and disease; supporting services such as soil formation and nutrient cycling; and cultural services such as recreational, spiritual, religious and other non-material benefits."*

[16] *https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uk-forestry-standard*

the use of more complex approaches to the processes of tree harvesting and replanting. To help this comparison, three sectors (A, B & C) have been identified on the diagram at the bottom of Fig. 29.

Sector A was clear felled towards the end of the 20th century and replanted quite soon afterwards. The replanting was not simply a replacement of the sitka spruce species which had been felled. Instead, a subtler approach was used which is visible in the 2009 image. Within the sector, there are several different textures and shades of colour shown in the image. These differences are caused by the planting of different species including deciduous varieties

Fig. 37 looking north from near the access barrier into the low density mixed woodland planted after clear felling of spruce in the late 20th century.

Fig. 38 thinning of larch in sector A.

(fig. 37). The western part of sector A is planted with larch[17], which often grow quickly in the first few years, with the initially slower growing spruce planted in the eastern part. However, by the June 2018 image, the spruce have caught up in terms of growth rate and are by then much more visible. The two areas have a different hue and texture compared to each other. In the 2025 image, the variations in species are very clear and the presence of an 'island' of larch within the surrounding spruce is now apparent. Larch were the chosen species for those parts probably due to the steeper slopes found in those areas.

Another feature visible for the first time on the 2025 image, which can also be observed in some areas neighbouring sector A, is that the spruce stands in these areas have been thinned by removing some trees and so creating a striped appearance when seen from above. The corridors created are about 4-5 metres wide, which is consistent with the felling of all the trees in a single row (see fig. 38). The remaining trees form a 'stripe' of about 15 metres wide.

The management practices visible in Sector A will clearly contribute to points 1 and 2 in the earlier list and because of the way in which thinning has been achieved in-between rows which could only be accessed with low-impact machinery, a feature of point 3. The thinning operations also provide the potential for some degree of "Continuous Cover Forestry". The CCF approach to woodland management gives opportunities to meet many aspects of the ecosystem approach including greater resilience towards climate change, increasing carbon storage, improve resistance to pests and disease and creating wildlife corridors within the forest[18].

Sector B is a relatively large sector to the east of Whinberry Hill and west of the forest road which runs close to the southern edge of the forested area. In the 2009 image, there is a uniform cover of spruce dating from the initial planting in the post-war period. Clearance was under way at the time of the 2018 image in the southern part of the sector. Clearance continued through the following years, and storm damage around 2020 complicated the situation, however by 2025 the whole sector had been clear felled although a line of trees along most of the north side of the

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[17] *Larch is a deciduous conifer so while it bears cones, its needles turn brown in autumn and then drop. While visually attractive for this deciduous characteristic, larch is generally slower growing than spruce and is susceptible to a disease called Phytophthora ramorum.*

[18] *"Continuous cover forestry (CCF) is a nature-friendly and sustainable woodland management approach that brings a variety of benefits to (your) woodland. It involves selectively thinning trees to create a diverse forest structure, thereby producing timber whilst retaining canopy cover."*
The definition is taken from the following FC document which also elaborates on the benefits of CCF -
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/657b1df5254aaa0010050d9f/WMM_benefits_of_continuous_cover_forestry_graphic_Dec_23.pdf

forest road had been left standing. The method of only clearing a proportion of mature trees which is mentioned in point 5 above has not been applied. Since the clear felling has only taken place recently, the full effects of replanting are yet to become visible from aerial images. However, the 2025 image shows that the replanting regime includes some variations. The sector seems to have been divided broadly into two, with the southern part replanted before the northern part. There are also two belts running roughly east to west, one crossing the newly planted area and one on the northern edge of the sector, where a different texture is visible. It remains to be seen whether these belts have been used for different species as in sector A or whether the variation in texture is due to a different cause.

Recently, the managers of the Parish land have learnt that an area of about 40 metres in width along the north-west edge of sector B running up to the Parish land is not going to be replanted. This may be an example of Active Habitat Management (point 2) and perhaps a response to the presence of nightjars in the area and/or the different regime of management being carried out on Whinberry Hill.

Sector C, like all of the land between the perimeter road and the edge of the forest, is on land sloping down to the south and south east. Originally planted in the post-war period the first felling took place in the early years of the 21st century and by 2009 some replanting had taken place. As was observed earlier in relation to both sectors A and B, replanting has not replicated the previous monoculture of spruce. In sector C, there has been some spruce planted but also larch and deciduous species (fig. 39). Some areas have been left unplanted, particularly in the parts lower down, close to the edge of the FC land. In addition, the trees along the boundary have been untouched. The result of these strategies is to create a diverse, varied environment in which some natural regeneration has taken place not only of tree species but also of heather, gorse, bracken and other species (fig. 40). The resulting habitat can be best described as ffridd (see footnote 6 in Section 5 for a fuller description). Sector C exhibits forestry methods which fit within the descriptions listed earlier in points 1, 2 and 4.

Fig. 39 looking south-east from the perimeter road into the area of mixed low density woodland. Scots pine, silver birch, broom and other species can be seen.

Fig. 40 looking from Obley towards the southern corner of Black Hill where a fringe of fridd lies below a stand of spruce.

The three sectors which have been examined in detail here, all point towards an assessment that the FC's approach to managing Black Hill has shifted significantly in response to policies emanating from authorities based in London, Brussels and elsewhere. While the economic objective of producing saleable timber remains central to the way in which Black Hill is managed, sufficient planning and operational activity of an environmental nature has taken place so that environment objectives now clearly hold significant sway when decisions are taken about how to manage the forest. As suggested earlier, it is much too early to make an assessment of the impact of these strategies towards meeting the wider goals which underpin the ecosystem approach, but even now, recent forestry operations have produced a more varied and interesting visual landscape for the small number of visitors to Black Hill.