



Wyre Forest Study Group

Hedgewick : From Manorial Waste to Forest Community

STUART DAVIES

Introduction

'Far Forest' was a name that does not appear in official records before 1840. Most of the area that we now think of as Far Forest was in fact made up of two wastes or commons called Great Hedgewick and Little Hedgewick. All that survives today to remind us of this are two farm names. But these place names are our link back hundreds of years into the Middle Ages.

The basic local unit of ownership and administration in the Middle Ages was the manor. Each manor originally had a mixture of land uses and had its wastes. The wastes were not areas of unproductive land. They were areas of wood-pasture (rough grassland populated by single or small groups of trees) held in common by the tenants of the manor. Indeed, in time the word 'waste' was replaced by 'common'. They supplied grazing for the manorial tenants' animals and could be an important source of firewood or wood for hurdles or repairing implements and so on. They were a common asset but governed by a set of rules to ensure that they were enjoyed fairly by all and not devalued by reckless abuses such as over-grazing or taking wood for more than personal use. These rules were enforced in the manorial courts, whose proceedings and decisions were recorded on parchment rolls known as the court rolls.

The manor of Bewdley and the other manors within which the forest lands lay, had a number of wastes. Some are still well known to us today, including Pound Green and Cooks Green. Others are less associated with commons, including Buckridge and Alton. They were the starting point for colonisation of the forest, creating the forest edge communities which are characteristic of the Wyre Forest today.

In most cases the commons have simply been nibbled away at various periods since at least the sixteenth century. These 'encroachments' as they are often described in the documents, usually consisted of a dwelling, a garden and a close of land (a hedged field) where a cow or two might be grazed. It is quite difficult to be precise about when encroachments occur and therefore map the steady erosion of the commons.

More spectacularly, in at least one case a whole coppice has disappeared under the pressure to build homes and bring land into cultivation. You will not find 'Handleys Binde' on any modern map. It has long since disappeared. 'Binde' is an archaic term for a coppice. Who Handley was is not known. Handleys Binde was at the eastern extremity of the Crown Woods and part of the Wyre Forest. It abutted upon the borough of

Bewdley boundary, in the vicinity of Barkhill. From at least the sixteenth century Handleys Binde was being colonised by Bewdley people. A survey of encroachments carried out in 1635 reveals that the process was well advanced.

By the time a survey of the forest was carried out in 1834, the surveyors were able to note that although 64 acres of lands were still described as being part of Handleys Binde, in fact there was no coppice left. Indeed, the surveyors said that they had investigated this and were of the opinion that the coppice had been 'grubbed up' by as long ago as 150 years before – in other words before 1700. There may be other examples of this around the forest, although it was the proximity to a growing town like Bewdley that created the spectacular extinction in this case.

Hedgewick

Hedgewick (often spelt 'Hedgwick') waste or common is – or was – located in a detached part of the manor, at the western end. Unfortunately, we do not have any exact description of the boundaries of Hedgewick. Nor do we know the precise relationship between 'great' and 'little' hedgewick, frequently referred to in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But it seems likely that the two were divided by Yarrons Coppice, Little Hedgewick being bounded by Yarrons Farm on the North West and Yew Tree Farm (near the church) on the South West.

It is possible to speculate, with reasonable confidence, that the boundaries of the waste may originally have been the same as the western outlier of the manor. The northern edge was probably the Dowles Brook and the western edge the Lem Brook. The southern boundary – where the waste may have narrowed considerably – being possibly formed by a short stretch of the main road between Cleobury Mortimer and Bewdley, at the point where the modern village of Far Forest is accessed. The eastern boundary is much more difficult to be sure of. It may be formed by the Brand Lodge and Doghanging coppices, or possibly a block of copyhold lands which extend westwards from the coppices. Whatever the precise boundaries, Hedgewick was a substantial area of waste or common in the Middle Ages.

A survey of encroachments upon the manorial wastes carried out in 1635 reveals a number of instances at Hedgewick, going back over a period of time. These are shown in the table overleaf.

Date	Description	Granted to	Granted by	Comments
Unknown	One cottage and 4 or 5 acres of land	[Edmond Bishop]		Bishop described as a husbandman of Great Hedgewick aged 77
1612	One parcel 30 acres of waste ground lying in Little Hedgewick	John Brasier	Bailiff and Burgesses of Bewdley	Now in occupation of Charles Mills
1613	One parcel 11 acres of waste ground in Hedgewick	John Viccaris the elder	Bailiff and Burgesses of Bewdley	
1613	One parcel 40 acres of waste ground in Great Hedgewick	Bartholomew Beale	Bailiff and Burgesses of Bewdley	
c.1617	Tenement and four acres	[John Walker]		
1622	Four acres in Hedgewick	Lewis Alsburie	Sir Edward Blount	Paid fine of £4 and rent of 1x s. pa to B & B of Bewdley. Described as husbandman of Great Hedgewick, aged 66
1624	Four acres of waste ground "in a place called Hedgewick"	Michael Boxe	Sir Edward Blount	

These seven examples over a dozen years or so give us several clues as to what was going on in the early seventeenth century. When the Bailiff and Burgesses of Bewdley leased the right to make grants, three parcels of the wastes were granted to men with familiar Bewdley names. When Sir Edward Blount was lessee, two grants each of four acres were made. The four acre inclosure – elsewhere said to be the equivalent of a ‘burgage’ – appears to have been the basic smallholding unit. Those who received their land – or who had their enclosures legally ratified – by being formally entered on the manorial court roll, paid a one-off fee (the ‘fine’) and an annual rent, but had some security of tenure.

The other two had no such security. Edmond Bishop held, in 1635, one cottage, ‘lying in great Hedgewick w[hi]ch he built upon the waste land there and hath inclosed thereabouts 4 or 5 acres of land without any grante for the same or paying any rent’. Similarly, John Walker held 4 acres of land lying in Great Hedgewick, which he had inclosed out of the waste there and erected a tenement upon it without any copy [of court roll] or grant of the same and has ‘enjoyed’ it for the last 18 years.

A number of local witnesses, including Edmond Bishop, husbandman of Great Hedgewick, aged 77, and Lewis Alesburie, also husbandman of Great Hedgewick, aged 66, gave evidence that they had known of ‘divers inclosures and encroachments’ made upon the woodland ground and coppices in Great Hedgewick, Little Hedgewick, Lynall, Goodmore, Barkhill, Handlyes Bynde and other places within the manor. These had been permitted by the Bailiff and Burgesses of Bewdley and other farmers [meaning those who leased the right to take income from the manor] of the manor. All swore that in the past 20 years (ie since about 1615) there had been ‘great spoils made of timber trees and underwoods’ in those places. Timber trees had been cut down, coppices and underwoods had been grubbed or stocked up and the soil converted to tillage and pasture, and measures for preserving new

growth in the coppices from the attention of cattle had been neglected. The witnesses estimated that the cost to the Crown had been between £800 and £2,000.

Squatting

In recent years ‘squatting’ has become defined as the illegal occupation of premises left vacant by their owners. The squatters pay no rent and are difficult to remove once they have established themselves. Often, if the squatters stay long enough, the owners will reach an agreement with them and they will acquire proper title to the premises or at least regularise their position by becoming legal tenants paying a rent.

There are only some similarities with the longer established definition and description of squatting. Peter Brears – in *Traditional Food in Shropshire* (2009) – has described, based on nineteenth century Shropshire texts, the popular image of squatting on wastes or common land : ‘...these squatters’ cottages represented the long-established tradition of converting open common land into enclosed holdings. Anyone who wished to build one gathered his family and friends on the intended site at nightfall, some then cutting the green turf into squares, which others used to build up the walls. A previously prepared roof was then set on top and thatched with either straw or rushes. To ensure good title to the land, the fire had to be lit inside and the smoke seen to rise before sunrise. Standing at the doorpost, the new occupant now hurled his axe as far as he could, planting a hedge on the line where it fell, to enclose the plot which he could now bring under cultivation.’ Whether these ‘wretched huts’ – as they were called in a report of 1820 – were all like this or all had such origins remains a matter of speculation, but George Griffith, writing of a visit to Far Forest in 1840, speaks of people living in ‘huts’ and hovels.

Local people identify small plots of land with being originally ‘squatter’ properties. None of course have



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their original buildings on and indeed many now have modern bungalows and the like. But there is a strong belief in these areas that many houses today had their distant origin as illegal squats on the commons.

Not all the cottages erected on the forest-edge wastes and commons in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were illegal or clandestine. In 1668, for example, the parishioners of Abberley petitioned the County Quarter Sessions magistrates that Margaret Taylor be allowed to erect a cottage on the common and in 1692 the parishioners of Lindridge likewise petitioned that William Grove needed somewhere to live and asked permission for him to erect a house on Frith Common. The need to build new homes was a significant pressure upon the commons.

The timing of colonisation and the speed of it was directly related to the growth in the population. When the number of people needing homes, food and fuel increased, the pressure on the commons increased – because the commons were regarded as a shared resource which anyone was entitled to benefit from. This was not of course strictly true. The commons were only shared by those who were legal tenants of the manor. But enforcing this law was very difficult and it was inevitable that the commons would be encroached upon and eventually disappear.

In many places the final ‘enclosing’ of the commons was achieved by a complex agreement involving an Act of Parliament, known as an Inclosure Act. There are hundreds of these around the country between about 1780 and about 1820. At Hedgewick there was no such Act of Parliament. Between 1787 and 1840 the remainder of Great Hedgewick was enclosed either by some local agreement or simply by the encroaching process. We do not know.

The 1840 Survey

The 1840 Survey of the Manor states:

‘In that part called or known by the name of “The Far Forest” is a considerable part which was heretofore Uninclosed Land called Hedgewick Common nearly all of which has since these maps were made, been inclosed by the Lessee or his Sublessees ...’

The 1840 Survey – of “The Far Forest & Hedgewick Common” – helpfully also details both additions to existing holdings since 1787 as well as entirely new enclosures. It shows that what was left of Great Hedgewick common in 1787 was virtually all enclosed and in individual ownership by 1840. The table below shows what was done between 1787 and 1840 and gives a flavour of how the landscape developed at that period. Much of what had been established by 1840 can still be recognised in the landscape today.

The pattern of a large number of smallholdings of about 4 acres or less, some a little more and very occasionally one of 20 acres and above, was well established by 1840 and is not substantially different today.

The Far Foresters

Those who have carved out their homes and livelihoods from the wastes or commons had a reputation for being independent-minded and suspicious of both outsiders and authority. So what was the character of those who had colonised Hedgewick in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Many of the inhabitants were smallholders, probably combining keeping pigs and a cow or two with wage labour on larger farms, working in the woods and making forest products such as besoms and baskets. This lifestyle would encourage independence. Even the farms were relatively small – 30 or 40 acres being the largest.

We do have one extraordinary account which gives one side of the story and an extreme view at that. In 1840 George Griffith and two Bewdley men were appointed to collect a local tax in ‘that lawless district’, Far Forest. Griffith’s account of his experience, published in his book *Going to Market Places and Grammar Schools* (London, 1870), is memorable and includes this description of the Far Foresters, as they were known :

‘The condition and manners of most of these peculiar people were very primitive; they were besom makers by general report, but with many of them, poaching, sheep-stealing, and marauding in the neighbourhood, occupied a great portion of their time. Their stock-in-trade consisted of wood-cutting tools and besom trucks, whilst here and there a more respectable member owned a donkey. Education was quite unknown, and marriages and giving in marriage formed no part of their domestic economy. The coats, breeches, and vests of the grown-up sons were of many colours, and as to their hats the Irish “caubeens” were genteel in comparison. Some of the house or rather hut-holders had a pig, some had two, and from a neighbourly dread of exchange or misappropriation, these useful animals and the donkeys occupied the “butt ends” of the huts.’

Griffith and his fellows spent a long day in the forest and failed to collect a penny. The male heads of household made themselves scarce and the women abused and threatened them. ‘We were ... told that we had better have stopped at home to mind our own business (which we certainly should have been very glad to do), and that if we dared to come again we must be sure to bring our coffins with us, for we should never quit the Forest again in our shoes’. They retreated to the Mopsons Cross Inn (today called the Royal Forester) for food and warmth.

Griffith observed that the community was – probably out of choice – quite isolated. He wrote ‘...with the exception of being visitors occasionally to neighbouring towns



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Lessee	Description	Occupier	Quantity <small>(acres/rodds/perches)</small>
Jacob Smith	Encroachments near Wheatsheaf incl. Small one since 1787	Smith	1-12-0
Messrs Lea	Thatched Cottage called Kites Nest plus closes and encroachment	Widow Jones	4-10-0
John Bore	House and Barn. Three dwellings added after 1787	Bore	6-0-0
James Adams	Thatched Cottage and tiled barn plus closes	Wm Winwood	9-0-0
John Williams	Tiled cottage and lands. One small enclosure added after 1787	Williams	8-0-0
Joseph Williams	Tiled Cottage called Rats Hill. (0-0-9).House, building, lands and coppice added after 1787	[blank]	6-0-0
Butler	Tiled House, thatched shed, thatched cowhouse, house & garden, thatched cottage	Butler	11-10-0
Thos Sheffield	Thatched cottage, barn and two acres; three enclosures added after 1787	Sheffield	4-0-0
Joseph Trow	House, thatched cottage, stable, barn; garden and site of cottage; closes and enclosures including three small ones added after 1787.	Trow	35-0-0
George Palmer	Thatched cottage; thatched cottage and close at [check];small piece open to Hedgewick	Palmer	3-10-0
Ann Jones	Thatched cottage and closes; small enclosure added after 1787	Jones	8-0-0
Isaac Morris	Tenements and closes; Site of cottage	Morris	4-4-0
Wm Wilson	Thatched cottages	Sam Getting	2-1-0
Late Powell	Thatched cottage & garden	Late Powell	1-15-0
Wm Handley	Brick & tiled Dwelling House & Piggery		4-10-0
Thos Dovey	Thatched farm house & barn; two thatched cottages	Dovey	26-0-0
Richard Fletcher	Thatched cottage, stable, piggery; Tiled cottage; closes; some small additions after 1787.		11-0-0
Widow Fletcher	House, Barn, Cowhouse and Land – all (?) post-1787	Herself	6-0-0
George Payne	Thatched Farmhouse, barn, Cartshed [] and closes (three amounting to over 4 acres post-1787)	Payne	18-10-0
W. Green	Thatched cottage, barn, stable, piggery coppice and pieces	Green	15-0-0
Thos Green	House, pigsty & land – all after 1787	Green	6-0-0
Wm Mole	Small house & land; Closes; House, barn, stable. All after 1787	Mole	8-0-0
Thos Mole	House, Barn, Stable and Closes. All after 1787	Mole	6-10-0
John Smith	Building and Land. All after 1787	Smith	1-3-29
James Bore	Barn and Land. All after 1787	Bore	3-2-20
Jos Oliver	House. All after 1787	Jas Bore	0-2-5
Richd Hudson	House and Lands. All after 1787	Hudson	1-1-33
Richd Green	House and Land. All after 1787	Green	0-4-37
Josh Green	Close. All after 1787	Self	0-0-28
Rich Mantle	Three Closes. All after 1787	Cleeton	2-4-18
John Winwood	House and Closes. All after 1787	Bradley	0-2-30

with their trucks or donkey loads of besoms, they might as well have had an impassable wall built around their forest colony'. Griffith's account may be a little soured by his bad day in the forest but the reputation for the Far Foresters being a distinctive community certainly endured into the twentieth century, as witnessed by Francis Brett Young's novel, *Far Forest*. Therefore it is quite possible that both the landscape and the reputation of the Far Foresters was shaped in the two hundred and fifty years when they gradually colonised the Hedgewick wastes.

Can we find out more ?

There is one way of finding out more about how Hedgewick common disappeared and indeed how

similar forest wastes and commons were enclosed. The deeds of properties in these areas may hold vital clues. These deeds are usually still in the hands of the property owners. If you have any deeds or know of where there are some, please contact the author (stuartwdavies@btinternet.com or 07821 382 998) or the editor of the *Wyre Forest Review*.

Another important source of local history is the stories that people tell about their own lives and experiences and things which they have been told. It would be very helpful to get a programme of interviews off the ground in order to record these memories. For that volunteers to both be recorded and do the recording are needed. Please do not hesitate to get in touch.