

## CHARNWOOD FOREST – A PLANNING HISTORY

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In this session I intend to take a general overview of the planning history of Charnwood Forest. As the first session of this event, I hope the images shown behind me will remind us of the qualities of the Forest and also some of the issues to be faced.

John Throsby, the antiquarian, writing in 1790 when modernisation was clearly well advanced, said *"This Forest, in which I have frequently delighted on my Excursions in Leicestershire, has many attractions, even now it is devoid of those embellishments it once possessed. When Leland made his observations, it was finely wooded; and not a century ago it was rich in foliage. But notwithstanding that its woods, groves, and lawns, are no more, in which the squirrel sported, and the black-bird and the thrush charmed, where the hart and the deer sheltered in times of danger from the sportsman and the fleet hounds."*



The earliest comprehensive record we are aware of is the Perambulation of 1754. However, the first signs of anyone actually planning the future of Charnwood Forest as an identifiable unit was through the Enclosure Acts of 1808 –1829. These completed the enclosures which had been going on in a mild way from early medieval times "one decided improvement, indeed, was effected by the enclosures in the making of some 30 miles of good roads, giving access to practically the whole area." Anyone who has had the good fortune to use the Enclosure documents kept in the Record Office

FOOTNOTE : *The Perambulation Around Charnwood 1754 map is available from the County Record Office, 0116 257 1080. The map alone costs £1.50 or £3.33 with 2<sup>nd</sup> class postage, £3.50 with 1<sup>st</sup> class postage.*

will be well aware of the scale of the record, two large maps one 42 x 37 inches, the second 29 x 24 and 20 smaller maps of Rothley Plain, buckled up in its large portfolio, Houdini like.

The Leicestershire Regional Planning Report 1932 proposed Charnwood Forest as a National Park. (This report was prepared for the Leicestershire Regional Town Planning Joint Advisory Committee by Allen and Potter – perhaps it's instructive here to comment for the Planners here that planning at least in Leicestershire began a lot earlier than the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act

During the Second World War, John Dower was requested by Government to study the problems relating to the establishment of National Parks in England and Wales. His report in 1945 included Charnwood Forest in his list in the category of "Other Amenity Areas" not suggested as National Parks, but as areas of landscape beauty which merited some form of national protection in the future. Many of these "Other Amenity Areas" later became the conservation areas of high landscape quality, scientific interest and recreational value, which were listed in the July 1947 Report of the National Parks Committee, chaired by Sir Arthur Hobhouse. The area of Charnwood Forest was included in the Hobhouse list, thus confirming the view of the time that national protection for the Forest did indeed have some merit.

After the completion of its National Parks Designation Programme in 1957, the National Parks Commission turned its attention to designating Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), using as an initial guide, the Hobhouse list of conservation areas. The threat posed to Charnwood Forest by the proposed M1 motorway brought forward the consideration of the area as an AONB and in 1958 the National Parks Commission agreed it would hear reports on its suitability as an AONB. In the event, the Commission received three reports during 1958 and 59 with differing views as to its suitability. After reviewing the findings of the first three reports the Commission determined in 1960 that, in the light of the decision of the Ministry of Transport to build the M1 through the Charnwood Forest, that this put paid to the proposal as an AONB. It therefore deleted it from the list of areas to be considered.

In 1971-73 the Countryside Commission, then well into completing the programme of AONB designations, established a review process for the Hobhouse Conservation Areas remaining undesignated. It did briefly review the earlier decision in respect of Charnwood Forest and confirmed this decision.

Turning to the local authority now and local planners view: in 1952 the County Planning Officer, no doubt in part as an aid to the AONB debate, prepared a report for the Planning Committee of the County Council has much to say about the issues relating to the Charnwood Forest, which are relevant today -this is a lengthy but important extract from his book, so please bear with me.

*"Charnwood is unique in more than scenic and geological value. No book devoted to descriptions of the beauty spots of this country is complete without some mention of Charnwood, while it has been included as an area worthy of special consideration both in the Dower Report on National Parks and in the later report of the National Parks Committee. Compared with the majority of the areas referred to in these reports Charnwood is relatively small in extent. In fact it is reasonable to suppose that its limited size would probably have resulted in its being excluded from the selected amenity areas considered on a national basis unless it had outstanding claims to notice by virtue of its scenic and geological merit.*

*There is a constant desire on the part of many people whose work is in Leicester to find a site for a house on the Forest, while the mineral value of some of the rock formations leads to demands for adding still further to the existing quarries. Outright allowance of the demands of the holiday makers without regard to the interests of the farmers would react to the detriment of agriculture. The result would be ill-kept fields, ragged hedges, frequent gaps in stone walls and a look of rural desolation which would make the area less attractive to the holiday maker whose enjoyment would eventually be reduced by an endeavour to meet his wishes.*

*To meet fully all the conflicting demands in such a small area without largely destroying its charm and attraction would be an impossibility. The planning authority faces an extremely difficult and delicate task in endeavouring, as it must, to hold the balance between frequently conflicting interests.*

*The problem appears to require a carefully designed policy, thoughtfully administered and aimed at securing the ultimate greatest good for the greatest number."*

In the absence of AONB designation the important Planning Policy documents since that time have been the Structure Plan and the various Local Plans that affect the area. The Structure Plan is about to disappear but provides continuing support for the policy which has existed over the last 30-40 years, which has been to divert large attractions to sites outside the Forest to reduce public

pressure upon it and to actively support the development of such attractions elsewhere. The approved Structure Plan up until 2005 contained a policy that recognised parts of the County, including the whole of Charnwood Forest, as Areas of Particularly Attractive Countryside. Following advice from the Countryside Agency (as was) and changed guidance from Government that, other than for national designations, which should be given special protection, other, more local designations were no longer appropriate and that countryside should be valued for its own sake and its own inherent character. This position is emphasised by the new Government White Paper 'Planning for a Sustainable Future, published last month which says in Para 1.14 :

"Continuing economic growth and the need to build more homes puts pressure on the environment and natural resources. Planning has a role to protect and enhance the quality, character and amenity value of the countryside and urban areas as a whole, through positive policies. A high level of protection should be given to our most valued townscapes and landscapes, wildlife habitats and natural resources; and those with international and national designations should receive the highest level of protection."

The new Structure Plan from March 2005 therefore no longer contains a special Area of Particularly Attractive Countryside policy. However, leaning on the Countryside Character approach a policy is provided that, within the area, the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty and character of the landscape should be given priority over other planning considerations. For the future however, with the Structure Plan to disappear in March 2008, the important Land Use Planning documents will become the Regional Spatial Strategy and the Local Development Frameworks.

In the Regional Spatial Strategy Three Cities SRS, Policy 6 Green Infrastructure and the National Forest states, *"In considering major development proposals, especially those associated with the New Growth Point proposals, Local Authorities and implementing agencies will co-ordinate the provision of enhanced and new green infrastructure.*

*Strategic priorities include:*

- *The National Forest;*
- *A proposed Charnwood Forest Regional Park;*
- *A proposed Trent River park;*
- *Green Wedges; and*
- *Community Forest proposals and 'greenways' around Leicester..."*

Given that Regional Parks are undefined this policy seems to me to create an opportunity to create an approach specifically tailored for the Charnwood Forest if there is a consensus that some form of

Charnwood Forest centred organisation is needed for the future. The Lee Valley Regional Park gives us one example – a more local example may be given by the achievements in the Nene Regional Park in Northamptonshire which is developing a distinctive identity linked to the large scale growth which the Government's Sustainable Communities Plan has generated. We have a similar opportunity in Charnwood Forest given the scale of housing and employment growth proposed in the Regional Spatial Strategy, which is currently being debated at its Examination in Public in Leicester at present.

## **Local Plans**

Each of the three Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) has an adopted Local Plan which contains a policy relating to Charnwood as an Area of Particularly Attractive Countryside, a designation no longer supported by the new Structure Plan or by Natural England's Character Area approach.

Each LPA is now required to prepare a Local Development Framework and it is fair to say that the new process is not simple and it will be some time before the nature of the new policies for Charnwood Forest will become clear. As such there is an opportunity to include policies for Charnwood Forest that flow out of today's conference and that while treating Charnwood's landscapes on their own merits also recognise the national importance that the area has.

There are three other factors that I want to highlight as impacting on planning in the Forest. These are the Natural Areas identified originally by English Nature (now Natural England), the Countryside Character Areas originally identified by the Countryside Agency, now also Natural England, and, third, the National Forest, which overlaps considerably with the Charnwood Forest.

It is significant that the Natural Area Maps and the Countryside Character Area Maps both identify Charnwood Forest as a distinct area. The two maps have been brought together in the Joint Character Area Maps and are a widely recognised national spatial framework, used for a range of applications. Examples include the targeting of Defra's Environmental Stewardship scheme and the Countryside Quality Counts project. JCAs form part of the data gathered for a Landscape Character Assessment.

## National Forest

The National Forest has undoubtedly had a huge and beneficial impact on parts of Charnwood Forest over the last 10 years or so. The scale of increasing woodland cover from 6% to 17% coupled with an enormous improvement in public access has clearly been an improvement for the visitor and has attracted many more visitors to the general area. Any impact on special sites for biodiversity has generally been carefully avoided. The woodland planting has meant reduced disturbance to large areas with a consequent burgeoning of ground flora. There has at the same time though been a certain loss of identity for Charnwood Forest given the scale of promotion of the National Forest. Although part of Charnwood Forest is outside the National Forest the question needs to be asked whether the best future for Charnwood Forest is simply as part, albeit a special part, of the National Forest?



## Conclusions

In conclusion we seem once again to be at a crossroads (for Charnwood Forest). The Planning Policy context is changing – the levels of protection that can be provided by local planning policy have been diminished. The change likely to be imposed on the area as a result of the continuing national importance of the Forest for stone extraction, as a place to live and work and continuing agricultural change will continue to put pressures on this undoubtedly nationally important landscape. The opportunities to manage the area creatively however are still there. AONB processes are still in place even if they have not been kind to Charnwood in the past. Some AONBs are smaller than Charnwood (eg The Scillies and Arnside) and others (eg the Chilterns) have had motorways built through them, and there may be merit in having another

attempt at designation. At the same time, the RSS Regional Park proposal gives us an opportunity to cast Charnwood in a different light -There will be other opportunities, which we will hear from Geoff Sansome later. Our job today is to consider these options, come to preliminary views as the starting point in a process which will find a modern solution to a dilemma which has been with us - not as long as the Forest - but as long as Throsby and his predecessors appreciated its great beauty and vulnerability.

## WHY CHARNWOOD FOREST IS IMPORTANT

Tony Squires, Landscape Historian

This presentation was illustrated with photographic slides by Tony Squires and Peter Gamble.

Most visitors are attracted to upland Charnwood Forest because it is pleasingly different from the landscape of that of the remainder of the county and indeed of most of lowland England.

The resulting geology of the area's very distant volcanic past is the basis of this difference. The very old, hard pre-Cambrian rocks are visible as jagged peaks protruding through the overlying Mercian Mudstones (formerly Keuper Marl), for example at Ives Head and at Charnwood Lodge where the Bomb Rocks are the chief reason the area has been designated as a National Nature Reserve.

The soils of Charnwood are predominantly acid, shallow, stony, ill-drained and infertile and therefore of low agricultural value. The climate too is noticeably wetter, cooler and more overcast. Perhaps not surprisingly the natural flora and fauna have strong links with the wildlife of the highlands of north and north-west England rather than with the Midlands and the south. The development of this upland island of approximately 40 square miles, isolated in the Midland plain has, until recently, lagged behind that of the more fertile and less challenging areas of Leicestershire. For this and other reasons the links between the natural and cultural aspects of the present landscape can be readily appreciated.

I begin by selecting just a few of the distinctive habitats which account for much of the area's surviving rich flora and fauna.

This is Ulverscroft, one area of the patchwork of heathland which, for many visitors, epitomises wild Charnwood. Here are heather, cross-leaved heath and bilberry, together with a rich variety of associated vertebrate and invertebrate species. There is acid grassland too, at Cademan Moor and at Charnwood Lodge. Both habitats, unless managed properly, are always under threat from woodland regeneration.

Next there is meadow along the Ulverscroft Valley which is particularly rich in wildlife. Here Herbert's Meadow supports such species as Fragrant Orchid, Meadow Buttercup, Meadow Saxifrage and a great deal more besides.

The woodlands of Charnwood are very special. Here are the Outwoods where trees have occupied the site for more than 900 years, since the Domesday Book of 1086. They owe their continuity and survival to the fact that they sit on a pre-Cambrian spine which has made the site unsuitable for any form of agriculture. The same remarks about continuity apply also to Buddon Wood, seen here before the commencement of mining in the 1970s. Swithland Wood must also be mentioned. Most visitors know it as a particularly fine bluebell wood and it is one of the finest SSSIs in the Midlands. However, it has a secret; it sits almost entirely on ridge and furrow, the ploughland of our medieval ancestors.

This is the River Lyn. Like most of the streams of Charnwood it is largely unpolluted, fast flowing and well-oxygenated. It flows over a rocky bed which has deep pools and streamside alders. It is home to the brown trout, minnow, bullhead, brook lamprey, crayfish and much else. Charnwood streams are rich in invertebrate life, particularly stoneflies and caddisflies. The Lyn's cultural history will be touched on later.

Groby Pool is believed to be slate workings which became flooded in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century. Over the intervening years it has acquired an amazingly rich aquatic flora and fauna. Other larger lakes are Blackbrook, Cropston and Swithland Reservoirs. These are 19<sup>th</sup> century creations but, provisions for drinking water apart, they make a major contribution to the wildlife, particularly the birdlife, and to the aesthetic appeal of the Forest.

It is worth mentioning that on Charnwood there are :

- ❖ all the county's nine species of amphibians and reptiles;
- ❖ eighty-five species of breeding birds, together with another seven probables;
- ❖ most of the mammal species of the East Midlands;
- ❖ twenty-one of the species of spider found in the county are confined to the Forest;
- ❖ a truly impressive list of beetles and other insects;
- ❖ a very long and impressive list of flowering and lower plants which we can't even begin to consider here.

By any set of criteria, Charnwood is important for wildlife.

Now for some remarks on the cultural landscape.

A site in Bradgate Park provides clear evidence of man's presence in the area in Palaeolithic times. Mesolithic activity is evident at Grace Dieu and in the vicinity of the present Mount St Bernard's Abbey. Buddon Hill and Beacon Hill are sites of Bronze Age and/or Iron Age

settlements and I for one am confident there are further prehistoric sites waiting to be recognised.

However, the overwhelming body of evidence for man's activity on the landscape begins in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, immediately after the Norman Conquest. This map gives an impression of the exploitation and development by Charnwood's manorial lords between about 1066 and 1530 and the routes along which development took place. In brief :

- ❖ There are remains of a castle at Groby which has links with late Anglo-Saxon England. The site was later adapted to become a medieval garden, the remains of which survive to this day. There is also a castle site at Whitwick.
- ❖ In the 12<sup>th</sup> century a number of religious houses such as those at Ulverscroft, Grace Dieu and the tiny Alderman's Haw appeared. Their remains and surroundings still allow one to travel back in the mind's eye to the Charnwood of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century before they were all dissolved.
- ❖ There are considerable remains of assarts, ancient enclosures from the waste made by pioneer farmers in the Middle Ages - that at Ley Meadow still has its enclosure bank and the moat which enclosed the house of its keeper. Charnwood is rich in moated sites, from the prehistoric one at Bardon to the Victorian renovation at Moat Farm at Loughborough.
- ❖ Around the edge of Charnwood in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries appeared a string of hunting parks. Those at Quorn and Bardon were established, as much as anything, to conserve declining Domesday Book woodlands.
- ❖ The signs of slate and granite extraction are clearly visible. There are abandoned slate pits deep in Swithland Wood, and there are more difficult to miss granite quarries at Markfield and Buddon.
- ❖ There are a small number of modest stately homes such as Beaumanor and a range of delightful vernacular buildings such as those at Woodhouse and Newtown Linford.
- ❖ Charnwood has a canal, long disused, and two railways, one of which has a new lease of life as the Main Line Steam Trust.
- ❖ The effects of the parliamentary Enclosure Act of 1808 are spread across the Forest – a pattern of rectangular fields, straight roads and field ponds.

The remainder of Leicestershire shows many of these features too, but they are often few and far between, much changed and recognised with difficulty. And remember, Charnwood is an area of only forty or so square miles.

The River Lyn deserves a special mention because only recently has research, soon to be published, revealed its complex history. This

modest stream rises near Ulverscroft and flows for about ten miles before falling into the Soar at Quorn. Along that course it has, in linear rather than chronological order :

- ❖ met all the watery needs of one monastery;
- ❖ was diverted in a major way in order to serve a large water meadow;
- ❖ powered a corn mill;
- ❖ flooded a second large water meadow;
- ❖ filled fish ponds;
- ❖ delivered fresh water to the former Bradgate House and its mill;
- ❖ flooded a third meadow;
- ❖ fed a moated site and fishponds (now under Swithland Reservoir);
- ❖ provided the water for a third water mill;
- ❖ and was dammed to create a lake for a 19<sup>th</sup> century park.

An astonishing journey through time.

And then there is Bradgate, surely the jewel in the crown. It scores highly against any set of criteria, natural or cultural, one cares to adopt. It is indeed a national treasure, but for many reasons, not least inadequate funding, it remains a landscape under pressure and one with an uncertain future.

To describe Charnwood we can do no better than adopt the Rutland county motto – *Multum in parvo*, Much in little.

From a number of points of view Charnwood is so different from the rest of the county and the East Midlands. At the same time it clearly and comprehensively demonstrates continuity and change over the centuries. The result has been, with a few exceptions (notably the motorway), a beautiful landscape where the many expressions of man's endeavours have come together in remarkable harmony. It is also worth remembering that this wonderful landscape is the result of the decisions made in the past by individuals using the land in many different ways and for their own ends. Now the decisions about the future are in the hands of groups of planners who serve a very varied collection of very different interests. It is a very great responsibility.