

## 1.11 BROAD CHARACTER: WOODLAND

### 1.11.1 CHARACTER TYPE: WOODLAND

#### INTRODUCTION: DEFINING/DISTINGUISHING ATTRIBUTES

The majority of the woodland in the East Anglian coastal region is located within the 'Sandlings' area in Suffolk and is a mixture of coniferous and broadleaf trees. This is often the remnants of traditionally managed woodland. Overall there is 3110 ha of woodland in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB, mostly contained in the three major plantations of Dunwich Forest, Tunstall Wood and Rendlesham Wood. These are closely associated with the heathland and birch scrub characteristic of the area.

A significant woodland plantation also remains around Benacre Broad, benefitting from the protection that the site is afforded. To the south, in the area of Covehithe Easton Wood is being destroyed by coastal erosion and slowly dying.

The Broads region boasts 3000 ha of carr woodland and scrub, the natural vegetation of fenland. Mature carr is particularly highly valued and is left unmanaged ([www.broads-authority.gov.uk](http://www.broads-authority.gov.uk)). In addition deciduous woodland, copses and plantations can be found in the upper reaches of the River Bure.



*Carr woodland in the Broads*

Other small but significant areas of woodland include a string of coniferous woodland situated around certain areas of the North Norfolk Coast such as Holkham and the Sheringham/Cromer area. In the south of the region the Stour Wood is situated on the banks of the River Stour near Wrabness and is an important part of the nature reserve there.

Ancient woodland is not common in the coastal area although the privately owned woodland at Staverton Park is one of the most important surviving areas of wood pasture in England (Williamson 2005, 106). This comprises c 200 acres of close-set medieval oak pollards, huge hollies, rowan and birch (Countryside Agency 1999, 56). Ancient woodland also survives at Iken, Reydon, Sudbourne and Sutton.

## **HISTORICAL PROCESSES; COMPONENTS, FEATURES AND VARIABILITY**

East Anglia as a whole grew vast quantities of wild oak as a result of its clay soils. It is unclear at what date the region was deforested although this was probably a gradual process with occasional reversions (Williamson 2005, 12). Environmental evidence from Sutton Hoo indicates that some oak and hazel woodland was accessible in the early Bronze Age.

Following the clearance of the wildwood managed woodland became abundant in the area but was more common in the south and west, removed from the coastal areas. Medieval woods were intensively managed and most were coppiced every few years to produce straight timbers. Wood pastures were also common, in these areas trees were generally pollarded and livestock were grazed.

The Domesday Book recorded that Aldringham in Suffolk had woodland sufficient for 500 swine, Staverton for 30 and Snape on the River Alde for six (ibid, 53). However, field names recorded in medieval documents indicate further woodland clearance.

It is possible that Staverton Park may have been a Saxon hunting ground (Williamson 2005, 107). It was owned by the Bigod family until 1306 when it reverted to the crown and



*Staverton Wood still used as a traditional pasture*

was granted to the Earl of Norfolk. In 1529 it was sold to Butley Priority for £240 and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it belonged to the Wantisden Estate.

By far the most common type of woodland in the area is post medieval plantation, originally dominated by oak with ash and beech. A few were established before 1700 and managed in a traditional manner by coppicing such as

Holly Grove in Benacre and Whitmore Wood in Rendlesham (ibid, 109). However most were established by large estates during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and were not coppiced; trees were planted, thinned and harvested or left to grow. These were mainly created as game cover for pheasant shooting which had become popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or to beautify the landscape (Williamson 2005, 109). The presence of post medieval plantations is often indicated by place names like 'covert', 'belt', 'broom' or 'plantation', or association with an individual.

In 1921 the Forestry Commission was created as a consequence of a severe timber shortage following World War I. At this time many of these plantations were comprehensively replanted with conifers. In addition the Commission created many more new conifer plantations on marginal land such as heathland which would not sustain hardwoods. It is this process which established Rendlesham, Tunstall and Dunwich forests between 1920 and 1938, resulting in the creation of 4905 acres of woodland.



*Rendlesham Wood, the largest of the post medieval plantations*

## **VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS**

The woodland in this region is highly valued for a number of reasons. In particular, woodlands are viewed as peaceful and tranquil places which attract those wanting to get away from the tourist hubs. From an environmental point of view the woods are considered to be important enough to protect through designation. In particular both Rendlesham and Tunstall forests are designated SSSIs and SPAs.

Plantations have been viewed with some distaste, having replaced the 'natural' environment. However this is not a common place perception and most people are keen to keep the coniferous woods.

## **RESEARCH, AMENITY AND EDUCATION**

Considerable research has been conducted into the region's woodland. However there may be potential for a larger study which encompasses all the available evidence such as a PhD study. There is also significant potential for surveys within woodland which may identify historic features.

Woodland is frequently used by both the local community and seasonal tourists. Activities such as walking, cycling and wildlife watching are popular and Tunstall wood also hosts a twice yearly motorcycle event. Everyday activities such as walking and running are also accommodated. Access to some woodland could be improved, particularly that on private estates such as Staverton Park.

Woodland could potentially be used as an educational case study for a number of reasons. Its development is a study in sustainability applicable to modern day life; it is also interesting from an ecological point of view and as a tourist destination.

## **CONDITION AND FORCES FOR CHANGE**

There are small areas of ancient woodland still in existence within the larger swathes of plantations which are generally traditionally managed. The younger plantations are generally in good condition and are still in some cases managed for timber.

Much emphasis has been placed on conservation of woodland in recent years which may result in their protection. Some schemes in the East Anglian area include a process of 'rewilding' in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB. This is a long term plan to recreate and regenerate the natural landscape which existed prior to the conifer plantations (<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/>).

The recent government announcement to consider selling many areas of woodland means the future of woodland is uncertain in the future.

## **RARITY AND VULNERABILITY**

Areas of ancient woodland are certainly rare, both in the region and nationally. However the younger plantations are a common feature of the landscape.

Most woodland is sustainably managed and protected where necessary; therefore it is not particularly vulnerable. However the proposed reversion of areas of plantation may mean that this sub type is at risk in certain regions.

Future political plans for woodland may also put them at risk, although it is unclear exactly how at present.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Williamson, T. 2005. *Sandlands - The Suffolk Coast and Heaths*. Windgather Press

Williamson, T., 2006, England's Landscape: East Anglia. English Heritage

## **Websites**

[www.broads-authority.gov.uk](http://www.broads-authority.gov.uk)

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/>