

The Helford River woods

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This is oak country -

“ The trees have an astonishing variety of size and shape. They hang down over the low cliffs. Alongside the little pills (creeks), they grow out horizontally over the water for forty feet or more. Within the woods are whole hillsides covered with bluebells, jungles of holly, sudden headlong

●●●● The Helford River Woods

After the last Ice Age, Britain was colonised from the south and east by trees. In Cornwall the ancient wildwood that developed consisted of huge swathes of predominantly elm, hazel and oak. Their distribution was determined by soil fertility; elm on the most fertile, oak on the least. Other less dominant trees: service, small-leaved lime and cherry, were scattered throughout the woods.

During the Late Stone Age, people began to clear the trees to make way for agriculture. By the time of the Iron Age peoples, we know that there was a large population living and

working around the Helford River. Their hillforts and rounds pepper the surrounding countryside. Only the most inaccessible woods on the steepest valley and seaward slopes were left intact. These remnants of the wildwood, being on the poorest soils, were oakwoods and some still remain today and have been worked continuously for hundreds of years. Most of the woods are inaccessible to the public. There are few footpaths here, though badgers and foxes create a network of purposeful routes through even the densest of cover.

Three hundred years ago, things were very different. The Helford Woods formed a large factory for charcoal production. There was much less woodland than now and everything was put to use. Plots, or coups, of trees around the wood were cut down in rotation. They were then burnt in kilns to produce charcoal for smelting tin and later for burning lime to improve the local acidic soils. The cut stems, or stools, rapidly regenerated, with fresh growth springing into life. After a few years these stems were cut



ravines, and bottomless swamps of golden saxifrage. Polypody ferns grow far overhead in the crowns of giant corkscrew oaks ninety feet high. A few yards away, on the other side of the ridge, the oaks are so dwarf that a tall man looks out over their tops. Ribbons of woodland, dark and complicated and often impenetrable, run from the pills up the valley and far over the hills. ♡
(Oliver Rackham: 'The Helford River Woods.' 1987)



and the whole cycle began again. For centuries this process, known as coppicing, was the traditional form of woodland management here. We know, for example, that coppicing took place in Merthen, Gweek, Bonallack and Calamansack Woods from as early as the 1300s. In places the stools are several feet

wide, indicating the great age to which trees can live when regularly coppiced. Scattered throughout the woods are flat areas scraped into the hillside to form the base for the charcoal hearths. Rummaging around in the surface of these hearths often unearths





of charcoal. Except in parts of the National Trust's woodlands, coppicing has long since ceased.

The woods have a rich and diverse wildlife. In spring and early summer there are spectacular displays of bluebells, dotted with the white of wood anemone and the pink of campion. Scattered here and there are rarer native plants like the lovely wild service tree. The mild humid conditions

are ideal for ferns, mosses, lichens and liverworts. Usually unobtrusive and scarcely noticed, here they are in such profusion that trees are clothed in green/grey hues. Buzzards and sparrowhawks patrol the area from their nesting sites, deep within the trees. Finches, tits and woodpeckers are much in evidence as they go about their busy lives. Small and larger mammals: voles, mice, foxes and badgers, are

fleetingly seen or noticed only by their tracks.

Other woods have grown up around the Helford River, either as the result of plantations as at Trelowarren, or of natural regeneration where agriculture has retreated. As a result there is a wide range of different woods and trees, but it is the ancient oak woods that typify the Helford and remind us of an older, wilder Cornwall.

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Thanks are due to the National Trust as sponsors of this leaflet. The Trust owns and manages much of the woodland around the Helford River. Photographs by The National Trust / Dan Flunder, The National Trust / Alastair Cameron, The National Trust / Rob Matheson and Pamela Tompsett.

