

#### IV.—THE MEDIAEVAL FORESTS OF NORTHUMBERLAND.

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There are many scraps of information scattered here and there in the records of mediæval Northumberland which suggest that until the sixteenth century the upper valleys of the county and the slopes of the Cheviot hills were still to a great extent wooded. Down to the fourteenth century there were several hunting forests that were controlled by the harsh forest laws of the Norman kings. During the second half of the thirteenth century and the first quarter of the next century the Crown gradually relinquished its rights in these forests to the barons and other large landowners in the county. (Map, p. 103.)

The word forest is from the old French *forêt*, med. Latin *forestis* meaning unenclosed land from *foris*—outside. In OE and ME it is often opposed to park, referring to enclosed land. A forest has been defined as “a certain territory of woody grounds and fruitful pastures, privileged for wild beasts and fowls of forest, chase and warren to rest and abide in, in the safe protection of the king, for his princely delight and pleasure”.<sup>1</sup> That these hunting forests were dense woodlands cannot be expected, but they were, in fact, well stocked with roe deer, the natural habitat of which is the open-gladed forest. The forests of Windsor, New Forest, Forest of Dean, Sherwood and Selwood that have remained Crown property down to the present day, are still largely wooded. It is not proposed here to detail how all the Northumbrian forests passed out of the control of the king,

<sup>1</sup> Marwood, *Lawes of the Forest* 1598, 4th edition, 1717.

but a few examples can be given. In 1203 Roger Bertram had a grant from king John that his manor of Felton with the whole parish and with all woods belonging to the manor should be disafforested with venison in the woods and all other things now belonging to the forest, quit from the exaction of the king's foresters. The manor of Ditchburn with Cartington, Ryle and three-quarters of Togston were held in serjeanty by the king's forester.<sup>2</sup> In 1256 Robert of Hilton had a grant of free warren in his demesne lands at Shilbottle, Rennington and Hilton so long as these lands were not within the bounds of the royal forest.<sup>3</sup> About the same time Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, had licence to empark his wood at Shipley within the king's forest in Northumberland.<sup>4</sup> In 1300 John of Bulmer paid yearly five shillings at the Exchequer of Newcastle for disafforestation of his forest of Chevington; this rent was still being paid in 1344.<sup>5</sup> Grants of free warren were made in 1244 to Odinel of Ford for his lands in Ford, Crookham and Kimmérston; similar grants were made in 1251 to Robert Ross (Carham and Wark), in the same year to William Heron (Hadston), in 1309 to William of Felton (Edlingham, Matfen, Lemington and Lorbottle), and in 1310 to Thomas of Carliol (Swarland and Glantlees). By the middle of the fourteenth century it is probable that all the forests of Northumberland were "disafforested", i.e. no longer subject to the forest laws.

There can be little doubt that the destruction of trees in these hunting forests was due in the first instance to man, who cleared the trees for house building and fuel. His domestic animals did the rest, cattle and sheep and to a lesser extent, horses, browsing on the young seedlings until natural regeneration almost failed. In the few places where the old woodland has to some extent survived, it is mainly in areas almost inaccessible to man or beast on the steep cliff sides of the upper valleys. The principal trees appear to have been oak; ash, alder, birch and rowan. The sur-

<sup>2</sup> N.C.H. xiv, p. 415.

<sup>3</sup> N.C.H. v, p. 419.

<sup>4</sup> N.C.H. II, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> N.C.H. v, pp. 388, 390.

vivors are now small, crooked and stunted, but at one time were evidently much larger. Bowes and Ellerker's Survey of 1541 describes a typical "headsman's" house in North Tyndale as built of "great square oak trees".

One of the largest "forests" in the county was Cheviot forest. Cheviot now comprises the three townships of Greys forest (6,620 acres), Selbys forest (11,500 acres) and Coldsmouth and Thompsons Walls (1,430 acres), but the wooded area at one time extended farther north into the townships of Hethpool and Kirknewton. Astinus, forester of Hethpool, was murdered in 1293 by being struck on the head with a sword by John Merlyon.<sup>6</sup> One hundred acres of wood in the township of Hethpool was part of the demesne lands at the end of the thirteenth century, and in 1305 the tenant was accused of wasting the woods. It is interesting to record that in the eighteenth century part of Hethpool was the property of lady Collingwood, wife of Admiral lord Collingwood, second in command at the battle of Trafalgar. On the 21st of March, 1806, Collingwood wrote to his wife "I wish some parts of Hethpoole could be selected for plantations of larch oak and beech where the ground could be best spared. Even the sides of a bleak hill would grow larch and fir." In 1320 a property in Kirknewton is described as 200 acres of wood and  $1\frac{1}{4}$  carucates (ploughlands). The wood of Ruttok in Kirknewton is mentioned in 1388.

It is difficult to realize to-day that the woods of Cheviot were still surviving in the sixteenth century. Leland reported in 1533-39 in his *Itinerary*<sup>7</sup> "In Northumberland as I heare say be no forests except Chivet hills, where is muche brushe wood and some okke, grownd ovar growne with linge and some with moss. I have heard say that Chivet hilles stretchethe XX miles. There is great plenty of redd dere and 100 bukkes." In another passage, after describing the general lack of wood in the county he goes on,

<sup>6</sup> Assize Roll 21, EI—*Dukes Transcripts*, vol. xvii, pp. 64, 70.

<sup>7</sup> Vol. v, pp. 67-8.

"in Glendale here and there wood, and Chiveot servithe them well; but the great wood of Chivet is spoylyd now, and crokyd old trees and schrubs remayne." In the border survey of 1541 we learn that considerable spoiling of the wood was done by the Scots. "The Scottes as well by nighte tyme secretly as upon the daie tyme with a more force do come into the said forest of Chevyott dyv'se tymes and steale and carrye awaie muche of the said wood which ys to them a great proffyte for the maynte'unce of their houses and buyldinge as small redresse thereof can be hadd by the lawes and customes of the marches." It was not only from Cheviot that the Scots stole trees; in a raid on Redesdale in 1598 "they brought 100 men to cut wood, did so, and carried it away as wont."<sup>8</sup> Some time in the thirteenth century the lord of Wooler granted part of Cheviot forest to the abbey of Melrose; the boundary of this land is described as running between the wood and the moor. The monks were given the privilege of cutting wood in the donor's forest for buildings on the land.<sup>9</sup>

Some idea of the appearance of a hunting forest in early days can be seen in the present appearance of Chillingham park. This was emparked in the early seventeenth century by William, lord Grey.<sup>10</sup> Chillingham lay to the south-west of Chatton forest and the inhabitants of Chatton claimed that part of Chatton had been included in Chillingham park. Eustace of Vesci, who died in 1184, in his foundation charter of Alnwick abbey, gave the monks the tithes of stags, hinds and boars captured by his dogs in Chatton. In 1279 John of Vesci obtained licence to enclose his moor of Chatton which was within the bounds of the royal forest. In *quo warranto* proceedings on 1291/2 William of Vesci claimed free warren in the forest of Chatton, except for about 200 acres which had been disafforested by licence of the king. In 1368 Henry, lord Percy, had a park at Chatton with wild animals in it. In 1566 much wood had been cut by a contractor who bought the old oaks. Fifty years later it was

<sup>8</sup> *Cal. Border Papers* II, p. 557. <sup>9</sup> N.C.H. XI, p. 301. <sup>10</sup> N.C.H. XIV, p. 301.

reported that "there are not great timber wood of oak or other kind of wood within the said manor (of Chatton) saving some small wood of oak, ash and suchlike which grow in certain places of the park and at Chatton Sheles".<sup>11</sup> In the adjoining township of Lyham there were 200 acres of wood in 1307.<sup>12</sup> To the south of Chillingham the townships of Newtown, Hebburn and Bewick had considerable woodland in the thirteenth century. The "forest of Bewick" is mentioned in 1250.<sup>13</sup> In a lease of Bewick in 1592 "all big trees, underwood and sapling oaks" were reserved.

The district of Kidland forms part of the range of Cheviot hills lying between the head waters of the Aln and Coquet. In 1181 Odinel of Umfraville leased to Newminster abbey for 29 years the grazing in his forest between Alwin and Clennel; the monks were permitted to take what they wanted from the forest by order of the lord's foresters, but the dogs used by the herds of the lessees were to be deprived of one foot, that the lord's wild animals might have peace.<sup>14</sup> These wild animals would mainly be deer. The names Wylywood, Allerhope and Yokeburn point to the presence of willows, alders and oaks. "The name of Kidland itself may refer to those days when the wild deer browsed along its verdant slopes and in its bosky dells."<sup>15</sup>

About half-way down the Coquet between Kidland and the sea lay the forest of Rothbury, granted in 1204 by king John to Robert son of Roger, lord of Warkworth. Included in the grant was the right of hunting in the forest, which comprised the modern townships of Debdon, Raw, Mount Healy, Hesleyhurst, Hollinghill and Pauperhaugh. The Newtown was probably improved out of the forest in the thirteenth century. A survey of Rothbury forest made in 1586 mentions "certain grounds in times past well plenished with oak timber and ash, but of late greatly cut down and wasted".<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* p. 205-6.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* p. 246.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* p. 429.

<sup>14</sup> N.C.H. xv, p. 449.

<sup>15</sup> Dixon, *Upper Coquetdale*, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> N.C.H. xv, p. 356.

The grant of disafforestation of Felton forest in 1203 has already been mentioned. Like Rothbury forest, it lay on both sides of the Coquet. The hamlets of Elyhaugh, Shot-haugh, Catheugh and the Steades were anciently part of this forest which included what were later called the moors of Bockenfield and Thirston.<sup>17</sup> By 1567 there were "no woods save underwoodds" in Thirston.<sup>18</sup>

The forest of Chevington has already been mentioned. In 1279 Robert of Lucker granted to John of Vesci common pasture in his forest of Hulne.<sup>19</sup> Alnwick Moor lying to the south-west of Alnwick was at one time called Aydon forest.

In the lordship of Redesdale, lying under the Cheviot hills between Coquet and North Tyne, there was considerable wooded area in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In the twelfth century Robert of Umfraville gave his forest of Altercoppes and Ellesden to Sir William Bertram as the marriage portion of his sister Alice.<sup>20</sup> About 1228 Gilbert of Umfraville granted to the abbot and convent of Kelso all the tithe foals of his stud of mares feeding within his forest on the east side of Cottonshope.<sup>21</sup> That the hunting forests of Redesdale were wooded areas, is proved by the enumeration of the lands belonging to Robert of Umfraville in 1324. He had 20 acres of wood and 200 acres of moor at Nuthope, 100 acres of wood and 200 acres of waste in Cotinghope, 300 acres of wood in Kyneshope and 100 acres of wood in Yardhope.<sup>22</sup> In 1244 Sibilla of Morwick held of the Umfravilles "the forest on the east side of Kinghope".<sup>23</sup> The Keenshope burn rises near the farm of Riding—a ridding being a piece of ground from which the wood has been cleared or "ridded". North of Riding is Woodside, where in 1827 there was still "sufficient remains of woods to make the name of this district sufficiently appropriate".<sup>24</sup> James the First's grant of Redesdale to Theophilus lord Howard of Walden in 1611 included "the forest or chase

<sup>17</sup> N.C.H. vii, p. 255.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* p. 305.

<sup>19</sup> N.C.H. ii, p. 302.

<sup>20</sup> Hodgson ii, i, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* p. 20n.

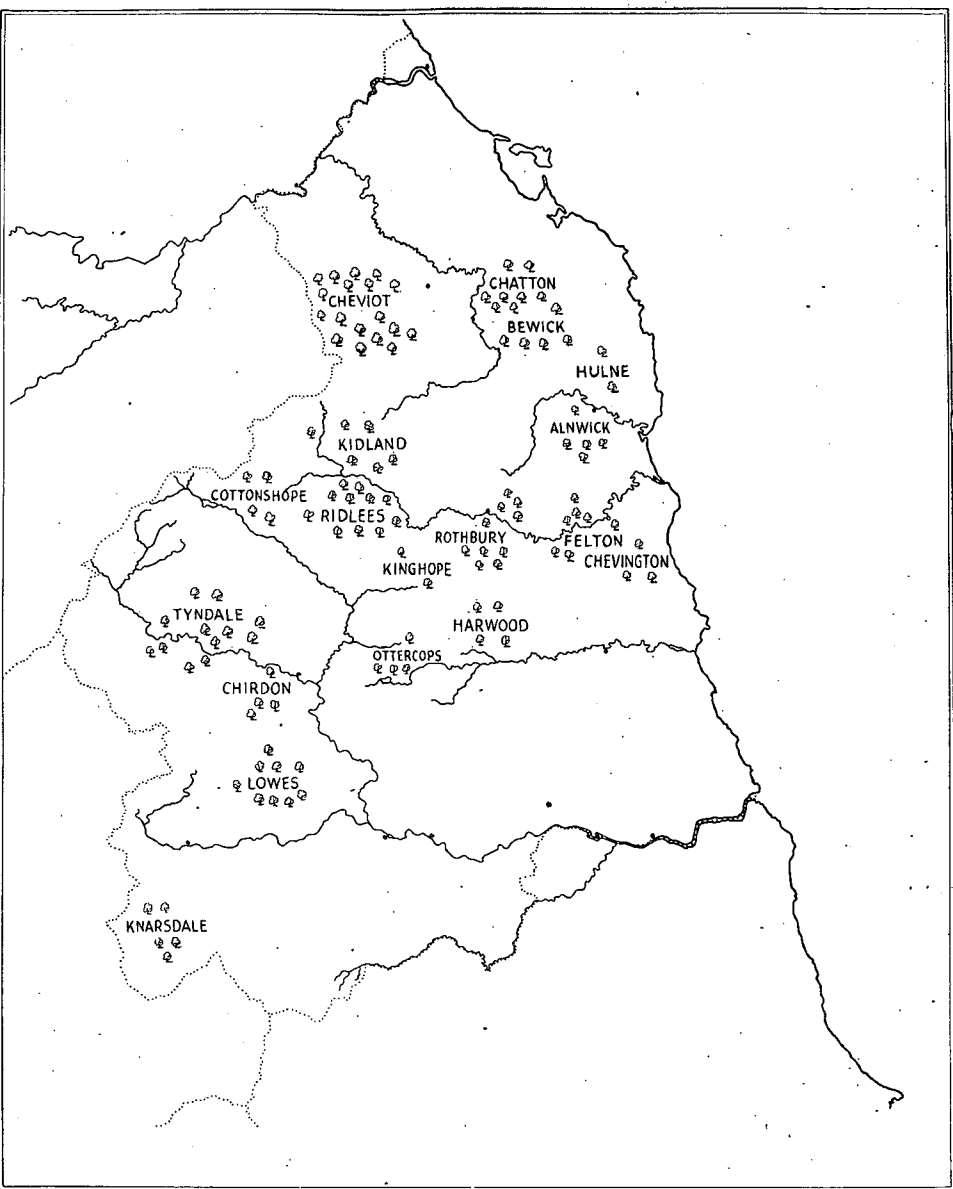
<sup>24</sup> *Id.* p. 99n.

called Wilkwood Forest or the Forest of Riddleys". Hodgson writing in 1827, records of Redesdale that "beyond the cultivated lands on each side of the valley, the tops of the hills are generally covered with heath—and between the hills are broad and flat morasses called flow mosses, many of which have been the sites of ancient woods of willow, birch and alder; in some of them oaks are found and others contain forests of buried pines". The head of Redesdale is now being reafforested by the Forestry Commission, and the forest of Harwood to the south-east of Redesdale has also been recently planted.

In 1279 William of Bellingham claimed to hold two-thirds of the manor of Bellingham by the service of being the king of Scotland's forester in Tyndale forest.<sup>25</sup> This Tyndale forest was probably scattered over the hillsides of the North Tyne above Bellingham. Between Riding and Charlton is a good example of old woodland still remaining to-day and probably not much changed in appearance in the last five hundred years. In 1541 Bowes and Ellerker<sup>26</sup> reported that "the houses, buildings and inhabitations of the said country of Tyndale is much set upon either side of the said river of North Tyne and upon other little brooks and runnels running and descending into the said river in strong places, by the nature of the ground and of such strength naturally fortified as well by reason of mosses and marshes, which with great difficulty may be passed with horsemen as of banks and cleughs of wood wherein of old time for the more strength great trees have been felled and laid so overthwart the ways (and) passages that in divers places unless it be by such as know and have experience of those said strait and evil ways and passages it will be hard for strangers having no knowledge thereof to pass thereby in any order and especially upon horseback". The "banks and cleughs of wood" still remain in many places, but the "great trees" have gone. At the court for the manor of Charlton in 1605 an effort was made to check the wastage

<sup>25</sup> Hartshorne, app. xxix.

<sup>26</sup> Bates, *Border Holds*, p. 49.



0 5 10 15 20 25 Miles  
0 8000 16000 24000 32000 40000 44,000 Yards

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of timber. The names were reported of those who "either carried or sold or gave away any of the woods lying in the highlands of Tyndale" belonging to the earl of Northumberland, and the manor court jury stated that it had always been the custom of the tenants to take what timber they required.

In 1279 William Slippertoppe was crushed by a falling tree in the wood of Chirdon.<sup>27</sup> The recent work of the Forestry Commission has once again created a "wood of Chirdon" and although in a few years' time there may be a grave risk of falling trees, it is to be hoped that no similar accident will occur.

In the valley of the South Tyne there were the mediæval forests of Knarsdale and the forest of Lowes. By 1586 the latter was "one great waste and uncultivated parcel of ground".

Many other areas in the county were at one time growing oak trees. The names of Acomb and Oakwood are synonymous. The woods of Bywell were famous for their oak trees for hundreds of years. The destruction of trees in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was checked in the late eighteenth century when the landowners commenced to plant trees for the beautifying of their estates. This was followed in the nineteenth century by the establishment of shelter and amenity woods for the benefit of agriculture and sporting. The great wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45 caused serious inroads upon these woods, but it is very pleasing to see that replanting is going on rapidly. Even so, many are sorry to see the replacement of our old deciduous trees by conifers. Oak is now no longer vital to the nation, "the wooden walls of England" having long since been replaced by steel, and the present timber needs of the country are mainly satisfied by conifers.

<sup>27</sup> Hartshorne, p. iii.