The history of the Clunbury Parish land on Black Hill (short version)

The history of the parish land on Black Hill can be conveniently divided into three periods corresponding to three different forms of ownership. This short account will use those three periods to provide a structure following an introduction. The last two sections focus on particular aspects about Black Hill. The sections are:-

1. Pre 1854 - when the Black Hill was common land
2. 1854 until 1939 – a period of private ownership
3. 1939 until present day – public ownership
4. A focus on Whinberry Hill
5. Aspects of wildlife

Introduction

Many of the points made in this summary document are elaborated and illustrated by maps, photos or newspaper articles in the full version of the article.

Black Hill in Shropshire, which is the subject of this account, can be confused with physical features elsewhere of the same name. There may also be confusion concerning the setting of the 1982 novel 'On the Black Hill' by Bruce Chatwin. He stayed at nearby Cwm Hall when writing the book, used some local place names e.g. Lurkenhope and probably based some events and characters on people from this area, but the geographical setting for events in 'On the Black Hill' was probably in and around Black Hill on the Breconshire/Herefordshire border.

Section 1 – pre 1854

Little can be said with certainty about Black Hill before the enclosure period except that it was common land and was used for sheep grazing and also as a source of peat. This much can be said due to a declaration document from 1718, now held by Shropshire Archives, which was signed by ten 'freeholders or occupiers' of property in the township of Obley holding commoner's rights, warned those responsible for taking turfs from Black Hill, without having the right to do so, would be subject to legal action. The nominated leader of ten freeholders was Jeremiah Edwards.

Another source from around 1800 also held by Shropshire Archives, is a hand drawn but detailed map which shows the 'sheepwalks' agreed by three landholders. That someone went to the trouble and expense to have these documents produced suggests that turf extraction and grazing were of importance and worthy of a degree of protection. Maps produced later in the 19th century show that there were no dwellings on the common land of Black Hill nor were there any signs of mining activity, unlike many hills a few miles further north. The maps also show several quarries and discontinuous areas of woodland. One can conclude that in addition to grazing and peat, stone and timber would have been extracted.

The first enclosure of common land in England to be authorised by Parliament took place in 1604. This was followed by more than 5,200 bills of Parliament in the next 300 years which together accounted for about one-fifth of the total area of the country. By the time that the Black Hill common was to be enclosed, Parliament had introduced the appointment of commissioners to oversee the process. In the case of Black Hill, Clun and others in south Salop, the Commissioner was William Eyton from Condover near Shrewsbury. He began the process in 1848 and the final document was signed-off in 1854.

In the Award document, Eyton awarded all of the high part of Black Hill common to four existing landowners – the Earl of Powis – 128 acres (Lord of the Manor), Rev C. Swainson – 6 acres (Vicar of Clun and rector of Wistanstow parishes), William EB Vaughan – 183 acres (Cwm Hall), the trustees of the estate of Richard Edwards – 166 acres (Cwm Farm and uncle of William EB Vaughan). In addition, Eyton awarded just over nine acres to the inhabitants of Obley, three acres 'as a place of exercise and Recreation' and six acres 'for the digging, cutting and curing of peats to be used for fuel… within the said township but not for sale or any other purpose'.

The Award document also specifies where fences should be erected, where roads or other routes were to be constructed, where stone could be extracted for the road building and which landowners were to be held responsible for the erection, construction and maintenance of the fences and roads. All of these details were written in the Award document and shown in a detailed map which had been surveyed and drawn specifically for the purpose.

Section 2 – 1854 until 1939

The removal of common status from Black Hill (and also from Lower Hill an adjacent but smaller area of common land) will have been viewed differently by different groups of local residents. The descendants or successors of most of the ten freeholders that signed the Declaration in 1718 which was referred to in Section 1, will have lost grazing opportunities as well as access to timber, stone and peat. Other residents, who may not have had commoner's rights, will have lost the opportunity for foraging for berries, nuts etc. and also access to open space. In general, all these people i.e. the majority of the people of Obley Township can be said to have lost out after the Award.

On the other hand, the four landowners whose land holding was increased by the Award will had a much more positive reaction. Of the four, William Edwards Brettell Vaughan (WEBV) stood to gain the most land, 183 acres from the Award, but that wasn't the limit of his ambitions and the timing of the award was to prove fortuitous for him. This was the case because of a number of family circumstances. As a result of inheritances from his father and two wealthy uncles, William Edwards, aged 49 in 1850 had become enormously wealthy. He had had to adopt the names Brettell and Vaughan, showing that his mother's family was the source of much of the wealth. Most of the wealth was in the form of land and houses including several premises in Ludlow, Bromfield and Montgomeryshire but also in Hatton Gardens and Clerkenwell in London and Virginia, USA. The Cwm Estate was another part of his inheritance, and the newly-named WEBV chose a site within the estate to build a house called Cwm Hall from where the estate would be managed.

The estate was about 340 acres in extent at this stage but during the 1850s, WEBV acquired several other parcels of land. By 1860, after he had bought the Earl of Powis's allocation on Black Hill, the estate was over 750 acres in extent, including an unbroken area of about 450 acres (182 hectares) on Black Hill. Grouse shooting became very popular in England in the mid-19th century and the open moorland of Black Hill was well suited to shooting. Cwm Hall became the lodge at which WEBV and his guests would stay during shooting parties.

When WEBV died in 1884, Cwm Estate passed on to a distant relative for the next 35 years but the way in which Black Hill was used for shooting was unchanged. Though the 1854 Award specified that fences should be erected around the Parish land, the 1905 OS map shows no such demarcation. This is thought to indicate that the original post-enclosure fences had been removed to allow shooting parties to cross unhindered.

An extract from the Estate's Game Register indicates the scale and range of species that were shot –

Year	Plovers	Partridge	Pheasant	Hares	Rabbits	Woodcock	Snipe	Grouse	Black Grouse	Wood Pigeon	Total
1905	2	92	161	6	212	1	2	25	-	40	541

No doubt Black Hill was used for sheep grazing throughout this period but the low fertility of the upland soils means that the grazing will have been low intensity.

The other main use of Black Hill was for harvesting of bilberries aka whinberries. Originally picked for domestic culinary uses (pies, tarts and preserves), these small red/purple berries became a significant money earner for many local families. The harvesting was done by women and children and took place in July and August if the weather had been kind. The harvest was sent by train to Lancashire for use as a dye in the cotton textile industry. Contemporary accounts suggest that the income from the whinberry harvest made a significant difference for many poor families, and a poor harvest would lead to hardship in the following winter. By the time of the Great War, bilberries had been replaced by synthetic materials in the manufacture of dyes.

An incident from 1905 is worthy of note. As the generation of electric power gathered pace in the last part of the 19th century, many sources of heat were tried. The reality of a national grid in Britain did not happen until around 1930, before then power generation, distribution and sale was in the hands of private, often small, companies. In the summer of 1905, Clun Rural District Council considered at length an enquiry made by Edward Brettell Vaughan (EBV), the then owner of Cwm Hall and Black Hill. EBV wished to lease the Parish ground from the council so that it could be used by Messrs. RW Vicarey & Co. for establishing a power generating plant on the site. Presumably, the intention was to use locally cut peat as the source of power. The power would be used to provide lighting in the

streets and houses of Clun. The idea doesn't seem to have got much further than the discussion stage and Clun remained without electric power until after the end of World War 1.

The Edwards family had lived at Cwm and been involved with the Cwm Estate since the 16th century but in 1919 the whole estate including Black Hill was sold to John Jackson, a farmer and industrialist from near Chorley, Lancashire. The change in ownership doesn't seem to have changed the way in which Black Hill was managed or used. Low intensity grazing and shooting remained the order of the day during the interwar years.

Section 3 – 1939 until now

After a dry spring, a major fire took place on Black Hill in June 1939 causing considerable damage to vegetation, wildlife and, perhaps, whatever peat deposits remained. While over 100 local people laboured for over a week to restrict the fire, it was not until rain fell that the fire was brought to an end.

In 1946, John Jackson's son Peter, the then owner of Cwm estate, leased Black Hill to the Ministry of Agriculture who intended to plant coniferous trees across Black Hill. The lease became a permanent sale in 1952 by which time the Forestry Commission (FC) had carried out the Ministry's intention. Since that date, Black Hill has been used solely for forestry. However, there have been some changes to the way in which the forest has been managed which have brought about changes to the visual and natural environments.

Since planting of conifers took place right across Black Hill in the late 1940 and maturity for sitka spruce is reached after about 40 years, monoculture prevailed until around 1980. By then, national and international influences had come to bear. Conservation and environmental considerations were beginning to influence government thinking and the strategic post-war need for tree planting had receded. Parliament passed the Wildlife and Countryside Act in 1981 which directed 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'.* In the case of Black Hill, the trees planted in the 1940s were reaching maturity but until the first clear felling, apart from some strategic thinning, the monoculture of sitka spruce remained.

The first clear felling operations on Black Hill took place in the late 1980s and 1990s. By that time, *sustainability* had become the watchword for decision makers. The principle of balancing social, economic and environmental objectives meant that the FC needed to modify its forest management methods. Some of the forests managed by the FC were easily accessible to larger populations (e.g. Wyre Forest near Kidderminster) and was adapted to welcome large numbers of visitors. Hopton Wood, about 2 miles SE from Black Hill, was suitable to being used for mountain biking and so was adapted accordingly. In such ways, the FC was able to achieve the social aim of sustainability.

Access to Black Hill is poor. When the FC were looking to balance the economic aim of timber production against others, Black Hill suited environmental initiatives rather than social ones. Whilst, no major initiatives such as rewilding or major habitat restoration have been introduced at Black Hill, there have been modifications made in the 21st century to the way in which the forest is managed. These shifts will have been beneficial to some species of wildlife.

In Black Hill, native broadleaf trees have been planted in some sectors which once were entirely spruce. This diversification has taken place particularly in a zone along the southern and eastern edges. The hard edge which the eye sees when stands of a single species are observed, has been replaced by a more varied, softer look. As well as deciduous species, the mix of gorse, heather, bilberry and bracken (known locally as ffridd) has been allowed to recolonise some parts.

In addition, when replanting sectors of coniferous trees, a buffer zone of several metres width has been left at the side of the tracks. These buffers are actively managed by FC workers to prevent self-seeding by the nearby spruce. In this way corridors have been created which can be used by wildlife species as habitats and route ways.

More recently, the principle of sustainability in environmental management has shifted towards a more holistic approach in which an area is viewed as part of a broad ecosystem including land, air, water, and living resources instead of seeing such individual resources, such as a forest, in isolation. One aspect of this approach is the recognition that an ecosystem as a whole can take many years to adjust to change in any one part of the system. So

evidence of the ways that modifications to management practice by the FC may have on the broad ecosystem of Black Hill will not become apparent for some time.

Section 4 – the creation of Whinberry Hill

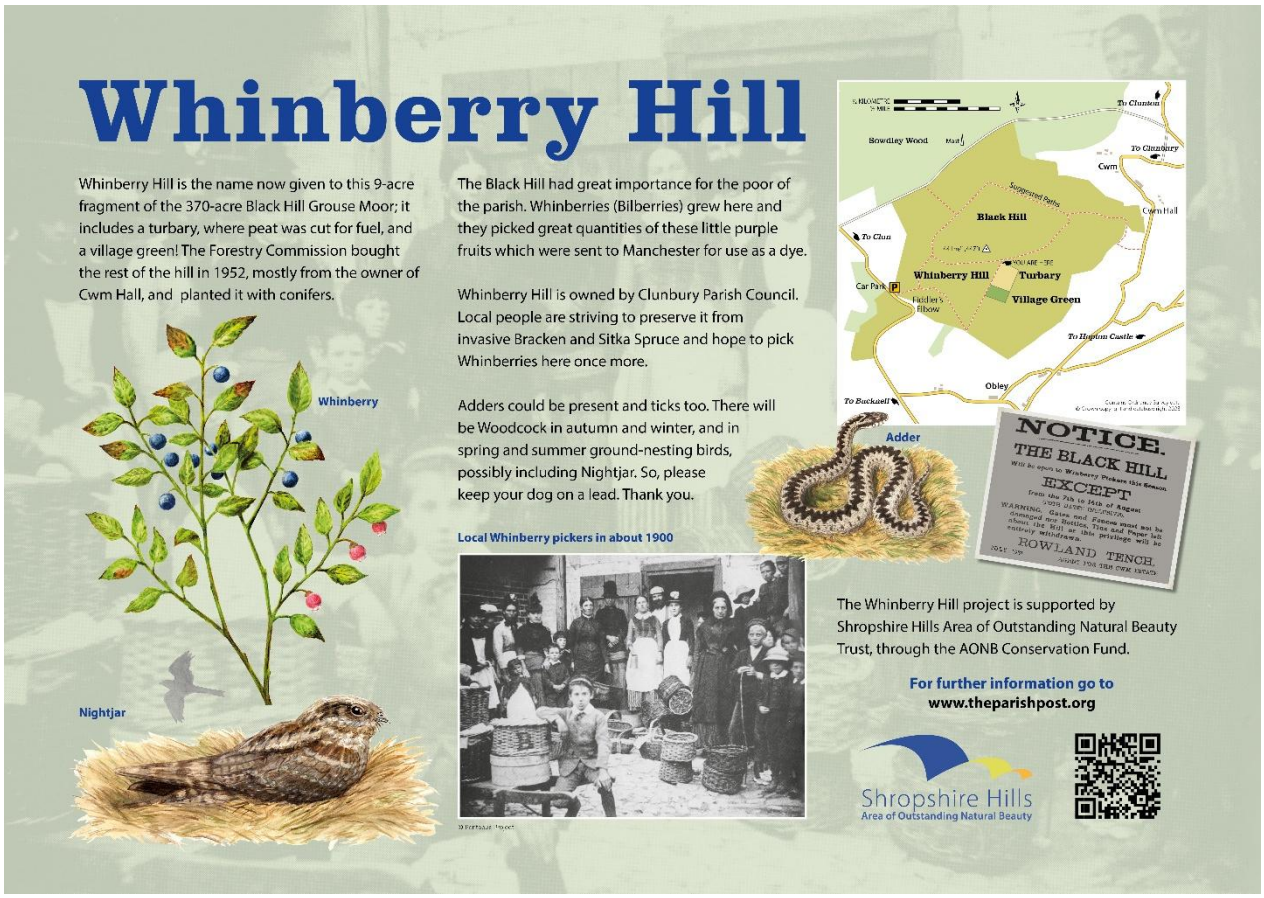
In 2022, Clunbury Parish Council decided to directly manage the nine acres of land for which they had responsibility on Black Hill. Their purpose was to safeguard remaining areas of heather and whinberry and to prevent domination by bracken and invasive conifers. The responsibility was delegated to the Clunbury Climate and Environment Group (CEG).

A felling licence has permitted the felling and clearance of invasive spruce. This work has been carried out on volunteer days or by contractors. As part of the felling licence, 72 mixed broadleaf trees and shrubs have been planted in the NE corner of the plot.

A number of strategies have been used to tackle the annual growth of bracken. The Asulox chemical was applied in 2022. Two mechanical methods, rakes pulled by working horses and a robo-cutter, were used in 2023 and 2024. These trials took place over selected parts of the plot but none have proven to be highly effective. In 2025, the CEG decided to use volunteer groups to cut or bash the bracken using scythes or similar equivalent. This was carried out on four separate occasions during the summer months involving 23 volunteers. Again, the work was only on part of the site. An evaluation of its effectiveness will be made in the future. Regular management of both invasive species will be needed in future years.

Public involvement has been an important benefit of the CEG's activity. As well as volunteer work groups, a pick-nic has been held, when bilberries formed part of the food eaten. Visits from local primary school groups have taken place and an information board has been designed and displayed at a prominent point (see below) to inform pedestrians how Whinberry Hill is being managed.

The costs of the habitat, community and educational measures has been met by grants. Grants have come from the Shropshire Hills Conservation Fund and Farming in Protected Landscapes, both of which are administered by the Shropshire Hills National Landscape formerly known as the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.



Section 5 – wildlife on Black Hill

The contrast between how the Black Hill would have looked in 1946, when it was leased to the Forestry Commission, and how it looks today, 80 years on, could hardly be greater. From being a hill of open heathland it has become one of closed coniferous woodland. Onto what was probably a continuous sward of native heathland plants, a continuous cover of alien conifers has been imposed. Apart, that is, from the 9-acre postage stamp of a holding marooned in the middle – the Parish land. The vegetation that survives here provides pointers as to how the whole hill would have looked, probably for many centuries, before the arrival of blanket coniferous forestry. It is the survival of this tiny vestige that gives it a significance beyond its size. If, however, we go back millennia, the whole area may well have been covered in woodland and scrub (of native species) which was then cleared, providing grazing for domestic animals, whose grazing will thereafter have kept it open.

So, the native plants to be found on Whinberry Hill today tell us what would have been the dominant vegetation right across the unenclosed land of the Black Hill. This would have been a heather-bilberry heathland along with other plants characteristic of this vegetation community such as wavy hair grass, tormentil, heath bedstraw and cow-wheat, with areas of bracken and patches of gorse on deeper soils. There will have been birch and rowan around the fringes, and although in recent times there will have been no deer to nip off tree seedlings, these will have been kept in check by sheep and cattle of hardy native breeds grazing; there will have been rabbits and hares too. However, two riders need stating: we don't know how much wet ground there may have been, nor how much damage was done by the severe fire of 1939.

The Black Hill appears today to be a dry site, but there was a turbary here, so there must have been waterlogged conditions where, over millennia, peat had accumulated. This would suggest significant areas dominated by sphagnum mosses where cotton grass will have flourished, along perhaps with cross-leaved heath, bog asphodel and sundews. Was it here perhaps that the snipe and 'plovers' listed as quarry in the Cwm Estate Game Register (fig. 16) for 1905-1910 were shot? The 'plovers' may have been lapwing or possibly golden plovers, which may have wintered here, while curlews will have arrived each spring to breed.

As to the severe fire of 1939, the newspaper accounts (fig. 26) seem to indicate that no part of the hill was spared. If so, all the vegetation will have been burned off and it is likely that the fire burned into the ground, eating into and fragmenting the surface soils and destroying any accumulations of peat. The fire in Radnor Forest in August 1800 is reported to have burned to a depth of three feet in the turbary; this may have been the case with peat deposits in what is now Whinberry Hill. The vegetation of the hill may have taken some long time to recover. There was severe fire damage to parts of The Stiperstones in 1976, ten years later the worst affected area showed only limited signs of recovery. Upland heathlands like the Black Hill do eventually come good and a mantle of heather and bilberry takes over, but the woodmen who planted the hill from 1947 onwards may have found only a thin covering of heather and whinberry to compete with the conifers they were planting.

But, to return to the time when the Black Hill was referred to and presumably managed as a grouse moor, the Game Register tells us a little bit more about the bird fauna then present. Two species of grouse were shot: red and black. The red grouse will have kept to the open heather habitat of the higher ground, the black grouse ('black game') to the fringe, favouring mosaics of heathland, scattered trees and grassland. The open heather habitat will have been home to meadow pipits and skylarks, and there will have been tree pipits and redstarts in the heathland fringe. Cuckoos would have been a spring-time fixture, parasitising the pipits, and interestingly too, we learn from a newspaper cutting of 1912 that ring ouzel (the upland blackbird) were said to breed.

The gamekeeper employed by the Cwm Estate would have been expected to manage the hill for the benefit of the grouse. He will, in a controlled way, have burned areas of old heather to promote new young shoots, the staple diet of red grouse. And he will have been expected to control any wildlife thought, rightly or wrongly, to endanger the grouse. Buzzards, ravens and all other members of the crow family would have been rigorously controlled, along with any other predatory birds. And foxes, badgers and stoats will have been shot, snared or trapped.

When the Forestry Commission started planting, the red grouse will have deserted the hill, and the black will have moved away as the trees grew taller. The early stages of plantation growth will have seen the arrival of whinchat and willow warbler, linnet and yellow hammer, but as the trees grew, these species will have moved on, and wrens, chaffinches, coal tits and goldcrests will have taken their place. A bird-watcher of the time would have ticked off a greater number of species but will have regretted the loss of the specialist upland birds which were losing out, not just here, but elsewhere in Shropshire, including a few miles west at the head of the catchment in the so-called Clun Forest (where there were in fact few trees). The heather and bilberry will have persisted but then retreated as the shade of the densely planted evergreens intensified, and, as the trees matured, light levels will have declined to such an extent that the woodland floor became bare of herbaceous plants, although the original vegetation still hangs on in places along ride-sides.

But new birds will have started to arrive as the trees matured. Today the sitka spruce plantations provide ideal conditions for breeding siskins, and crossbills appear in some years when they feed heavily on the spruce cones. Coal tits persist and goldcrests too. And given mature trees and little disturbance, goshawks have started to appear.

The Black Hill plantations are sufficiently extensive to have allowed a rotation of felling coupes to be put in place over recent decades. Following felling, the sudden burst of light to the forest floor, coupled with the ground disturbance caused by felling and timber extraction, stimulate the germination of buried seed, notably that of heather. The plants produce millions of seeds some of which can survive for many decades in the soil. So, there is a flush of heather growth, and for a few years this, coupled with the growth of the next generation of planted conifers, provides habitat for nightjars, a very uncommon bird in the county. All being well, as one young plantation gets too tall for the birds, another provides the low dense cover they like. And Whinberry Hill should provide a continuity of suitable habitat for feeding and possibly breeding too. This is a place to come to in spring and summer in the hope of hearing their night-time churring. But come by day if you wish to hear Tree Pipits which like the mix of open ground and scattered trees afforded by Whinberry Hill.