

Background

It is believed that Court Woods was established in the 17th century for the supply of wood. It is mostly made-up of sweet chestnut coppice with oak and hornbeam standards dotted throughout the chestnut crop which is very efficient – as sweet chestnut can grow beneath them and this creates a woodland where sweet chestnut can be taken every 15 years and oak and ash every 100 years, so short term need and a long term capital growth are both catered for.

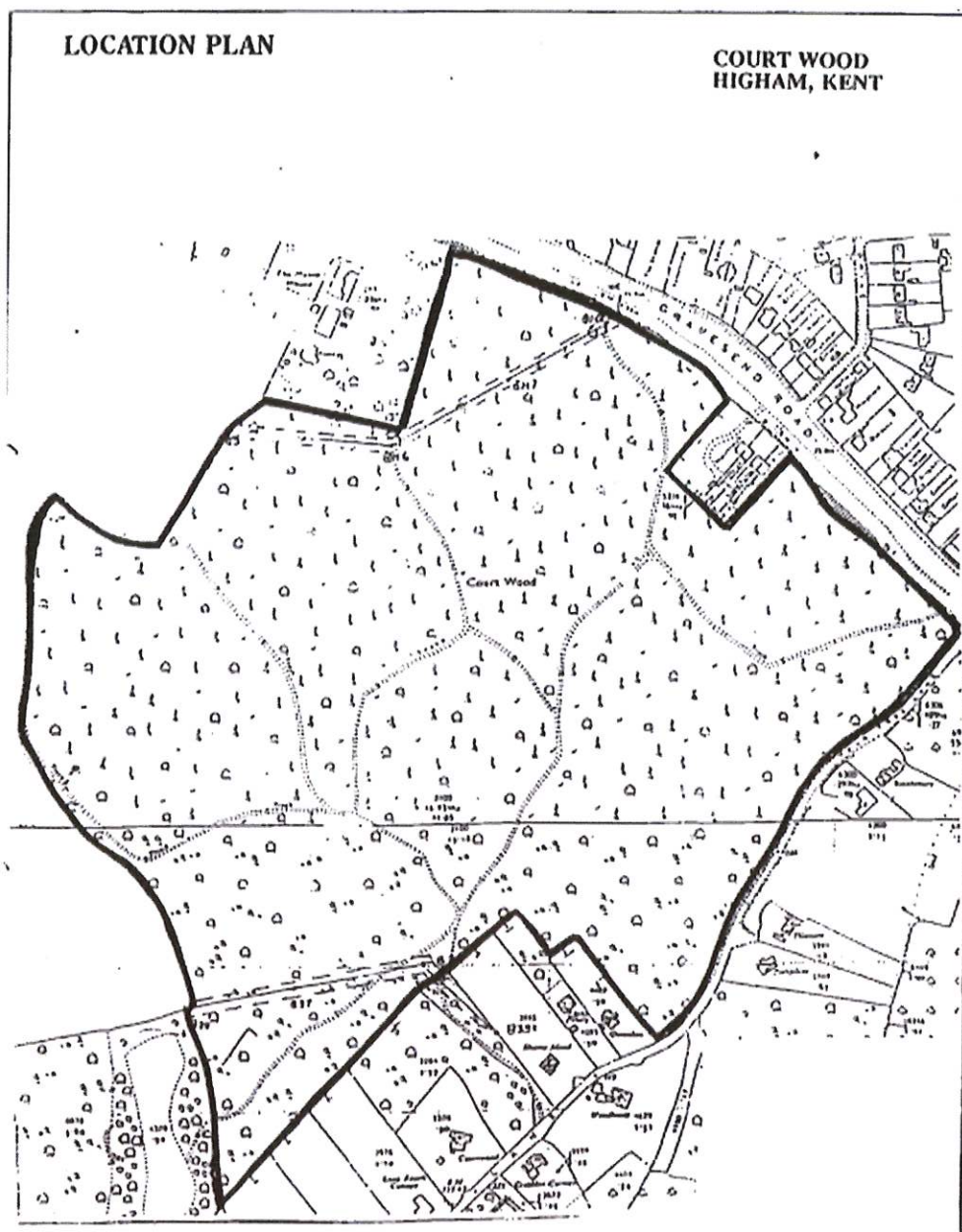
1871-1890 OS MAP showing Court Woods: Source Kent County Council



It should be made clear at this point that the application only refers to the Sweet Chestnut and none of the oak trees will be felled.

Coppicing is an important part of life in Southeast England and goes back hundreds of years. It is thought that Romans introduced Sweet Chestnut from Italy. As an introduced species it has naturalised, ie propagates itself without further human intervention.

The managing of Sweet Chestnut was further developed in the early 1800s to meet the demand for long straight poles for hops. The trees were coppiced on an 8-10 year rotation. As wire supports began to replace the poles for hops the demand for Sweet Chestnut fell rapidly. A new market emerged using Sweet Chestnut for fence posts and so now the coppicing is often cut on a 12-year rotation. During the 1990's due to the demand of fence posts an Article 4 direction was introduced to Court Woods to ensure the woods were protected. A copy of the order is attached as appendix A and the below map shows the extent of the direction.



Coppicing is an extremely sustainable management style and there are some cooperatives which have been managed for 800 years with no significant decline in growth.

Coppicing is a harvest which far from devastating the forests capacity encourages new growth and is hugely beneficial to wildlife and a host of plants and insects. Bluebells run riot after fresh cutting and combined with mature oak and hornbeam standards produce a wonderful wood scape and superb woodland husbandry.

The regrowth from the cut stools can be remarkably fast and is quite normal for sweet chestnut to reach 2 metres after their first year. Sweet chestnut is usually cut every 12 to 16 years except where it is cut young as three years to make walk sticks.

Every time a coppice cycle is initiated a sequence of changes set in motion develops in the following way.

In the first summer after cutting the woodland floor has a fairly sparse covering of vegetation. However, by the 2nd year the vegetation is very prominent with spring flowers and other plants. In midsummer the woodland floor is flooded with light and this triggers a rapid change in its appearance. Seeds which have lain dormant sometimes for many years germinate in response to additional light.

The coppice in the first three to four years is still very open allowing species such as Birch and Bramble to establish themselves, the result is usually an almost impenetrable tangle of low foliage which will normally persist until the leafy canopy closes itself at around 5 to 8 years after being cut. The increase in shading at this stage rapidly eliminates the regeneration benefit beneath the canopy and until the next cutting very few changes take place other than the continued growth of the coppiced stools. Under the shade of mature coppice, the ground layer is normally very sparse.

Contrary to popular belief, most woodlands which we know today have come about as a result of being managed and the wildlife which we associate with this particular habitat will gradually disappear if these Woodlands are no longer managed.

Small mammals such as wood mice, shrews and bank voles are strongly influenced by the coppice cycle. Once again, when coppice has been cut there is an increase in these mammals and a third year after cutting a coppice woodland can support double the density of small mammals than at any other stage of coppice growth. Numbers then decrease but remain fairly stable until the next cutting.

Coppicing is also great because young stems are doing a lot more photosynthesising than a mature tree which reaches the balance between growth and decay. A woodland full of coppice draws enormous amount of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and locked away in the form of timber. The stored carbon ends up in one of three ways.

1. Wood products where carbon is stored indefinitely.
2. Wood fuel (vastly less emissions released compared to fossil fuels).
3. Deadwood creating a lovely habitat for various creepy crawlies and food for decomposing microorganisms.

The biodiversity of young coppice is twice that of mature trees as a young coppice draws out double the amount of carbon dioxide out of the air compared to mature trees.

Proposal

Court Woods has not been managed and many of the trees have died and collapsed across the woodland floor and this is evidenced by the planning register which shows since 1974 there has only been one application for coppicing in Court woods which is as follows:

20120038 - The coppicing of Sweet Chestnut and Ash trees over a five year period and the felling of two dead Oak Trees. Consented 21.05.2012

20140124 - The coppicing of 2.8 acres of Sweet Chestnut. Consented 06.03.2014

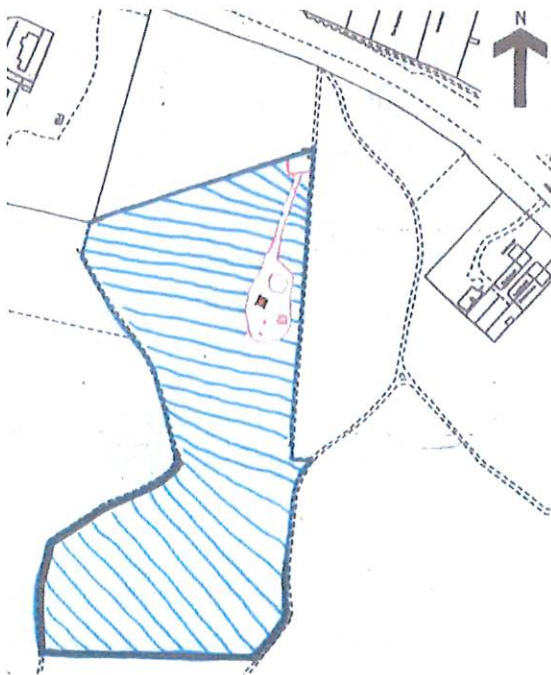
20210644 - Retention of tree coppicing to trees at court wood. Consented 13 July 2021

The Oak and Hornbeam Standards have been severely affected by the density of the sweet chestnut which has invertedly resulted in the lower limbs dying and restricting the growth of the canopy. Photos of this can be seen in Appendix B.

Court Woods consist primarily of lapsed sweet chestnut that has attained a height in excess of 80 metres within which are a number of single mature oaks and hornbeams. In addition to Sweet Chestnut a small number of single stem silver Birch and coppiced ash are present.

With average stem diameters of 300 millimetres (over bark measured at 1.3 from ground level) it is estimated the average age of the coppice tree growth to be between 40 and 50 years. Being lapsed specimens many as stools are showing decay and hollowing, commonplace on old unmanaged coppice stools. Evidence of windblown stools and failed stems caused by lack of management and basal decay is evident in the woods. Appendix B contains examples of this.

The proposal is for the thinning out of the Sweet Chestnut to allow new Stool growth and introduce appropriate for management for the woods. The extant of works will be over a number of years and encompass the land below.



In order to ensure the works are compliant with the current good forestry practise and the recommendations of British standard 3998: 2010 tree works recommendations the following will be undertaken.

1. A Forestry Commission coppice licence will be obtained.
2. TPO Consent will be obtained.
3. all felled brushwood and logs are to be removed clear from any stumps to assure adequate space is provided for natural regeneration on stumps to take place.
4. any torn split ends of cut stamps will be made good by making one final sloping cut wave in the centre of the stump.
5. Felling will only take place during the felling season (November to February).

Conclusions

It is evident that due to the lack of past management many of the lapse coppice stools within the woods are deteriorating due to basal and stem decay. This is not uncommon with lapsed coppice woodland and if left unmanaged will result in the continued deterioration and loss of many stools

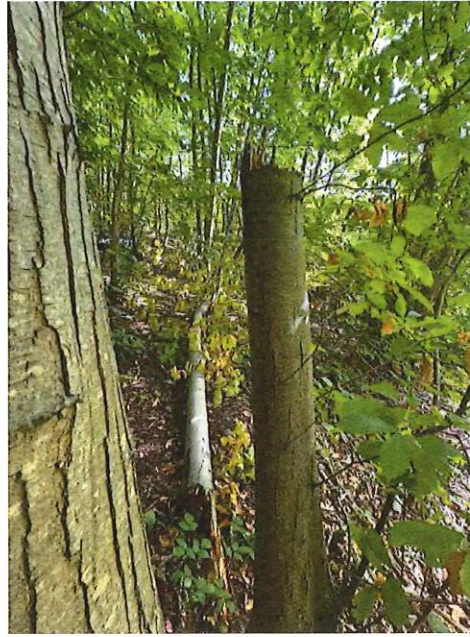
Appendix B - Conditions of Trees within Court Woods

Basal and stem decay



Fallen Trees (Decay and Storm Damage)



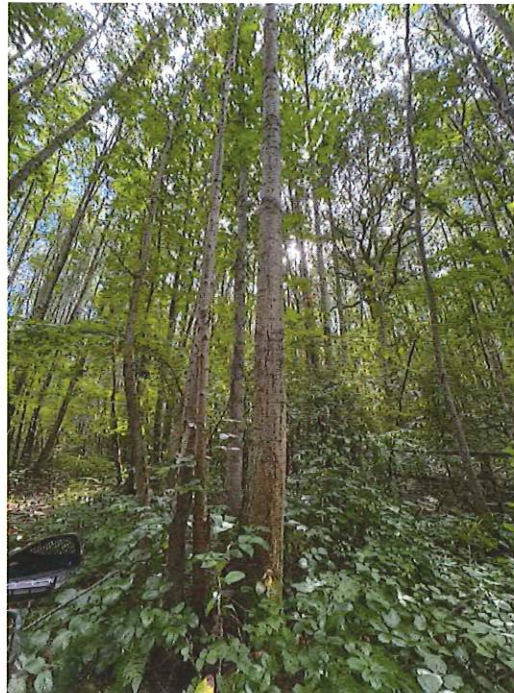


Standing Dead Trees





Trees in excess of 80M in height (competing for space).



Oak Tree constrained by Coppice Growth

