

Some ancient Compton woodlands

Ancient woodlands feel old and they are old. They were worked for hundreds of years until the twentieth century and can be recognised by the large diversity of plant species, many of which are only found in these very special places. The richness of the woodland floor has been created, in some cases, over millennia and it is not possible to replicate an ancient woodland simply by planting many different species. In England a wood is defined as ancient if it has existed continuously since 1600, although many are very much older than this.



The regrowth of coppice stools.

They have survived because they were a resource of considerable value and they were managed to produce a regular crop of underwood and timber trees. If you cut down a coniferous tree it dies but felling a deciduous woodland does not destroy it; the cut stools regenerate to grow another crop of poles ready for harvesting in about ten years time. The supply is apparently inexhaustible. Our native trees re-grow from the cut, either at ground level as coppice or higher above the ground as pollards, and this property has been the basis of traditional woodland management for tens of centuries.

There are a number of ancient woodlands in Compton, as well as some others that are not so old. Ashen Copse, on the Loseley estate, is ancient woodland but its near neighbours, Puddock and Pipkin Copses were created in the early nineteenth century and this shows in their ground flora. Bummoor Copse is ancient, as is much of the wooded ridge to the south west of Compton and Binscombe.

Ashen Copse

Recorded on the Loseley estate map of 1682, Ashen Copse is situated on the eastern edge of the parish. Throughout its life, until the twentieth century, the wood was coppiced every ten years or so to produce a regular crop of underwood and standard trees for timber. Like most ancient woodland, the copse is bounded by a bank and ditch which was once topped by a fence to prevent animals wandering into the wood and eating the coppice shoots. The area of the woodland has been increased over the years by the growth of new woodland on the margins and, within the copse, there are banks and ditches that mark its earlier extent.



Yellow archangel.

A series of manuscripts in the Loseley Collection that date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gives an insight of how the woodlands were managed and show just how important a resource were coppice woodlands. These very tightly written agreements record the selling by Loseley of the rights to cut the underwood in Ashen Copse during the winter. The buyer of these rights was strictly limited to the coppicing of the underwood. He was not permitted to take any of the timber trees and would suffer a 5 shilling penalty for each young standard cut. He could not lop any of the pollards and he was to cut sufficient underwood to enable him to repair the boundary fence. In addition to this, Loseley asked for cash in advance and the woodmen had to be out of the wood by May.¹

Ancient woodlands can be identified by the plants that grow within them and there are indicator species that help to confirm the wood's ancient status. These include the early purple orchid, wood speedwell pignut, great stitchwort, yellow archangel, wood anemone, wood sorrel yellow pimpernel, bluebell and primrose. The last two of these makes the point that it is the number of indicator species present that is the key to identifying an ancient woodland. Primroses and bluebells can grow on their own in many places but it is only when seen in abundance with many other species that they become significant indicators.



Early purple orchid.

Much of Ashen Copse has a mixture of flora associated with both ancient and more recent woodlands, which suggests that it is not as old as some other woods.

¹ LM 354/11, LM 357/28, 96 Surrey History Centre.

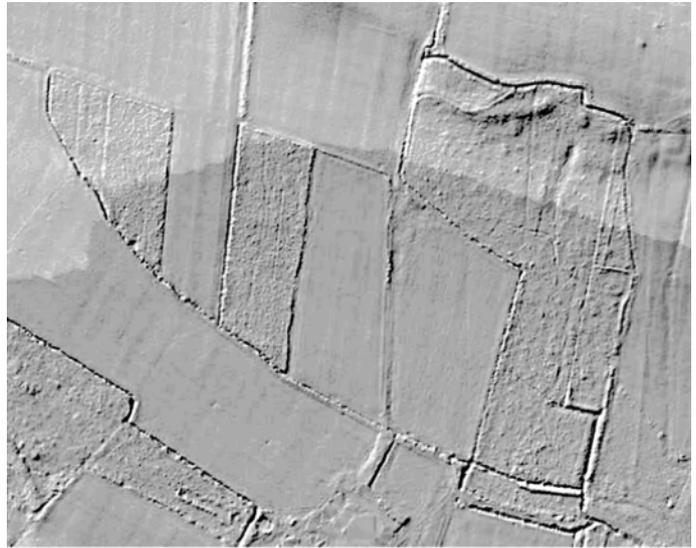


An extract from the Loseley and Polsted enclosure map of 1803. Plot 144 is Ashen Copse and 143 is open land that is now a part of the woodland. Pipkin Copse and Puddock Copse had not yet been created.

QS6/4/37/1-2, Surrey History Centre.

Fast colonisers, such as goose grass, nettles, ground ivy are found throughout but there are areas where they are very much more abundant. Nettles occur in patches and they are possibly indicate the sites of woodmen's fires.

The most notable area of fast colonising plants is towards the southern end of the wood. It is marked as plot 143 on the enclosure map of 1803 at which time it was open ground. There are fewer ancient woodland indicator species in this section and the goosegrass and nettles are at their thickest. The bluebells have crept southwards into this newer woodland. Although there is goosegrass in section 107, to the south of this area, it is stunted and not in continuous cover, indicating that this strip of woodland is older.



A Lidar image of (left to right) Pipkin, Puddock and Ashen copses showing the boundary banks and internal divisions of the woodlands.

There are at least seven indicator species in Ashen Copse. However, the extent of the non-ancient woodland plants suggest that the wood is secondary ancient woodland, meaning that it has grown up in medieval times on previously open land and has had time to acquire some ancient characteristics. The presence of quick colonising plants show that there is still accumulated nitrogen in the soil, an indication that the land was once cultivated.



Looking south towards (left to right) Ashen Copse, Mellersh Farm in the distance, Puddock Copse and Pipkin Copse.

The dominant tree in the copse is ash, as one might expect, but there is a good proportion of hazel, both of which are coppiced. There is also oak in the copse but none has been coppiced and they are all standard trees grown for timber. Also found there are the common and midland hawthorns, elder and buckthorn.

The Light Detection and Ranging survey reveals earthworks within the wood. They have a north-south pattern of strips that is similar to the surrounding field pattern that is recorded on the 1803 enclosure map. Two of these wood banks are of great antiquity as the parish boundary between Compton and Guildford St Nicolas follows them in a dog leg through the copse. Most rural parish boundaries were established in the Anglo-Saxon period before the Norman Conquest and they often used existing features in the landscape such as field boundary banks, streams and tracks to define the line clearly. On one corner of this boundary bank grows a solitary, large horse chestnut that appears to have been planted to mark the change of direction of the parish boundary.

After many hundreds of years, the future of Ashen Copse is uncertain. It takes its name from the dominant tree which is now under threat due to Ash Dieback. It is probable that a significant proportion of the ash trees will die but, in their absence, the second most dominant species, hazel, will naturally fill the space .

Puddock and Pipkin Copses

These two areas of woodland are of comparatively recent date. They are not shown on the 1682 Loseley estate map nor on the early nineteenth century enclosure map. They do, however, appear on the 1839 tithe map.

The woodlands, which appear to be plantations, have grown up within the field boundaries shown on the enclosure map. The boundaries of the narrow cultivation strips shown on the map can still be seen on the Lidar survey hidden within the copses.

It is possible that the woodlands were planted as fox coverts to encourage a supply of animals for the chase. Their recent creation is reflected in the ground flora and there are no ancient woodland plants here except on the southern boundary banks.

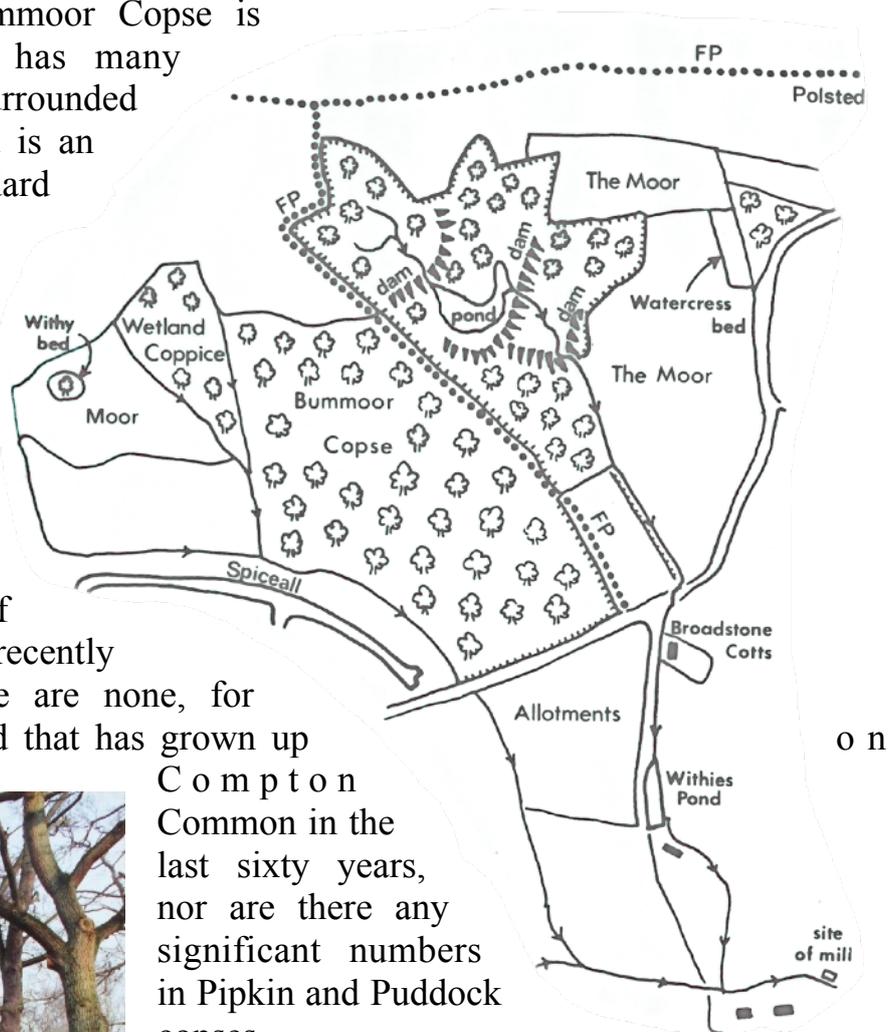
Please note that Ashen Copse, Pipkin Copse and Puddock Copse are on private land and there are no rights of way or access to the public. The author explored the woodlands with permission nearly thirty years ago - so please take his word for what is there and do not trespass!

Bummoor Copse

The Moors are an area of damp, low lying ancient woodland and rough pasture based on an outcrop of Atherfield clay. The area has probably never been used for cultivation and the field names reflect the poor quality of the land: The Moors, Moor Piece, Bummoor Copse, Wetland Coppice. Although it is usually associated with windswept highlands, *mor* is an Anglo Saxon word to describe a wasteland or badly drained area. A lot of water springs to the surface here.

Like Ashen Copse, Bummoor Copse is ancient woodland and has many similar features. It is surrounded by a ditch and bank and is an area of coppice and standard trees. During the spring, the north east section of the wood is full of flowers that indicate that the woodland is of great age. These include primroses, wood anemones, wood sorrel and early purple orchids. Such a range of plants are not found in recently planted woodland. There are none, for instance, in the woodland that has grown up

Compton Common in the last sixty years, nor are there any significant numbers in Pipkin and Puddock copses.



The middle pond and dam in Bummoor Copse.

A good time to visit Bummoor Copse is in May when the woodland is awash with bluebells. Although they are found in many places, it is usually only in ancient woodlands where they grow in such numbers.

There is much evidence of man's efforts to make use of the inexhaustible supply of water from the Moors. As well as the now overgrown watercress and withy beds, there are, in Bummoor Copse,

the remains of three dams which once held back a series of ponds which flowed from one to the other. The middle pond is still there, albeit a shadow of its former self, but the other two are merely boggy patches in the wood. What were these works for? Possibly they were fish ponds. Fish was an important source of protein in medieval times, particularly during the winter. Alternatively, they may have been reservoirs to store water for the mill that once stood by the stream behind Brook House.

Philip Gorton 2021