Historic Highgate Wood
a self-guided walk
Compiled by Michael Hammerson
Allow two hours to do the whole walk in one session. Numbers in brackets refer to the stops on your walk in the map on page 7 - NOT to the numbered posts in the wood; these refer to a different walk. The walk starts at the Information Hut, by the Cafe (1). Map on pages 7-8.

An ancient wood like Highgate is not just trees and wildlife; it can also be a walk back through time. Like most other woods in Britain, it has been shaped by thousands of years of human management, of which there are traces everywhere - if you know where to look. Old photographs of the Wood show us what it was like 75 to 125 years ago, and old maps go back even further. This guide will show you things which you may have walked past many times without noticing. Highgate Wood is full of remains of its past history and management, some going back thousands of years, making it one of London’s most important ancient woodlands. (An “ancient woodland” is one which has existed since before 1600).

But, firstly - do you know the difference between a Wood and a Forest? The curious answer is that a forest need have no trees in it! It was originally a legal concept, introduced by the Norman Kings in the 11th century to define the area over which the King had a right to hunt deer, which were then royal property. It could include woods, fields and even towns; the laws protecting deer applied over the whole area. One well-known example preserves the concept in its name - Sherwood Forest: that is, the area covered by the deer laws in which Sherwood was located. There is a Bernwood Forest in Oxfordshire, and Dartmoor is also a Forest, though it has few trees.

While on the subject, what about the notoriously cruel forest laws of the Normans, which prescribed severe punishment for anyone who dared to hunt the king’s deer? Actually, as Oliver Rackham reminds us, there is no recorded case of their ever being enforced; fines were a much more sensible, and lucrative, means of punishment.

There is a great variety of woodland types in Britain. Highgate Wood is typical of the oak and hornbeam woodlands unique to Middlesex, southern Hertfordshire and west Essex. The main aim of woodland management in Highgate must be to maintain and optimise this habitat, both for the wildlife which depend on it and to ensure that future generations can benefit from the history and ecology unique to ancient woodlands of this type.

Highgate Wood and its Setting

To look at Highgate Wood and its history, we must forget the wood as it is today - a green oasis in London’s inner suburbs. Today, it is bounded by the railway (built in 1864), the Archway Road (1813), and Muswell Hill Road (mediaeval), with some 9.6 km of suburbs between it and the countryside. Yet, almost within living memory, it was rural. Highgate was not even joined to London until the 1890s, and until the First World War (1914-18), it was mainly countryside and villages to the north.

Little more than 100 years ago, therefore, Highgate wood was part of the Middlesex countryside, an agricultural landscape employing most of the population, and providing the largest city in the world - London - with food & fuel. The photographs below show the area just before it was swallowed by suburbia.
Our first stop is at a small but important tree, less than 1 foot in diameter, at the left edge of the path - its trunk divides into two about 1.5 metres above the ground. It is a Wild Service Tree (Sorbus torminalis), a rare native tree which is an indicator of ancient woodland. Though it is unlikely to be very old, the ancestor tree from which it suckered (their main means of spreading) could have been an original inhabitant of the wood when it was part of the original prehistoric wildwood of the area. (There are several examples of huge ancient Wild Service Trees on Hampstead Heath; these are of national importance).

Continue along the path for about 25 metres, to another bench, on the left of the path; then turn to the left and walk 25 metres into the wood (3)

Here is a large, oddly-shaped Beech tree with what appear to be several trunks pressed against each other. This is an old woodland management technique known as Bundle Planting, where several saplings were planted in the same hole to grow more timber. It is perhaps 200 years old.

From here, walk parallel with the path 18 metres towards the playground to (4)

Here is a tall double-trunked hornbeam which split apart during the great 1987 storm. Its roots remained intact, so it continued to grow, its branches growing towards the light. Eventually, as the trunk sinks into the ground, each upright branch will root and become a separate tree, misleading future historians into thinking that this is an old hedgerow! This illustrates the importance of confirming any such theories with documentary research, whenever possible.

Now go back to the path and look at the Playing Field (5)

You probably think of the playing field as cleared from the Wood in modern times as a sports facility. Earlier maps show that this is not so. It is shown on, for example, Greenwood’s map of 1819 and on John Rocque’s well-known, if not entirely accurate, 1754 map, and is conjectured on Marcham’s map of the Manor of Hornsey in the 17th century (Page 3). It has therefore been a field for many centuries.

Note also, on Greenwood’s map, a ride between the two sections of the Wood on the south of the field, pointing towards what is now the Archway Road Gate opposite Church Road. Other early maps show that this follows the line of what is now Bishop’s Road, towards the area now occupied by the Hillcrest flats on North Hill (the site of the 18th century Gillows’ Brewery, which owned the wood, when it was known as Brewhouse Wood, long before the Archway Road was built). This shows how ancient landscape features affect the modern layout of an area.

It is surprising to realise, from looking at Prickett’s 1842 map that, until the building of Archway Road in 1813 (as a bypass to Highgate Hill, which was almost impossible for horse-drawn vehicles in winter), Highgate Wood extended to North Hill as far up as Park House Passage. This part of the wood survived until the 1860s, when it was finally developed.

Incredibly, though, three ancient oaks from it survive to this day in one of the back gardens in the area, two hundred metres from the modern wood!

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Now continue up the path about 18 metres to (6)

Looking to your left, you will see a low bank with a large shattered oak on it, meandering eastwards across the Wood. This eroded earthwork is an important clue to the Wood’s history.

Some background information will help you understand how woods were traditionally managed. Until the early 20th century, Highgate Wood was managed on the “coppice with standards” method. “Standards” were oak trees allowed to grow to their full size for timber, buildings, and other large construction projects such as ships for the old wooden navy; indeed, this form of management was a legal requirement in the 16th century, when a supply of timber for the navy’s fighting ships was vital, and oak from Highgate Wood may have been used for this.

However, in the pre-plastic and aluminium era, wood was also needed for many small objects: tool handles; vessels, boxes, poles, sticks, and firewood; charcoal, essential for ironworking; etc. It was realised early on that, when young trees were cut, they did not die, but grew again; not only that, but more than one stem grew, to provide the sustenance for the root system. This technique, known as coppicing, meant that a tree could produce an unlimited amount of “small” wood if it was harvested every 10-20 years. Further, every time it was cut, its biological ‘clock’ was set back to zero; a regularly-coppiced tree will keep growing back, and can, almost literally, live forever.

Over the centuries, the new shoots, after many coppicings, would spread out from its original centre until it looked more like a ring of individual trees than a single multi-stemmed plant; this is known as a Stool.

While a coppiced tree was growing again, its shoots were vulnerable to grazing animals such as cattle and pigs - the 11th-century Domesday survey indicates that pigs were kept here. The stools were protected by separating off each area of newly-coppiced trees - known as a “compartment” - by earth banks, with a drainage ditch on one side and topped by a hedge, to keep grazing animals out. The hedge was kept thick by partially cutting through the stems every few years and bending them down, so their branches started to grow upwards again (like the split hornbeam (4)); this technique is called “layering”. We shall see some old examples in the wood.

Highgate Wood would have been divided into fifteen or twenty compartments, and one compartment - the oldest, with the largest stools - cut annually to provide the wood needed every year - a perfect example of the “sustainability” which we strive so hard to achieve in our so-called modern age!

One former name for Highgate Wood is Brewer’s Fall, when the Wood was Marcham’s reconstruction map of the area in the 17th century

Ancient 6-trunked hornbeam coppiced stool (7)

Ancient 5 trunked hornbeam coppiced stool (8)
owned by local brewer and corn merchant Francis Gillow; see the early field names on Marcham’s map. A “Fall” was a compartmented coppiced wood; the name is recalled in nearby Coldfall Wood. Local names preserve other woodland management techniques: “Barnet” suggest a burnt woodland clearance, as, perhaps, does Burnt Oak. “Redding”, a riding or clearing, survives in Old Redding, Harrow.

Now look again at the earth bank where you have stopped, winding off into the wood. This is one of a few which still survive in Highgate and Queens Woods, dividing them into “compartments”; sadly, most have been lost through erosion. Note the slight depression on the right-hand side; this was the ditch which drained the compartment, now almost filled by centuries of rotting leaves; it may originally have been 0.5 – 1 metre deep. The bank was also much higher, but weathering and millions of people using the wood have eroded it. There are no records to tell us how old this bank might be; but it must be older than the huge beech tree, at least 200 years old, growing on it a few metres ahead.

Some trees take coppicing better than others. Among the best are hornbeams, the main coppice tree in the wood; hundreds of old coppiced hornbeam “stools” still survive. Almost any hornbeam with two or more stems is likely to be one; although the individual trunks may be no more than 80-120 years old (the wood was last properly coppiced in the 1880s), the biggest stools may be many hundreds of years old; some could be over a thousand years old. Try to spot them as you walk around. Some now only have one trunk remaining, but scars or stumps at the base will show where older trunks once existed.

Although regular coppicing prolongs a tree’s life, to start again after 100 years or more is risky; the shock may kill it. It is therefore likely that we will gradually lose these links with the distant past as they grow old and die. However, research in ancient woodlands such as Epping Forest is helping us to understand how these ancient trees might be kept alive for future generations.

You are now standing close to two of the largest ancient coppiced hornbeam stools in Highgate Wood. Go back down the path 12m towards the cafe; on your right (7), you will see an oval group of six hornbeam trunks, about 4 metres across. A further 25 metres back down the path, on the left, you will see a semicircle of 5 large trunks (8), all that remains of a once much larger stool. Both are many hundreds of years old; they are larger than stools in Bradfield Woods, Essex, known from old records to date from the 13th century.

**Now walk across the narrow open area at the southern end of the field to (9), where you will see a large, gnarled, ancient-looking oak**

This oak stands at the edge of the “ride” which old maps show once ran through the southern part of the wood and up to North Hill. It has a thick trunk, which divides into several smaller branches 5 metres above the ground; this is an ancient “pollarded” oak. Pollarding is a traditional tree-management technique like coppicing, but the tree is cut, and re-grows, at a height which grazing animals cannot reach. This suggests that this oak was once in a hedgerow - we will shortly see other evidence for this - and that the field was once used for grazing animals.

**From this oak, turn left and walk 12 metres to (10)**

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Here you will see one of the most remarkable trees in the wood - a two-trunked hornbeam (10), its roots exposed, leaning towards the field at a crazy angle. One trunk runs parallel with the ground and then suddenly turns upright. This is an example of the “layering” technique mentioned earlier; it was part of a hedge on a compartment bank running along the edge of the ride, in which the oak (9) grew. Its roots are exposed because the bank on which it grew has eroded away. However, we can still follow the line of this bank.

To your left is another large multi-stemmed beech tree (14). It is too high for a coppice, and too low for a pollard (grazing animals could reach there easily). It may therefore be another bundle-planted beech; there are several in the wood.

**Continue along the path for 70 metres**

Immediately to the left, you will see (15) an old hornbeam on a low earth bank. This is the same bank which we saw at (7); if you have the time, try following it back to (7), noting the remains of the drainage ditch alongside it and the 200-year-old beech on it (16), and then come back to (15) again - but, please walk alongside it, not on it, to avoid eroding it.

**Back at (15), walk straight across the path towards Muswell Hill Road**

A slight drop in the ground to your right shows that the bank (17), now almost eroded away, continued across here; another layered hedgerow hornbeam can be seen on it, and a distinct difference can be seen in the level of the ground, which is higher on the left than the right. Continue into the wood for 50 metres, and stop (18). What do you notice about the ground here? The surface of the ground is a series of ridges, before finally plunging down towards the Road, and beyond it to the valley at the bottom of Queen’s Wood. These ridges can be followed for some distance to the right and left; we do not know what they are. They could be: - the eastern boundary of the Mediaeval Hunting Park of which Highgate Wood was once a part (see later): but it is more complex than the usually single-banked Mediaeval park boundary or “pale”; - the defensive earthworks of a Bronze Age (2,500-700 BC) or Iron Age (700 BC - AD 50) settlement or fort, though no objects of that date have been found here; - they could just be the result of the clay subsoil slumping down the steep valley.

**Flat, semi-circular area (19)**

**View from (21) in 1913**

**Unidentified ridges or earthworks (18)**

**Old hornbeam on compartment bank 6 (15)**

**200 year-old beech on compartment bank 6 (16)**

**Unidentified Bank**

### Walk towards the playground.

After 18 metres, you will see another layered hornbeam on your right (11), leaning at an even steeper angle, by the corner of the playground fence. As you walk along the playground fence, look at the hornbeams to your left (12); these are the remnants of the same layered hedge, their exposed roots and the slight rise in the ground from the path being all that is left of the compartment bank on which they originally grew.

This bank has been heavily eroded during the time the Wood has been a public open space. As recently as c.1910, the bank and its layered trees still survived in relatively good condition; but millions of feet walking over it have almost destroyed it.

As users of the wood, we have a responsibility to take care to avoid damaging these fragile remains of the wood’s past.

**From here, walk diagonally left back into the wood towards the path, and turn right along the path to the first junction; the Archway Gate is to the right, but you turn left**

Look at the large oak (13) at the path junction which fell in the 2002 storm, now almost buried by bramble. This was one of the “standards” planted for timber about 200-300 years ago, but never cut down.

**Turn left along the path, into the wood; stop after 28 metres**
Only an archaeological survey may tell us. All we know is that, a few years ago, the stem of a clay pipe, commemorating Queen Victoria’s golden jubilee in 1887 - the year the wood was opened to the public - was found in the roots of a fallen tree nearby; they are therefore older than that! The Gate a short distance to your right, on Muswell Hill Road, is known as the Gypsy Gate. This is not some romantic name, recording a time when Gypsies travelled along the road. It recalls a pub called The Gypsy, located a short distance away on the opposite side of the road, which closed back in 1907; the building still stands, used today as a design studio.

Return to the path which you left at (15). Turn right, walk for about 10 metres and look to your left

Here is another strange feature - a flat-topped, semicircular area - which we do not yet understand. We know that the Hampstead-Highgate Ridge, from Child’s Hill, through the Whitestone Pond and Highgate Village, and down to Crouch End, was intended to be the defensive line for the British Army had Napoleon invaded England in c. 1800, during the Napoleonic Wars, and captured London. An area near the Whitestone Pond, where a fort was built, is still known as “The Battery”. The name Castle Yard, in Highgate, may record another fort on the same line. Might another artillery emplacement have been built in Highgate Wood? We are unlikely ever to know; some day, an archaeological excavation may give the answer.

Walk along the path for another 100 metres, to (20)

The area to your right, coppiced in 2002, gives you a good idea of what the wood would have looked like in its “working” days - not the high, dense wood we know today, but an ever-changing patchwork, managed for wood and timber, and showing different stages of growth from 1 to 20 years.

Carry on for about 50 metres (21)

You are now standing approximately where the photograph was taken in 1913. This shows what the wood actually did look like about 20 years after it had last been coppiced.

Now turn left and walk off the path, into the wood, for approximately 100 metres, following the rough track where it forks and curves to the right, to (22)

(It’s hard to describe this part of the wood accurately, so following our directions will take all your skill and powers of observation - good luck!) If you look ahead carefully, in the direction of the playing field - and by now you will be starting to look around with archaeologist’s eyes for variations or irregularities on the ground - you will see a long, low bank, about 5 metres wide, running from your left to your right, with several large oak trees standing on it. Easier to see in winter than in summer, when bramble covers the ground, it can be traced for about 35 metres to the left, and for at least 130 metres towards the north of the wood. We do not know what it is:

- it does not appear to have any connection to the earthworks we saw in (14);
- it is too far from Muswell Hill Road - the eastern boundary of the Mediaeval hunting park - to be the Park boundary;
- it has the form and appearance of a deliberately-made road or trackway, and could be of any age from Roman to relatively modern; the trees growing on it are at least 200 years old. As we will see later, it could possibly be Roman.

If the ground is dry, sit down, because it is time for some more historical background. There is no early documentary evidence for Highgate Wood. From the early 7th century, it was part of lands owned by the Bishops of London (Hampstead Heath was owned by the Abbots of Westminster).

The 12th century chronicler, William FitzStephen, described Middlesex as dense, endless forest, inhabited by bulls, wolves and bears, and his account has been used uncritically by historians ever since. However, archaeological excavation in Greater London over the past 40 years have shown the situation to be far more complex, with extensive farmed landscapes from the Neolithic period (5-3,000 years ago) onwards. From the Saxon period the Church would certainly have managed all its properties, including Highgate Wood, as intensively as possible; during excavations in the 1970s, whetstones were found, made from a stone known to have been imported from Germany in the 11th Century.

Following the Norman conquest of England in 1066, the wood was a part of lands given by King William I (1066-1087) as a Hunting Park to William the Norman, Bishop of London 1051-75. A Park, in the Middle Ages, was not a place for public recreation. It was an area within which deer were kept, with a ‘pale’, or embankment with a hedge or fence, to prevent them from straying. As Parks were not the King’s hunting lands, the Forest Laws did not apply. However, they were the gift of the King to his senior nobles. Deer, as the King’s property, could not be bought, and to be able to hunt them and eat their meat was a powerful status symbol.

The memory of the men who worked in the Parks from the Middle Ages to the 17th century still survives in a common surname - Parker.

The map on Page 3 shows the area of the Park as plotted by the Meacham brothers in 1929, showing the probable layout of the locality in the early 17th century; note that the whole of Muswell Hill Road is called Southwood Lane (the Archway Road was not built until 1813). Highgate Wood occupied a small part of it. In the middle of the Park, the Bishop had a hunting lodge. This was used until at least 1335. Its ruins were still visible in 1593, when it was described by historian John Norden as “rather a castle than a lodge”, and writers in 1797 and 1842 state that its outline could still be seen. Its site is now within Highgate Golf Course; the most surrounding it can still easily be made
In all but the 1987 area, which is a permanent reserve, fences are removed after 10 years to allow tree regeneration.
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out, some 70 metres square, in the area of the 12th green. Hornsey Church is said to be built of its stone. For a detailed study of the Hunting Park, read the article by local historian Malcolm Stokes (see “Further Reading” at end). Highgate Wood is not mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086, but is probably part of the “Wood for 770 pigs” mentioned in the survey for Hornsey. The first written mention of the Park, and of Highgate, was in 1227.

The main road from Highgate to the North - now North Road and North Hill - passed through the Park; Hampstead Lane formed its southern and Muswell Hill Road its eastern boundary. Travellers through the park had to pay tolls to the Bishop of London. For this purpose, Toll-Gates were set up at the entrances to the Park, and their names are still preserved for us:

(1) the now-forgotten Finchley Gate, at the Old White Lion Public House, by East Finchley Station;

(2) Spaniards Gate, a name still used; the 18th-century toll house building still survives opposite the Spaniards Public House, now a famous piece of “traffic calming”;

(3) Highgate, which probably derives its name from the “High Toll Gate”, although it could also derive from the Middle English “heig geat”, meaning a gate or opening in the hedge or enclosure - that is, of the Hunting Park. The first mention of a hermit living at the top of the hill, to collect the tolls and repair the road, is in 1387. The inn where the tolls were collected until 1876 is still called the Gate House. In 1241, William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke, was permitted by Henry III to keep 10 deer in his Park at Haringey. In 1305 Edward I visited the Bishop’s Hunting Lodge - and, perhaps, the wood. It is unclear whether it was among lands which passed into the King’s hands when Henry VIII confiscated vast tracts of church property in the 1530s, and there is no other specific mention of the Wood until 1647, when Parliament sold “Hawtes” (or holts, thin strips of woodland) in Hornsey, confiscated from the crown, to Sir John Wollaston, a supporter of Parliament during the Civil War and builder of the

Almshouses in Southwood Lane near Highgate High Street. However, Stokes tells us that the Bishops retained hunting rights over the land until as late as 1662. In the 17th century it was known as Brewer’s Fall or Brewhouse Wood, and seems to have been back in the possession of the Church by the later 17th century, after the restoration.

Now start walking again! Try to follow the earthwork north, as far as the first surfaced path; there turn left, at a memorial bench to Prof. Peter Fay, then right at the first path junction, and continue walking

As you walk, note on your left, c.15 metres into the wood, a low earth bank running almost parallel with the path. This is another coppice embankment. As you reach the fountain, this bank will be only a few metres from you; north of the path, it is lost - or maybe it ended here?

Stop by the Fountain (24)

Read the 1887 dedication on the fountain. Then look at the photo of the area in about 1905. It shows that the trees and shrubs were much lower and denser; they would have been coppiced only about 20 years before and had only just grown to the point where they needed to be cut again, It also shows that the track now leading to the top of the low hill above the Fountain had been given a hard surface by the wood’s new owners; most of us will probably be glad that it is again a rustic earth track, giving a much wilder feel to the area.

Multiple-stemmed Beech & Oak (25) on embankment (26)

Multiple bank and ditch (26)

Fountain, 1905 (24)
Now walk up the hill along the track a short distance, and stop where you see a fine old multiple-stemmed beech tree with an oak growing up against it (25)

Here, with the aid of our imaginations, we can take a big leap back in time - 7,000 years, to 5,000 BC, during the so-called “Mesolithic” or Middle Stone Age period. The wood was very different then, owing to cooler climatic conditions - mainly native lime, with oak, elm, hazel and alder, rather than today’s oak and hornbeam. We know that people hunted here at the time; archaeological excavations at the top of the hill found large quantities of flint tools, including arrows, blades and the debris from manufacturing them.

Why did early man choose Highgate Wood? It was not just here, of course, that they lived and hunted, as excavations throughout Greater London over the past 30 years have revealed; but the wood is one of the few areas not destroyed by suburban development, where clues to the past still survive. The Neolithic, or New Stone Age, which followed the Mesolithic, was a time of agricultural revolution, with massive loss of woodland to farming - possibly including Highgate Wood itself, the finding of an area where flint tools were made suggests the area may have been more open at the time.

Our next glimpse of the Wood’s history is possibly 5,000 years later. Look around you. The huge old multiple-stemmed beech tree, with a large oak growing right up against it, mentioned above, is standing on a rise in the ground. If you stand here, facing down the hill, and look to your right, you will see that this rise in the ground is actually part of a long earthwork - a multiple bank and ditch - running into the distance and crossed by the modern path (26). This runs right across the Wood, from the Onslow Gate to the railway embankment.

We do not know what this is, but it has trees at least 200 years old growing on it. It may be a boundary bank, or “pale” of the Norman Hunting Park. However, it doesn’t coincide with any known medieval boundaries, and it could well be Prehistoric in date - perhaps an Iron Age [700 BC - 50 AD] boundary between estates or tribal territories, or a defensive work.

There is also another low bank running parallel to it, about 35-40 metres to the south, and possibly linked to it as some sort of enclosure (27). The fact that no Roman pottery was found in, or under it, during a 1970s excavation suggests that it could be pre-Roman.

Only archaeological excavation may show what these earthworks are. In the meantime, why not explore them (trying to walk beside, not over, them, to avoid eroding these precious relics of our past history) and imagine to yourself what this area may have been like when they were built, perhaps 2,000 years ago or more. A substantial earthwork like this could not have been built in a wooded area, meaning that when it was built, there was no wood here.

Now continue up the path to the top of the hill (28)

If you had been standing here 1,900 years ago, the scene would have been very different - a lot of newly-coppiced trees, and a lot of smoke because, soon after the Roman conquest in AD 43, a factory was set up here to supply the new town of Londinium with pottery. Pottery was made here over the next hundred years, and it is regularly found in City of London excavations. Although there have been few archaeological excavations in Highgate, two other local Roman finds are known - a hoard of late 2nd Century coins from Cranley Gardens in the 1920s, and some pottery from Southwood Lawn Road in the 1970s. So far, Highgate is the only Roman pottery factory known from Greater London (the much larger one at Brockley Hill being in Hertfordshire).

Vast quantities of misfired or broken pottery, and the remains of ten kilns, were found during the 1969-74 excavations. Firing a pottery kiln needs a lot of wood, particularly charcoal to quickly build up a high temperature, and brushwood to keep the kilns burning for up to two days. Study of the pottery suggests that the site was not working all the time, but was visited every 20 years or so, from about AD 50 to AD 150, by potters who moved around the London area. The evidence suggests that the pottery manufacture process was linked to a 15-20 year coppicing cycle; after the coppiced wood had been used up, there would be no more available until it had grown again. It also suggests that Highgate Wood has been managed and coppiced from at least the 1st century, A.D.
The lack of other Roman finds in the area suggests that there was not a large population here at the time. Why, then, did the potters keep coming back? It must surely have been the only suitable woodland in the area, combining good supplies of wood, clay and water, and not a part of a vast, dense, wild forest, as it is traditionally thought to have been until well into the middle ages. We still have much to discover about the early history of the area.

In 1972, two kilns were reconstructed here, to try to replicate the Roman production of pottery. The experiment was successful, with one exception. The Roman pottery was grey, showing that the potters excluded oxygen from the kilns while the iron-rich clay was being fired. The experimental pottery consistently came out red; the Romans’ techniques could not be duplicated exactly.

There are several massive coppiced hornbeam stools in the wood, some 4m or more in diameter. These are larger than some documented examples in Essex dated to the 13th century and, according to one ancient tree expert, it is possible that some could actually date from the Roman period and have provided fuel for the pottery kilns; so, a few of the trees you see could perhaps be between one and two thousand years old. The pottery manufacture ended in about AD 150, perhaps driven out of business by the large-scale Late Roman pottery factories in Oxfordshire & Surrey. We know nothing of how the wood was managed for the next 400 years.

In AD 604, two hundred years after the end of Roman government in Britain, the Wood became the property of the Diocese of London. It must therefore have been carefully managed from that time. After the Norman Conquest, it became the property of the Norman Kings, and by the late 11th century had been given by them to the Bishop of London as a Hunting Park, valuable not only for the right to hunt, but for producing wood for timber (“standards”) and smaller wood (“coppice”), and for rearing pigs.

Highgate Wood has therefore probably been managed since at least the Iron Age - a period of 2,000-2,500 years. As we have also seen, it is unlikely that it stood alone in a vast wild forest - so William FitzStephen’s description of Middlesex in the middle ages may not be accurate. Perhaps he never actually visited it? Though the Borough of Haringey has only existed since 1964 - before that, the western part of it was Hornsey - the two place names are both very old. The first record of the name is in 1201, as Haringue, from Harengs Hege, or Hareng’s Enclosure, Hareng being a Norman French name. From then until the mid-15th century, it appears in various spellings. The ‘s’ first appears in 1461, in Harensey, and it is as late as 1564 that the name Hornsey is first used.

Go back down to the path, by the most direct route you can find (28), and turn right along it towards the Bridge Gate. As you walk, look down the slope to your left, where the great earthwork (26), with its double bank and triple ditch, is clearly visible; it crosses the path diagonally, exactly where the memorial bench to Val Weinstein is sited (29). Go down and look at it; but help us to preserve this important relic of our ancient past by walking over it as little as possible, and making sure that bicycles, skateboards, etc., are not ridden over it. 75m further along the path, on the right, is a huge 6-trunked hornbeam stool, possibly one of the very trees originally coppiced by the Romans 2,000 years ago (30). Just before the bridge gate, take the path to the left, and walk along it for about 65 metres.
Here, on the right of the path (31), is a short but well-preserved length of the great earthwork, as it leaves the edge of the wood under the bed of the former Alexandra Palace railway, built in the 1870s. The earthwork may be even better preserved beneath it, protected from weathering and pedestrians; one day, perhaps, we will be able to excavate it and get a better idea of what it once looked like (30). An information board here tells you more about it.

On later 19th century Ordnance Survey maps, the line of the earthwork continues west of the railway as a short length of hedge, suggesting that the earthwork once extended well beyond the modern wood.

Below the earthwork is a small stream (32). Highgate Wood is on a spur of land (the Muswell Hill Ridge) which is a watershed between the valleys of the River Brent to the west, and the River Lea to the east. This little stream, now dry for much of the year (though 100 years ago or more there were more streams and pools in the Wood) runs, via Mutton Brook, Dollis Brook and the River Brent into the Thames. Streams and springs on the eastern side of the wood also ran into the Thames, via the now-lost River Moselle (from which the name Muswell derives) and the River Lea.

Continue another 65 metres along the path, leaving it where it curves to the left, passing to the right of a large twin-trunked oak (33) and follow the rough track which runs parallel with the fence separating the wood from the old railway track.

After about 30 or 40 metres, stop and look around, and you will see why the Wood got its 19th-century name of Gravel Pit Wood (34). The ground is full of hollows and pits, caused by digging for the gravel which formerly covered this area; it was probably used to surface the Archway Road when it was built in 1813.

Now continue towards the Playing Field, and after you have passed the main belt of trees on your left, walk round to your left and continue until you come to a fenced off area (35).

This area was coppiced in 2006 as part of the ongoing programme of regenerating and providing a wider age spread of trees. The little or no coppicing carried out between the 1890’s and 1980’s means that too many of the more recent trees are now of the same age, so that, when they start to die off in 50 - 100 years’ time, the wood would become very thin. The programme of coppicing a small area of the wood every 10 years will correct this and ensure that the wood remains varied and in good health.

This area will show visitors what a newly-coppiced area of the wood would have traditionally looked like, and regular visitors will be able to follow its gradual recovery and growth, and how the ground flora grows and changes to meet the changing conditions of light and overshadowing, over the following years.

The main part of your historical walk is now over. However, there is some later history to read about, so why not go back to the cafe and finish reading it over a cup of tea, of which you may be in some need if you have carefully followed this walk!

As you walk back, look around with your newly-acquired historian’s eye. Some areas have many coppice hornbeams; others have few, but a higher concentration of oak, while others have a mixture. Most of the coppice “compartments” have been lost, but a GIS survey of stools, and oaks over 150 years old, might one day enable us to work out where the compartments had been.
The Modern History of the Wood

During the 17th Century, wood was sent from Hornsey to London, and damage was caused to Churchyard Bottom Wood (now Queen’s Wood, then part of what was known as Southwood Common) by the local "commoners" grazing their cattle. Locals also cut gorse - no longer found here, though some still survives on Hampstead Heath - for fuel on the common, and bracken for their animals. A fragment of a 17th Century stoneware beer-jar was found in the roots of an old oak which fell in 2004.

The 18th Century was a period of great agricultural change, enclosure of common land, and destruction of many ancient woods; in its impact on the English countryside, it was the Common Agricultural Policy of its time. Hornsey’s woods, however, seem to have survived the “improvements” which destroyed woods elsewhere.

In 1813, the Archway Road was built as a “bypass” to Highgate village, whose Hill was such a challenge to horse teams, particularly in the gluey clayey mud of winter. This cut off part of the Wood, which remained undeveloped until the 1860s; remarkably, three surviving ancient oaks from it were recently discovered in a back garden in Church Road.

The wood was coppiced regularly until at least 1842 (though the growth rings of fallen trees suggests that there was some coppicing until much later). It was then leased to the Earl of Mansfield, the owner of Kenwood, who somewhat neglected it.

In Highgate and elsewhere, development intensified with the building of the railways and the relentless expansion of suburbia between the 1880s and the First World War. The saving of Hampstead Heath in 1871, after a 40-year struggle, had shown the urgent need to protect London’s open spaces. Fortunately, the Earl of Mansfield was in no hurry to sell his lease, and the Church Commissioners, who owned the Wood, had plenty of other land to develop. But Mansfield’s lease finally ended in 1884, and the Church announced its intention to develop its “1,000 acres of land in the area.”

The fight to save Highgate Wood was led by local politician Henry Reader Williams (1822-1897), who wrote a long letter, warning of the wood’s imminent destruction, to the Times, which took up the campaign. But who would buy the Wood? The Hornsey Local Board had little money, and it was outside the area over which the Metropolitan Board of Works (the precursor of the London County Council) could buy land. Only the Corporation of London had the precedent, the experience and the resources to buy and manage open land in the London area, and it was persuaded to buy the wood in 1886. The Crouch End Clock Tower was erected in honour of Williams’ efforts in 1895. The story is told in detail on pages 496-507 of John Lloyd’s classic history of Highgate.

In return, the Church Commissioners were allowed to develop other lands in the area, between the Spaniards Inn and Bishopshoop Road. Sadly, this included the great Bishop’s Wood, an important ancient woodland of which the Kenwood North Wood is the surviving fragment. However, many of its original ancient oaks were preserved in the streets and gardens of Bishop’s, Compton, Courtenay and Sheldon Avenues and Stormont Road; a walk along these streets (two of them are private roads) will reveal many ancient oaks, visible between the houses. The name survives in Bishopswood Road; though the name of the Bishop of London under whom the Wood was destroyed – Arthur Winnington-Ingram – also survives, in Bishop’s Avenue, Winnington Road and Ingram Avenue!

The story does not end here though. In 1889, Highgate Wood could still be described as “…very thick and coppse-like, so that to turn aside from the path is to plunge into a dense thicket of trees and saplings, where a lover of solitude might spend a long summer’s day without seeing a human face.”

Only 5 years later, in 1894, the poet AE Houseman, who lived in North Road, Highgate, wrote to the press with some irony: “In August 1886, Highgate Wood became the property of the… City of London. It was then in a very sad state. So thickly was it overgrown… that if you stood in the centre, you could not see the linens of the inhabitants of Archway Road hanging in their back gardens. Nor could you see the advertisement for Juggins ale on the public house at the south corner of the wood. Therefore the… Corporation… cut down the intervening brushwood and now when we stand in the centre we can divide our attention between Juggins’ ale and our neighbours’ washing. Scarlet flannel petticoats are much worn in Archway Road, and if anyone desires to feast his eyes on these very bright and picturesque objects, so seldom seen in the streets, let him repair to the centre of Highgate Wood.”

The wood’s new owners started to turn it into a park, and between 1899 and 1906 cut down many of the old oaks, so that by 1916 “Highgate Woods, which thirty years ago were a blaze of colour in spring, are now so intersected by cinder and asphalt paths that their beauty has almost been destroyed. Bluebells are now practically non-existent, and the thousands of wood anemones are now represented by a few miserable clumps. … The better drainage of the woods has destroyed numerous plants, and several… have been lost. Bishop’s Wood, too, is being rapidly spoiled”. By the 1930s, development had totally destroyed Bishop’s Wood, though an outlying fragment, the little-known Turner’s Wood, survives today near the Spaniards, in private ownership.

Public trampling during the 20th century reduced the native ground flora even more; most of what we see in the wood today has been re-planted recently - the bluebells, primroses and wild daffodils. The few Wood Anemones seen in the spring could be survivals, but for a fine display of these, you will need to visit the extension of Queen’s Wood on the west of Wood Vale. By the 1960s, the ground had become so compacted from public trampling that it was regularly harrowed, destroying both flora and archaeological features, and fallen leaves were raked up and burnt. Finally, a misguided programme of Beech planting in the early 1970s threatened the natural habitat of the wood; fortunately only a small part was affected, and most of the saplings have now been removed. Ironically, many self-seeded beeches have appeared in recent years, perhaps a reflection of climate change, although beeches do not like warmer, drier climates. Knowledge of the complexities of ancient woodland management has improved dramatically in recent years. Much of the damage of earlier 20th century management is being
reversed, and today’s more informed management techniques encourage a wide variety of plants, insects, birds, mammals and fungi, some of them nationally rare (and, in the case of a fungus native to Borneo discovered here in 2003, and an Egyptian Locust found in 2000, a sobering indication of global warming!).

The greatest challenge is to ensure that what remains of the historic ancient woodland landscape is preserved for as long as possible, so that present and future generations can see, in London, what an ancient managed woodland looked like. As we noted earlier, keeping the important ancient coppice stools alive will be particularly challenging.

Highgate Wood, then, has probably been managed for at least 2000 years. It is a unique historic asset for London which must be carefully protected. We must, in particular, resist uninformed pressure to ‘leave it to nature and let it go wild’. This would not protect it, but destroy it, and turn it into a creation of urban fantasy, eventually to become like nearby Coldfall Wood, another ancient oak and hornbeam wood suffering from long neglect and lack of management, which a new programme of coppicing is trying to reverse.

The present programme of coppicing small areas of the wood at 5-year intervals will not only give visitors a good idea of what it looked like in the distant past, but will also benefit wildlife. Many insects, particularly our rarer woodland butterflies, are dying out because the best conditions for their survival were found in traditionally coppiced woods.

Finally, as you leave the wood, walk along the left edge of the playing field towards the Archway Road, until you reach a bench near where a tree, enclosed by a triangular wooden fence, has been planted. Then walk about 45 metres out onto the playing field. If the weather has been dry, you may spot a circle of eight parched rectangular patches of grass, with another in the middle. This “Crop Mark” is the Wood’s most recent archaeological monument - the anchor of a second World War (1939-1945) Barrage Balloon! It would have been one of several anchored along the railway to obstruct enemy aircraft trying to bomb it. They were not entirely successful; several bombs fell in the area (one destroyed the police station in Archway Road) and, during tree cutting works in the 1970s and 1980s, chainsaws were damaged by fragments of exploded bombs embedded in trees near the railway. Crop marks are a valuable means of finding new archaeological sites; in this case, the concrete blocks just below the surface prevent water getting to the roots of the grass, which withers more quickly, producing a “ghost” shape of the blocks below. Other darker green stripes in the grass mark the lines of land drains, where the grass gets more water.

It is hoped that this guide has helped you to see that Highgate Wood is full of ancient secrets which can add to your enjoyment and understanding of it, and help you to appreciate what to look for both here and in other woods. It would, after all, be a shame for you not to be able to see the wood for the trees!

Finally, please remember that even something as long-lived as a tree does not last forever. Sooner or later, the trees mentioned in the text will eventually succumb to old age, fungus or disease and die or fall. We try to avoid carrying out any unnecessary works to ageing or decayed trees unless they are in a location where public safety makes it advisable that they be made safe or removed, since dead wood is an extremely valuable habitat for many rare insects. Improved coppicing techniques will hopefully mean that it will be possible to keep some of the important ancient coppice stools alive for an indefinite period.

Further Reading


John H. Lloyd, The History, Topography and Antiquities, in the County of Middlesex, with notes on the surrounding neighbourhood of Hornsey, Crouch End, Muswell Hill, etc., Highgate, 1888.


George Peterken, Woodland Conservation and Management, (London, 1981 and later editions)

Oliver Rackham, The History of the Countryside, (London, 1986 and later editions)


Oliver Rackham, Trees and Woodlands in the British Landscape, (London, 1976 and many later editions)

Oliver Rackham, Woodlands, (London, 2006)


Frances Rust, Highgate Wood: A History, (Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution, 2001)


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