

CHAPTER SEVEN

The threats to trees

Introduction

As we noted at the outset, underlying the historical enquiries described in this book are questions concerning the current condition of England's trees and woods. It is widely believed that we are losing trees from the countryside at a rapid rate as a consequence of agricultural intensification and industrial and urban expansion, and that many hundreds of ancient, semi-natural woods have been destroyed entirely or damaged beyond repair over the last century. Above all, it appears that our indigenous tree species are being assailed by a frightening succession of new diseases, mostly imported from abroad. All this is part and parcel of a wider and more general deterioration in the condition of England's natural environment. Many of these impressions are, we would emphasise here, at least partly true. But recent changes need to be carefully assessed and examined in historical context. We need to establish more clearly what precisely has changed over recent decades, by how much, and with what results. And we need to be clear about which particular social and economic developments have served to modify our tree populations, which were themselves largely shaped, in earlier periods, by social and economic processes and influences. Only by understanding such things can we begin to formulate a future for trees and woods in England.

One problem we have in thinking about the recent history of the environment is that it is often presented, in effect, as a 'game of two halves', divided by the upheavals of World War II. From the late 1870s farming began to slide into a long period of depression, principally caused by the expansion of the American railway network and the consequent conversion of the prairies of the mid-west into vast cereal fields. Britain, together with the rest of Europe, was flooded with cheap grain. No longer kept artificially high by the operation of the Corn Laws, repealed in 1846, wheat prices were halved between 1873 and 1893, while those for barley and oats fell by a third. Within a few years the problems of farmers were compounded by the arrival of cheap meat brought by refrigerated ships from the New World and Australia (Perren 1995; Perry 1974). The fortunes of farming recovered briefly during the First World War, but there was then a further slump, with only a partial and patchy recovery through the 1930s. According to many writers, because the countryside was now farmed at lower levels of intensity wildlife and a range of habitats benefited. Only in the period following the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 did agriculture

return to long-term profitability, as first the national government and latterly the European Economic Community and European Union introduced a range of subsidies aimed at increasing production. This ushered in a period of intensive farming that has continued, more or less, to the present day, and with calamitous results. Ancient pastures have been ploughed, wetlands drained, ponds filled in and woods, hedges and farmland trees removed on an awesome scale. This bipartite division is often used to frame discussions of environmental history. In John Sheail's words, '[w]hilst farming was generally depressed, the countryside of the first half of the century was typically diverse, beautiful and rich in wildlife. Farming boomed in the second half of the century, as those concerned with the conservation of amenity and wildlife ... came close to despair' (Sheail 2002, 110).

The idea that the 'depression' years were broadly beneficial in environmental terms, in comparison with both what came after and before them, has also been expressed by Oliver Rackham when specifically discussing rural tree populations: 'The period 1870–1951 was, on the whole, an age of agricultural adversity, in which there was less money to spend on either maintaining or destroying hedges. Neglect gave innumerable saplings an opportunity to grow into trees' (Rackham 1986, 223). But the connections between nature and economics are seldom simple and this is perhaps especially the case with woods and trees.

The fate of farmland trees

There are, in fact, good grounds for believing that the numbers of farmland trees, which had been falling throughout the nineteenth century, did not increase, and in many areas continued to decline, during the first half of the twentieth. One key factor was the way that the agricultural depression impacted on the fortunes of large landed estates. Agricultural rents plummeted, especially in arable districts, and at the same time landowners were faced with a raft of other financial challenges, most notably Death Duties, introduced in 1894 and raised to 15 per cent by Lloyd George and subsequently, in 1919, to 40 per cent on estates valued at more than £200,000 (Thompson 1963, 325–30; Barnes 1984). Escalating financial difficulties led many to capitalise on their standing timber. In 1902 Rider Haggard noted the felling of hedgerow oaks in the area between Whissonsett and Wendling in Norfolk, commenting: 'I think that 'ere long this timber will be scarce in England' (Haggard 1902, 506). Lilius Rider Haggard similarly described in the 1930s how 'the wholesale cutting of timber all over the country is a sad sight, but often the owner's last desperate bid to enable him to cling to the family acres ...' (Haggard and Williamson 1943, 97). When, as was often the case, large estates were finally broken up in the first half of the twentieth century, the purchasers of particular farms – often their former tenants – were likewise keen to sell much of the timber, partly to help recoup the purchase price, partly to improve the yields in the adjacent fields. Where estates remained intact, moreover, it was often hard to find tenants in these difficult times, so that landlords were more sensitive than they had formerly been to the perennial complaints about the density of hedgerow timber. Lilius Rider Haggard described:

[a] consultation about the always difficult question of tree cutting on the farm. This particularly affects the arable fields, where the farming tenant has cause for some complaint. Decided somewhat sadly that some dozen small oaks must come out before the sap rises, or next autumn when the crops are off. (Haggard 1946, 73)

Forestry operations were increasingly concentrated in woods and plantations, where timber was also cheaper to extract – an important consideration, given that the rising scale of timber imports did nothing to improve the profitability of estate forestry.

Nor is there much evidence that saplings had a greater chance of growing into mature trees during the depression years in the manner that some have suggested. Hedges were still actively maintained in most districts, not least because outgrown hedges provided cover for the exploding population of rabbits. Indeed, descriptions of the countryside in the 1930s suggest that some hedges were already being grubbed out. Mosby noted how, in north-east Norfolk, there was ‘a tendency in some areas to enlarge the fields by removing the intervening hedge. Where this has been done the farmers, particularly those who use a tractor plough, have reduced their labour costs’ (Mosby 1938, 203–4). Butcher in 1941 described much of the Suffolk landscape as having ‘Hedges ... kept as low as possible or even rooted out. Consequently one characteristic of the district is the hedgeless or almost hedgeless fields surrounded by deep ditches’ (Butcher 1941, 357). Not surprisingly, the naturalist George Bird was able to bemoan – in a lecture on Suffolk birds delivered in 1935 – the ‘devastation of the countryside by loss of timber and hedge-shelter’ that had occurred during the previous decades (Bird 1935).