

Swithland Wood - “secured as a National Heritage” by Rotary in 1925

Patrick J. Boylan

For over 70 years the Bradgate Park estate has been the most popular area in the county for quiet recreation and enjoyment of the countryside. It is well-known that in 1928 the founder of British United Shoe Machinery Ltd, Charles Bennion of Thurnby, bought part the estate of the Grey family of Newtown Linford and Groby and gave this to the people of Leicester and Leicestershire. The Bennion gift covered the ancient deer park of the Grey family, including the ruins of Bradgate House, where Leicestershire’s tragic Nine Day Queen, Lady Jane Grey, was born in 1537, together with the high ground of Old John.

However, it is not generally known that more than three years before Charles Bennion’s generous gift, the Leicester Rotary Club had already bought for the public benefit and preservation one of the most popular areas of the present Bradgate Park Trust lands. This was Swithland Wood, directly across the road on the northern side of Bradgate Park, opposite the Hallgates car park on the north-west corner of Cropston Reservoir. The 137 acres of Swithland Wood was (and still is) amongst the richest and most attractive ancient woodlands in the Midlands, famous throughout the country for its spectacular spring displays of bluebells.

Swithland Wood and the more or less adjacent The Brand to the north cover the largest and most important outcrop of the well-known Swithland slates, which are the youngest member of the ancient Late Precambrian rocks, around 600 million years old, that form the striking rocky outcrops across Charnwood Forest, (though the latest evidence suggests that the Swithland Slates part of the sequence may actually date from the Cambrian period, which began around 545 million years ago). As across much of Charnwood Forest, the ancient Charnian rocks of Swithland Wood are partly covered by thin deposits of soft red desert clays and sands of the Triassic Mercian Mudstone Group, dating from around 220 million years ago, and by some patches of glacial deposits.

The characteristic thick purple, blue-grey, to green Swithland Slates were used quite extensively as roofing slate and building stone in Roman times, as evidenced from the Loughborough area and Leicester including Jewry Wall, and from as far away as Borough, Norton Disney and Thorpe in Lincolnshire. Quarrying seems to have been re-established by around 1260. Swithland slates were used in the re-roofing of Leicester Castle in 1377-8 and for repairs to the Castle in 1439, by which time other important Leicestershire buildings including the fourteenth century Leicester Guildhall had Swithland slate roofs.

By the 15th century the stone was also being used as a more general building material, for example in the drains and cellars of Bradgate House, while the value of polished slate for engraved lettering was known from the late 16th century, though the majority of the well known and much admired Swithland slate headstones and other memorials are from the 18th to mid 19th century. As sawn slabs of slate became available with more advanced quarrying techniques, Swithland slate began to be used for many other purposes, including sundials, sinks, fireplaces and cheese presses, as well as a building material for houses, farm buildings and dry stone walls across much of Charnwood Forest.

It seems that quarrying for slate within the present Swithland Wood was on a small scale and not continuous, and presumably took place by or under the authority of the Greys of Bradgate who owned the Wood as part of the Bradgate Estate from medieval times until after the First World War, and the Bradgate Estate accounts and other records in the Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Record Office detail successive tenancies of the various quarrying leases from 1688 onwards.

Slate extraction from Swithland Wood on a more industrial scale using gunpowder as an explosive appears to have begun in the later 18th century. The large and deep Old Slate Pit near the northern boundary of Swithland Wood was opened in 1813 by the Hind family under a lease from the Bradgate Estate, but suffered from mixed fortunes. Production ceased for some years in 1838, restarted and the lease in the Old Pit lapsed in 1849, but was taken up by Thomas Rudkin in 1850. The larger abandoned quarry, Swithland Great Pit, in the centre of the Wood, must have been started during the same period.

In 1859 the well-known Ellis family of Belgrave Hall whose commercial interests included the Leicester and Swannington and then Midland Railways, and later the Ellis & Everard builder’s merchant business, took over the lease on the Great Pit and introduced the latest quarrying methods and equipment, including a lifting crane and a weighing machine. Within less than thirty years the Big Pit had followed the best stone downwards to a remarkable depth of over 55 metres (180 feet). By the time of the first Ordnance Survey Six Inch map of 1883 only the Great Pit was still working, and the abandoned quarries were filled with water. The Great Pit finally closed in 1887 and this too quickly flooded creating the very attractive tree-surrounded feature that is one of the most popular sights of Swithland Wood today as well as being a popular but challenging environment for advanced sub-aqua exploration.

By the early 20th century the present rich oak, lime, ash, sycamore, hazel and birch woodland had become fully established (or probably more accurately re-established) over all of Swithland Wood, and no doubt there was some timber extraction and forestry management, though despite recent extensive research by Stephen Woodward it seems that there are no records of what exactly was done in terms of either felling or any planned replanting rather than natural regeneration. However, the Bradgate accounts show that in 1905 alone over 2,000 cubic feet of standing timber (oak, lime, ash and birch) was auctioned in ten lots, raising the then quite considerable total of £210.

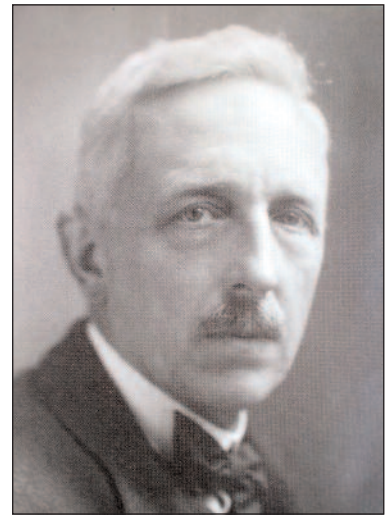
In July 1921, in one of their first disposals of freehold of the Bradgate Estate land they had owned for over 400 years, the Grey family sold Swithland Wood together with Swithland Wood Farm and Hallgates Farm, a total of 286 acres in a single lot by auction for £7,300. The buyer was the well-known Leicester timber merchant, William Gimson, who was apparently interested in acquiring the property to continue the commercial forestry operation and sell the timber through his own business. For a time Gimson felled and extracted mature timber for sale, but by 1925 it was reported that all the (currently mature, presumably) valuable timber had been taken.

However, very soon there was growing concern that one of the one of the most important and beautiful natural history sites in the county, now known to have over 400 different varieties of trees and plants according to the latest surveys, could be damaged or even destroyed by continued forestry works and subsequent replanting, as had recently happened to too many other important areas of Charnwood Forest. The widespread call for action to save Swithland Wood was taken up by the Rotary Club of Leicester, which had been formed less than nine years earlier in 1916 as only the thirteenth Club in Britain and Ireland within the Rotary International movement founded in Chicago in February 1905.

The prime move was the Club's most important and influential founder member, the architect Waller K. Bedingfield. Among many other things Bedingfield was a long-standing member of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society and the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, serving as President of the "Lit. & Phil." for 1930-31. In addition to undertaking some important architectural projects through his Museum Square practice of Bedingfield and Grundy, including the well-known Art Deco factory for Goddard's in Nelson Street, Leicester, he was the architect and planner for the late 1920s extension of Abbey Park. As part of this work he began the excavations of the Leicester Abbey site, the work being continued in the 1930s by his younger brother and partner Ralph Waldo Bedingfield.

At a meeting of the Rotary Club Council on 3rd January 1925 Bedingfield asked permission to bring forward the question of the possible purchase of Swithland Wood, and ten days later the Council appointed the President, George

Tarratt, the jeweller, Bedingfield, the County Architect William Keay, and William Bastard who had an important spinning business in the City, to serve as a preliminary committee to investigate the proposal. This confirmed that William Gimson was sympathetic with the view that the Wood should be saved from any further substantial felling for timber extraction. On this basis he was prepared to sell



Waller Bedingfield.

Swithland Wood to the Rotary Club for only £3,000, subject to the condition that it should be preserved "for the public use for ever", this condition being guaranteed by vesting the legal ownership permanently in trustees or the National Trust.

The Committee recommended to the Rotary Club Council that an appeal should be launched both among the members of the Club and outside it to buy Swithland Wood on these terms. This was endorsed by the Council, and the proposal was put before a meeting of the whole Club on 16th February 1925. Bedingfield proposed the resolution, which was seconded by Bastard, and it seems from the detailed Minutes that survive that in all the discussion that followed the comments of members of the Club were always entirely favourable. The Medical Officer of Health, Dr Millard, supported the proposal "from the health point of view", while the prominent designer, Harry Hardy Peach (founder of the Dryad group of companies locally and of the Design and Industries Association nationally) pointed out that Leicestershire has less common land than any other large county in the country. The resolution to buy Swithland Wood and hold it in permanent trust for the public benefit was finally carried unanimously, and a Swithland Wood Committee of nine members, including Bedingfield, was elected.

The Swithland Wood Committee opened with an appeal addressed to the Rotary Club's own members. By 10th March the committee was able to report to the Club Council that nearly £1,000 had already been pledged by Club members, and the appeal was then broadened to individuals and businesses outside the Club. Less than a month later progress was so encouraging that contracts for the purchase were exchanged and a 10% deposit was paid, William Gimson having stuck to the verbal agreement on the price despite receiving an offer of £3,500 from someone described as "a speculative builder".

By 23rd June 1925 it was reported that 104 members of the Club had contributed £1,002.14s.0d whilst 100 non-Rotarians had added £1,466.14s.6d. Major contributors from



Contemporary view of Swithland Great Pit.

outside the Club included H. Percy Gee, Stead & Simpson, Freeman, Hardy & Willis, and Wolsey Ltd, each of which contributed £100, while the seller of the Wood, William Gimson, added a donation of £100 towards the purchase at his already below market value price. On 29th June 1925 a business meeting of the whole Club agreed to complete the purchase, the balance of around £600 including legal costs being covered by a Westminster Bank overdraft. Negotiating this overdraft cannot have been difficult: the Bank's local Manager was Rotarian O. Wheeler, Treasurer to the Swithland Wood Committee, and all the Committee's meeting had been held in the Bank. The purchase was completed on 1st August 1925, with William Bastard, George Tarratt and W. Arnold Viccars named in the Conveyance and Deed of Trust as the Trustees on behalf of the Rotary Club.

The management of the Wood passed immediately to the Club's Swithland Wood Committee which decided to continue with the fund-raising to raise funds not just to repay the overdraft but for the immediate fencing of the dangerous flooded Great Pit, and for other site management and public access works, at an estimated cost of around £2,000. One of Bedingfield's original ideas of 1925 had been to for the Club to set up an annual Bluebell Service in the Wood, and the first Bluebell Sunday was organised by the Club on 20th May 1928, though after a few years the Parish of Swithland agreed to take over the organisation of this. By 1931 the Club had not only paid off the overdraft, but had raised a further £3,000, of which £2,400 had been spent on fencing, landscaping works, a parking area and on employing a Ranger and casual staff, leaving a sum of around £700 in the Committee's investment account. Thus the total raised by the Club over six years was just over £6,000, (equivalent to at least £135,000 at 2005 prices).

In 1928 Charles Bennion of Thurnby, founder of the British United Shoe Machinery Company Ltd., bought Bradgate

Park "for the quiet enjoyment" of the people of Leicestershire and Leicester. The land was vested in the county and city councils jointly as open space under s.10 of the Open Spaces Act 1906 which allowed councils to hold and administer suitable land in trust for "the enjoyment thereof by the public as an open space within the meaning of this Act and under proper control and regulation". After consultations, in 1929 the two councils set up the Bradgate Park Trust to serve as the legal owner of Bradgate Park in perpetuity and to manage this for the public benefit in accordance with the terms of Charles Bennion's gift and the 1906 Act.

It soon became clear that the Bradgate Park preservation and access scheme was a great success, and on 4th May 1931 a business meeting of the Rotary Club unanimously agreed to offer Swithland Wood to the Bradgate Park Trustees, accompanied by the £700 balance from the second fund-raising campaign as an endowment to help with future maintenance costs, "on condition that the Wood may be given to the Public use for ever and be managed by the Bradgate Park Trustees and under the same regulations as the Park".

This approach was very enthusiastically welcomed by the Bradgate Park Trustees, led by Col. (later Sir) Robert Martin, Chairman of the County Council, who had in fact helped the Rotary Club with its fund-raising six years earlier. Sir Robert was also a noted local historian and long-standing supporter of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society, serving as Chairman from 1933 to 1953 and President from 1955 to 1961. It was recognised by the Bradgate Trustees, and far more widely, that apart from the fact that the two areas of public access open space were adjacent, to bring together the management of these two extremely different examples of unspoilt Charnwood Forest

landscape and habitat, and managing them as a single unit, would be not only more efficient but would provide contrasting environments for both nature conservation and public enjoyment.

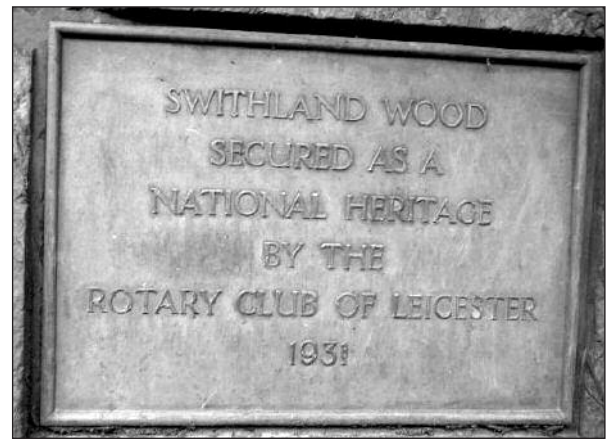
The County and City Councils in turn approved the proposal for the transfer of Swithland Wood to the Bradgate Park Trust. After the completion of the formalities, on Monday 7th November 1931 the Bradgate Park Trustees and other local and national dignitaries including the Lord Mayor, Harry H. Peach, Lindsay Everard MP and Claud Bennion (Charles Bennion having died in 1929) were invited to the Rotary Club's luncheon meeting in the Oriental Hall in Leicester's Market Place. In the chair was the President, the leading Leicester solicitor A.A. Ironside who had undertaken the legal negotiations free of charge through more than six years. The meeting saw the formal signature and exchange of the Title Deeds of Swithland Wood and two accompanying Trust Deeds. William Bastard, on behalf of the Swithland Wood Trustees, then formally handed the Deeds and a £600 War Stock certificate to Colonel Robert Martin.

In thanking the Rotary Club for the gift on behalf of all the people of the County and City, Col. Martin pointed out that it was now possible to walk two and half miles from the top end of Swithland Wood to the far corner of Bradgate Park without passing land that did not belong absolutely to the public of Leicester and Leicestershire. In acknowledgement of the Rotary Club's remarkable efforts, the Bradgate Park Trustees presented the Club with a key to Bradgate Park which was to be handed each year to succeeding Rotary Club Presidents, giving them the right to pass through the gates of the Park at any time. Sir Arnold Wilson, Chairman of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, was the guest speaker, and described the Club's preservation and gift of Swithland Wood as "without parallel in history of the Council".

In recognition of the gift, a commemorative inscription in very large letters was carved into the main vertical face of the abandoned Swithland Great Pit, and which must have been the biggest ever Swithland slate inscription. The lettering seems to have been designed by Bedingfield: a scale drawing for the lettering, apparently initialled by him, is preserved in his Secretary's file for the Swithland Wood Committee. The inscription reads:

*The Rotary Club of Leicester
Secured Swithland Wood
As a National Heritage*

However, due to rising water levels in the flooded quarry the bottom line of the inscription is only seen in periods of long and extreme droughts. Indeed, in particularly wet seasons even the middle line may be partly or completely under water. Because of this in 1948 the inscription was duplicated on a small bronze plaque affixed to a rock by the main path just above the Swithland Great Pit. Most unfortunately, however, the bronze plaque gives the year when the Wood was "secured as a National Heritage" as 1931 – the date of its donation to the Bradgate Park Trust, not 1925, the actual date of the purchase of Swithland Wood in trust for the



The misleading 1948 bronze plaque.

public benefit by the Rotary Club. Because of this, it is nowadays universally assumed that Charles Bennion's purchase of Bradgate Park in 1928 began the first moves to preserve for the public benefit some of the most important unspoilt parts of the ancient landscapes of Charnwood Forest. In fact, his munificence followed, rather than preceded, the extraordinary efforts of the Rotary Club of Leicester.

Bennion, though not himself a Rotarian, knew many of the key members of the Leicester Club. In the Centenary Year of Rotary International, and on the 80th anniversary of the completion of the purchase, it seems appropriate to point out that it seems very likely indeed that Bennion's most generous gesture in buying Bradgate Park was heavily influenced, if not directly prompted, by the pioneering action of the Rotary Club in buying Swithland Wood for the public benefit more than three years earlier in 1925.

Sources and further reading:

Ball, M.E. & Jones, M.D., 1976. The Extractive Industries. Pp. 47-55 in Evans, I.M. (editor), 1976. *Charnwood's Heritage*. (Leicester: Leicestershire Museums)

McGrath, A., 2004. *A Geological walk around Bradgate Park and Swithland Wood*. (Keyworth: British Geological Survey)

Moseley, J.B., 1981. Geology and mineral extraction. pp. 130-147 in Crocker, J., (editor), 1981. *Charnwood Forest: A Changing Landscape*. (Wyomondham: Sycamore Press for the Loughborough Naturalists Club)

Rotary Club of Leicester Archives. Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland ref. 21 D 69.

Thompson, F.B. & McIntosh, M., 2000. *Rotary in Leicester. A History of the Rotary Club of Leicester, 1916-2000*. (2nd edition) (Leicester: Rotary Club of Leicester)

Woodward, S. 1992. *Swithland Wood. A study of its history and vegetation*. (Leicester: Leicestershire Museums Publications no. 116)