

The Forest Trees of Somerset

BY E. CHISHOLM-BATTEN.

THE forest trees of Somerset have found no historian: they gladden the eye of the visitor, and are dear to the hearts of the home-folk, both gentle and simple, but have as yet no record. The guide-book dwells, and fitly dwells, upon the goodly mansion houses of the county, while their stately avenues and surrounding groves hardly obtain a notice.

Surely this ought not so to be; surely the *Proceedings* of this Society, at once an Archæological and Natural History Society, ought to dwell on a subject where both interests are happily blended. Their pages should tell us the story of the woods of old, point out the lingering survivors of earlier times and teach us how to preserve with reverence and affection those which remain, and how best to fill the gaps which time, or tempest or the axe of cupidity may have made in our sylvan scenery.

The history of a county is linked with the history of its sylvia. The trees and woods of Somerset in past times represent the history of its population; their record discloses to us what the chroniclers do not tell of the common life of the mass of our ancestors—those who dwelt in our country towns, villages, and hamlets. Then every land owner had some of his land “set out to plant a wood;” then the boundary trees were revered as the line of the village perambulation, and the village councils met under the Moot Oak or the Court

Ash. Tell us the history of the woods and forests of a shire, and we shall learn much of the history of its common people.

Somerset, at the landing of Julius Cæsar, being far from contact with civilization, was “*horrida sylvis.*” Woods and moors must have taken up the most of its surface. There were some villages by the side of rivers, or on the Severn Sea, but the summits of downs where the dwellers were safe from the attack of any neighbouring tribe, and some spots where metallic ores were near the surface or building stone just under the grass, were generally the situations which attracted inhabitants in this county before the Christian era.

Cæsar¹ says Britain had every tree except Fir and Beech, but its forests probably then contained little hard timber, except Oak, Ash, and Elm;² the three kinds of trees which have acquired, from their good qualities, the style and title of timber trees. These three the best authorities classify as indigenous, and these alone are recognised by the Common Law throughout England as timber. Neither Beech nor Birch—though in some counties timber by custom—are legally timber by any custom in Somerset.

It is probable that during the stay of the Romans, that is until they abandoned Britain, a space of nearly four centuries, a great part of the woods in Somerset were destroyed.

With the progress of civilization and increase of population, considerable tracts must have been from time to time cleared for the purpose of pasturage and the raising of corn; but to the Roman method of settling in Somerset especially may be attributed much of the destruction. It was a general maxim of Roman rule to construct roads, and roads in this county

¹ Cæsar., *Comm.*, lv, cx. *Materia cujusque generis est, præter fagum atque abietem.*

² Some sceptics maintain that the Elm is not indigenous, but introduced by the Romans. This opinion is refuted by the Elm being found in a submarine forest near St. Michael's Mount, in Cornwall. “Dr. Boase found there,” says Sir H. De la Beche, “remains of a wood, consisting of Alder, Oak, and Elm.” *Report on the Geology of Cornwall, Devon, and West Somerset*, p. 418; citing *Trans. Geol. Soc. of Cornwall*, vol. iii, p. 173.

were early set out by them and carefully maintained. So far back as the time of Agricola (Tacitus's father-in-law), the industry of the Romans in making use of native labour to clear Britain of its woods was well known, and Galgacus³ is represented by Tacitus as animating his soldiers to battle by reminding them of the drudgery of this work.

Somerset, by its Roman baths, Roman roads, Roman camps, and Roman villas, displays an extent of Roman occupation which must have tended largely to reduce the size of woodlands in this county during the long period of its peaceful servitude to Rome.

When the Saxons settled here permanently, and on the establishment of Ina's kingdom, the free holding of land by its owners tended undoubtedly to encourage the growth of woods. In those times, though no man was allowed to chase or kill the King's deer, yet he might start any game, pursue and kill it upon his own land.⁴ Of course the Kings would protect their own game, and favour the increase of covert; and we see that by the time of Edward the Confessor there was reckoned as appurtenant to the twelve Somerset manors of Antient Demesne of the Crown held by King Edward at his death, a considerable quantity of wood. The total area of Domesday acreage of the twelve Crown manors was 108,741. Of this, 33,620 acres—nearly a third of the whole—was wood: wood of timber trees (*silva*), not brush-wood or coppice wood (*silva minuta*).

Earl Harold's estates, forfeited to the Crown, had only a fifteenth of the whole acreage in wood.

There were a great many of the small Domesday manors of the county which had woods appurtenant to them. Probably these had been so appurtenant for a long period. There were in the Domesday survey twenty-four manors belonging to Saxons, who were allowed to retain holding of the Conqueror

³ Galgacus's speech, Tac. Agricola xxxi.

⁴ Blackstone's *Comm.*, ed. 1787, vol. iv, p. 415.

the manors they held of the Confessor. Ten had woods; two, large ones, 1,220 acres and 2,440 acres respectively; the other eight had small woods, none more than 30 acres, two of them coppice wood and one, 10 acres of Thorn coppice. Throughout the county, and apart from the large tracts of wood which sometimes occur, there are frequently small patches of woodland belonging to each Domesday manor, indicating a care in keeping up by each land-owner his own wood or coppice or grove.

The respect paid by the Anglo-Saxons to trees is marked in the Domesday Book of Somerset by the nomenclature of the manors. We have manors (now parishes) with the single names of Oak, Ash, Elm, Alder,⁵ Hazel,⁶ and Thorn.

Collinson⁷ suggests that in these cases the name of the Domesday manor is taken from the *quantity* of trees of the sort indicated which were found in the place.

I should be inclined to think the name taken from some distinguished tree; it might be a boundary tree, or a tree which was the meeting-place for the freemen of the vill which gave it its name in Anglo-Saxon times, and that this name passed on to the Domesday manor. It must be observed, however, that the extended lapse of time—quite six centuries—from the abandonment of Britain by the Romans to the landing of the Conqueror, makes a variety of causes contribute to the place-names of Somerset.

The fact is, that at the date of the Survey the quantity of wood—whose name the manor bore and bears—attached to the manor was small, or none. Elm at the Domesday survey has only sixteen acres of wood, and that coppice wood; and Oak only ten acres of wood. Thorn Coffin, no wood at all; Thorn St. Margaret, only eight acres of wood; and Thorn Fagon,

⁵ Alder is universally called Aller by the Somerset labourer in 1890.

⁶ Halse (Pr.) means Hazel. Halshanger in Thorn Falcon, *temp.* Ed. I, is now Haselborough.

⁷ Collinson, vol. iii, 273.

only two acres of wood, and that coppice wood. But this is not sufficient to disprove the theory of the historian as to the origin of the names.

Besides the Domesday manors which take the name of a tree, pure and simple, as the name of the manor, without any prefix or suffix, there are some manors (now parishes mostly) which have a tree as a portion of their name.

We have the Ash tree in compound names Ashill (Parish), Asholt (P.), Ashcombe, Ashcott (P.), Ashington (P.), Ashton Long (P.), Ashway, and Ashwick (P.), are examples.

The Alder is an element of the compound Allerford.

The Beech, which does not give its sole name to any Domesday manor, makes an element in several compound names. Bickenhall (P.), Bickham, Beckington (P.), Bicknoller (P.)

The Birch is not a tree growing much in the county, except in the Selwood coppices, but it finds a place in the compound name Berkley (P).

The Hazel is part of the compound names of Haselbury (P.), Halsway, and Halswell.

The Maple tree (probably the great Maple or Sycamore) is clearly the ruling element in Maperton (P.), *Malperettona*.

The Oak appears as a portion of a compound Domesday name in Achelai in Martock, which Achelai is now become Hurst. Oak is the suffix of Martock (P).

It may be that when forming part of a compound name, the tree was more generally a march or boundary tree. Kemble says the trees most frequently named in these land boundaries are the Oak, Ash, Beech, Thorn, Elder, Lime, and Birch.⁸

Those persons who have a taste for the legends of old times are apt to imagine that the woods in the Royal forests in Somerset in the reigns of the Conqueror and his sons occupied great areas; but a little care in investigating the subject will lead us to a different conclusion.

⁸ Kemble's *Saxons in England*, vol. i, p. 52 (note).

It was not the amount of Royal woodlands in the Anglo-Saxon days that encouraged the trees of Somerset: it was the habit of the thanes and smaller land-owners, who loved to plant a wood, and to preserve it, if self-planted. "As the country cleared," writes Mr. Green, "the *Silva infructuosa* or wood reserved on every farm for building and fencing, became of increasing importance, as is shown by the laws against cutting down and burning trees, as well as by the inclusion of such woods in the Domesday survey."⁹

King Ina found it necessary to protect timber; he punished burning a tree in a wood very severely, more severely than the felling of trees with the axe; and most severely the man who felled a tree without leave, under whose shadow thirty hogs could stand.¹⁰ This means the destroying trees by other persons than the owner of the land where they grew. The custom of the Anglo-Saxons was to give absolute power to the owner to deal with trees as he pleased, a custom retained now by copyholders in the manor of Taunton Dean from Ina's time, whose Queen gave the manor to the Bishop of Winchester.

The extent of the Royal forests in Somerset at the time of the Conquest is somewhat obscure. There were only four: Selwood, Mendip, Exmoor, and North Petherton. Neroche was not then a forest.

Domesday survey gives, as we have mentioned, about 33,000 acres of wood as belonging to the Crown manors in the time of the Confessor. Amongst these woodlands—at least, among them and the 5,000 of Harold's forfeited manors—must be found the woodlands of the four Royal forests.

SELWOOD FOREST must be comprised in the 8,640 acres of wood appropriated to the Bruton and Frome Selwood Crown manors.

MENDIP FOREST must have included the 1,440 acres of

⁹ Green's *Making of England*, p. 184. Note 4.

¹⁰ *Monumenta Historica, Ina's Doms.*, p. 56.

wood appropriated to Cheddar and Axbridge Crown manors, and the 1,830 acres of wood appropriated to Earl Harold's escheated manor of Congresbury.

As to EXMOOR and NORTH PETHERTON FORESTS, we have nothing in the Domesday survey by which we can determine the extent of woodland in either forest. The survey gives no woodland to the Crown manor of North Petherton; but to the ferm or annual value of the manor, the survey states, twenty swine-herds (*Porcarü*) contributed annual fees, amounting to £5. "Obviously," says Mr. Eyton, "they had the run of North Petherton forest," which though locally adjacent to North Petherton, was technically deemed to pertain to a mass of King's forest, registered under other Royal manors." The survey lumps together the woodlands of Cannington, Carhampton, and Williton Crown lands as 14,400 acres; out of which we must pick by some other means the woodlands of the forests of North Petherton and Exmoor.

Later records tell us the boundaries of the forestal areas of Petherton and Exmoor at the first coronation of Henry II, and the actual areas of the Confessor's forests in Somerset must be little less than those defined as the areas of the Royal forests in 1154.

From Domesday survey at Easter, 1086, to the first coronation of Henry II, on the 19th December, 1154, seventy years of most troubled reigns intervened; the reigns of Rufus, Henry I, and Stephen. No record exists, or is suggested to have existed, of any extension of the four Royal forests in Somerset by any of these Kings.

By the perambulations recorded as made of these forests, in pursuance of the Carta Forestæ (1225), we get their exact limits. Neroche forest is shown by the same record not to have been a forest in the Conqueror's time, and of course not in the time of the Confessor.

With the exception of Exmoor, the four Saxon forests were of small extent, and none of them had large areas of wood-

land, where the growth of timber trees was likely to be favoured by soil or climate.

Wood in Exmoor forest must have been in those days rather the exception than the rule; nor would Oak and Ash flourish on the bleak hills of Mendip forest. Dr. Buckland clearly pointed out, in addressing this Society at its foundation in 1849, the influence which varieties in ground and climate had upon our timber.¹¹

The two forests of Petherton and Selwood were better adapted for the growth of timber. Halswell and Mells still show survivors of these forest woodlands, and Hestercombe has its relics of Petherton forest. "The Foreste of Selwood," says Leland, "ys in one parte a 3 miles from Melles."¹²

Forests were in the times of the Conqueror and his sons, as Lord Lymington says,¹³ what Scotch forests are now, the domain of deer, and not of woodcraft; but the inclusion of a private owner's wood in a Royal forest deprived him of the right of cutting any trees, whether timber or not, without the license of the Crown. And although the object of this rule was to keep covert for deer, yet it encouraged, in a way, the growth of green-wood.

Leland (1540-42) speaks of the pastures and fields in Somersetshire being much enclosed "with hedge-rows of Elmes." It has been for some years the fashion to decry small fields and hedge-row timber; but some of us are of opinion that the shelter afforded by timber trees, as well as the supply of wood for building, repairs, and fuel, is, at least on grass lands, a considerable compensation for the evils, or supposed evils, attendant on the growth of hedge-row timber.

The best modes of planting, protecting, pruning, and cultivating the growth of our indigenous trees—the Oak, Ash, and Elm—are probably by none better known than by Somerset

¹¹ See *Proc. Som. Arch. and Nat. Hist. Soc.*, vol. i, p. 15.

¹² *Proc. Som. Arch. and Nat. Hist. Soc.*, vol. xxxiii, p. 134.

¹³ *Nineteenth Century*, 1891.

men, though the best rules are not always practised. It is, however, useful to learn the rate of growth of trees, whether indigenous or introduced; particularly of trees remarkable for their size. For instance, in September, 1889, I saw close to Trent church, north of the tower, two Elms, about the same height as the vane, which the Rector, the Rev. T. R. Tait, told me was 100 feet high. He said that it appeared by some record that they were planted in 1680. Loudon mentions an Elm at Nettlecombe 210 years old, 100 feet high; diameter of the trunk, 5 ft. 8 in. [17 ft. girth], and of the head 57 ft.¹⁴ The Chantry Elm at Nettlecombe must have been growing at the dissolution of chantries in 1547. It has had its head blown off, but is still (1890) alive, and has a girth, 5 feet from the ground, of 18 ft. 6 in.

Loudon speaks of an Elm at Leigh Court, fourteen years planted, 50 ft. high. There are few records of such rapid growth in other counties. There is a Turkey Oak, planted in 1851, now 65 feet high; but it is in a sheltered situation south of Thorn Falcon church. At Nettlecombe there is a magnificent Turkey Oak on an elevation above south-west angle of the Court and 100 yards from the lawn fence. Its girth is 15 feet, its height about 60 feet, spread 120 feet. It is probably the same Turkey Oak recorded at Nettlecombe by Loudon as planted about 1754, 59 feet high, 9 feet girth, and 46 feet head.

There is a magnificent occidental Plane at Chipleigh, near Nynehead, I measured it with Dr. Prior, on 17th September, 1888; its height is 105 feet, its girth at 5 feet, 15 feet 6 inches, diameter of spread 120 feet, planted in 1760. It is mentioned in Selby's *Forest Trees*, p. 360.

“In collecting,” wrote to me this eminent botanist, “measurements of remarkable trees in West Somerset we are struck with the size and height of such as are introduced from warmer

¹⁴ Loudon, vol. iv, p. 1393, *Arb. Brit.*, 1838. One of his contributors was the late Sir Walter Trevelyan, President for the first nine years of this Society.

climates, as compared with the same trees and shrubs in the more eastern counties of England. For instance, the Walnut, Manna Ash, Oriental Plane, Sweet Bay, Luccombe Oak, Spanish Chestnut, and Cypress usually attain dimensions here which are rarely seen out of this district. A common Laurel (*Prunus Lauro-cerasus*, L.) grew at Fyne Court to the height of 72 feet before it was cut down. I measured some there that were 54 feet about twenty years ago. Portugal Laurels of enormous size were seen with their boughs bending to the ground and rooting, and an upright trunk growing from the arch that they formed. The Weeping Willow, on the other hand, forms a timber tree about London, as in the garden of the Royal Botanic Society, but in the Vale of Taunton Dean rarely outlives a few years.”¹⁵

Without reference to the distinction of indigenous and introduced trees, it were well if particulars of the finest trees in the county were recorded in our *Proceedings*, and specimens of such particulars are here given.

The high perfection to which some trees of the different species have attained in the east and west of the county is an object of interest to the planter of forest trees, as well as to all the people of the county—for who does not derive pleasure of the highest order from the sight of a noble tree.

Mr. Mildmay kindly furnished me, in 1888, with the following particulars of the Oaks at Hazlegrove.¹⁶

I. The “Old Oak,” height unknown; girth at 5 feet from the ground, 35 feet; spread of branches—length of one limb from trunk to extremity, 40 feet; age, unknown, mentioned in old papers of the sixteenth century as “*the Oak*.” II. Oak;

¹⁵ Dr. Prior added, “Nor do I know any Maple as a tree, although common in hedges. Nor have I ever seen a Hornbeam in the county, except at Mr. Welman’s; and the wild Pears are going or gone. *P. aria*, *P. torminalis*, and *P. sylvestris*.”

¹⁶ The Society had the pleasure of visiting these Oaks the second day, at Mr. Mildmay’s hospitable reception; it was evident that the Old Oak was making fresh bark every year, and the girth at the level of the ground was measured as 58 feet.

height unknown; girth at 5 feet from ground, inconsiderable; spread of branches—length of one limb from trunk to extremity, 55 feet. Both of these trees are situated in a part of the park known as the Lawn, growing in a soil of mixed loam and clay.

Mr. Thring, in 1888, gave me the following particulars of Elms and Oaks growing in the grounds at Alford House.

I. Elm; height estimated at 112 feet; girth at 5 feet from ground, 17 feet; spread; had lost some large limbs. II. Elm; height, above 100 feet; girth, 14 feet; spread; run up straight to a considerable height. III. Oak; height about 90 feet; girth 12 feet 1 inch; spread; stood near two others. IV. Oak; height, about 90 feet; girth, 13 feet 7 inches; spread, 86 feet. Age of all unknown. All these trees grow in soil of deep loam and clay, with patches of gravel.

Mr. Horner, in 1888, kindly furnished me with particulars of Oaks and a Silver Fir at Mells Park.

I. Pollard Oak; height, 76 feet; girth at 5 feet from ground, 23 feet 6 inches; spread of branches, 111 feet; age, unknown. II. An Oak; height, 81 feet; girth, 13 feet 7 inches; spread of branches, 74 feet; it has no branch at all up to 19 feet 6 inches from the ground, though it stands in the open; age, unknown. Both growing in the park. III. A Silver Fir; height, 108 feet; girth, 9 feet 7 inches; spread of branches, 41 feet; age, about 100 years; growing by a pond.

The most beautiful specimen of the Oriental Plane or Chinara (*Platanus Orientalis L.*), that Dr. Prior ever saw in England is at the Vicarage, Lydeard St. Lawrence. Height, 80 feet; girth, 10 feet; spread, 53 feet; age, unknown; soil and situation, on the strip of New Red Sandstone which runs up between the Quantock and Brendon Hills, in a moist meadow, near a pond. There is a beautiful Oriental Plane at Dunster, by the bridge in the walks, close to the stream, planted some 50 or 60 years; its height is difficult to ascertain, but at 6 feet from the ground I measured it as 12 feet in

circumference. Loudon mentions a specimen at Nettlecombe, 40 years planted, 64 feet high, 6 feet in girth.

Besides the Occidental Plane at Chipley, there is a Luccombe Oak; height, 86 feet; girth, 14 feet 6 inches; spread, 70 feet; cannot have been planted before 1762; most probably after 1772; the soil and situation, New Red Sandstone, open meadow, unsheltered.

At Hartrow there is a Scotch Fir, on Mr. Escott's lawn, which rivals the giants of Strathspey and Strathglass, height, 93 feet; girth, 14 feet 6 inches, at 4 feet from the ground; spread, 22 feet 6 inches.

When an Elm attains the height of 100 feet, it seldom grows much higher; it increases in size. A very fine Elm at Dunster is about 100 feet in height, and at 6 feet from the ground I found the girth 23 feet 6 inches. It is on the side of the hill facing the Castle, and just within the deer park fence.

Perhaps on the present occasion it would be best to confine our particular attention to one family of introduced trees, and in this county we may well take that first mentioned by Dr. Prior in his letter, the Walnut family.

The common Walnut (*Juglans regia L.*) is a native of Persia and Cashmere, and not indigenous in any part of Europe. Loudon says, "In cultivation in England since 1562, and probably long before."¹⁷

This tree, well called by Mr. Grindon¹⁸ "delightful and precious," is one of the last to come in leaf, and is very soon dismantled again, being unable to withstand the autumnal frosts. In the south of England, he says, it is a very common tree, not only in pleasure grounds and gardens, but by the way-side in retired villages, as at Tickenham in Somersetshire, and ripens its dainty fruit every year freely and abundantly.

The earliest herbals speak of the Walnut, which they call *Nux Persica*, Welch Nut. The different names in different

¹⁷ *Arb. Brit.*, p. 1421.

¹⁸ Grindon's *Botany*, p. 594.

languages are given in the first *English Herbal*, published by William Turner, Dean of Wells, in 1548.¹⁹

The places where the Walnut flourishes are pointed out in Gerarde's *Herbal*, in 1597.²⁰ Lyte's *Herbal*, 1619, under the head "Of the Walnut Tree," says, "The Walnut tree loveth dry places and mountaines. They are planted in divers places in this Country, and Almaine, in Orchards alongse the fields."²¹ Parkinson, in his *Paradisus* (1629), suggests the planting of Walnut trees in the corner of Orchards, and tells of the virtues of the leaves, the shells, and the fruit.²²

The opinion of farmers then was that Walnut trees injure the growth of grass, and therefore they should be planted in corners and by roadsides.

To collect the fruit, the ends of the branches are commonly thrashed with long poles. This breaks off many of their points, and so causes the production of new spurs, which will probably bear female, *i.e.*, fruit-bearing flowers.²³

Let us recall the memory of that Walnut tree that grew in Glastonbury Abbey churchyard, on the north side of St. Joseph's Chapel. It was reputed to be a miraculous Walnut tree, according to Collinson,²⁴ and it never budded forth before the feast of St. Barnabas, *viz.*, 11th June, and on that very day shot forth leaves and flourished like its usual species. It rivalled in its attractions for pilgrims the miraculous Glastonbury Thorn, which budded on Christmas Day. The sceptical pilgrims of the nineteenth century maintain that this Walnut was a [French]nut of the late variety, called by French botanists *Juglans regia serotina Noyer de la Saint Jean*, and that the Thorn was a Palestine Thorn.

¹⁹ Greke, . Latin, . English, . Duche, . French,

²⁰ Gerarde's *Herbal*, folio, London, 1597, p. 1251.

²¹ Lyte's *Herbal*, folio, London, 1619, p. 527.

²² Parkinson's *Paradisus*, folio, London, p. 1627.

²³ Boulger's *Familiar Trees*, 2nd series, p. 97.

²⁴ Collinson's *History of Somerset*, vol. ii, p. 265.

Valuable as the fruit of the Walnut is, when the tree grows old it becomes of great use as a timber tree. It is considered the most beautiful wood produced in Europe, and was employed in preference to every other for the best kinds of furniture, before the introduction of Mahogany.

France annually exports large quantities of Walnut to the war department of this country, for gunstocks. During the Napoleonic wars Walnut trees in this county commanded a very high price; and even in 1731, Lord King, C. (2 P. W. 601), a native of Exeter, said Walnut trees may be worth £10, £20, or even £50 apiece. His Lordship would have especial knowledge of the best Walnut district in Somerset, around the Bratton Court estate. In this district between Minehead and Porlock the roads are sometimes lined with Walnut trees, and the great Bossington Walnut—of which more hereafter—is a conspicuous object.

The finest Walnut tree in England is, it is believed, the Cothelstone tree, on Cothelstone farm, belonging to Mr. Esdaile, near Bishop's Lydeard. It was stated by Loudon, in 1836, to be 64 feet high; diameter of the trunk, 6 feet 6 inches; and diameter of the head, 97 feet. It was carefully measured in July, 1888, by Dr. Prior, and he gives: height, 94 feet 6 inches; girth, 18 feet; spread, 22 by 27 yards. It is on meadow land, quite exposed in open field. Its age is uncertain. The woods at Cothelstone were all cut down by Cromwell's army, and the estate sequestered until the Restoration. It is quite possible that it is not more than 150 years old. By the kindness of Col. Ewing, the Society is able to give a drawing of this magnificent tree.

The Bossington Walnut tree²⁵ stands near the road at Bossington, in Porlock parish, and is on Sir Thomas Acland's estate. Its height is difficult to measure, from being close to other trees; it is estimated at about 50 feet. About forty

²⁵ This tree is photographed in Frith's series, and marked "23523," Bossington.

years ago many branches were cut back, to prevent danger to travellers on the road. The length of stem is 10 feet from the ground to the fork or point of division; at 2 feet up, the girth is 21 feet 4 inches; and at 5 feet up, 16 feet 6 inches. At the point of division there are two branches; one, the south branch, is sound, its circumference, where it leaves the point of division, is 14 feet 4 inches, and it extends 64 feet to the outermost bough; the other branch is at first 16 feet in circumference.²⁶

The Old Walnut tree at Cleeve Abbey Mr. Horatio F. Brown and I measured in Sept., 1890. Its girth is 16 feet 2 inches; its spread, east 49 feet 8 inches, west 42 feet 9 inches; its height by dendrometer, 75 feet.

The Walnut tree does not attain a very great age in this county. This Walnut tree at Cleeve Abbey is in a declining state; as it grows out of the Abbey Church ruined wall, it cannot be older than the Dissolution: 200 years is the longest period of growth recorded by Loudon for any Walnut tree.

I can give the exact age of a fine old Walnut tree, growing near Yeovil. Its height is 86 feet; its girth, 14 feet 6 inches; one diameter of its spread is 93 feet, the other diameter 89 feet. The soil is brick earth; it stands in old grass. It was planted on the 10th December, 1772.²⁷

The year 1772 was about the period in which planting, on a large scale, was commenced by the landowners in the county of Somerset. The movement took its rise in the east, on the ground formerly Selwood Forest.

In 1763 Mr. Thomas Davis, of Horningsham, Longleat, steward to the Marquis of Bath, commenced a most extensive system of planting on the Greensand hills and Inferior Oolite slopes of Selwood Forest. Mr. Henry Hoare, of Stourhead,

²⁶ These measurements were kindly given me by Mr. Birmingham, at Sir Thomas Acland's request, in 1888.

²⁷ It is at my brother's, Hollands, Yeovil; planted by my great grandfather. The date of planting is recorded in his diary.

in 1772, completed the erection of Alfred's Tower, and extended plantations and hanging woods into Somerset from the tower. The ground is favourable for wood, but not for arable cultivation. From Alfred's Tower a steep cliff of hills extends southwards beyond Wincanton, and northwards in the direction of Bath.

Sir Thomas Acland, in his *Report on Somerset Farming*, remarks that—"The geological names of the strata would here be a most unsafe guide to their agricultural character; for whatever their chemical constituents or geological ærea may be, they are wholly unlike the Oolite sands of the south of the county."²⁸

Mr. Davis continued his work on behalf of Lord Bath for more than thirty years.²⁹ Marston Forest and Witham Friary had their share of new woods; and much ground was newly planted down to 1797 on the hills in these localities, to the profit of the owners. The profit arising from this improvement, particularly on the sandy parts of the hills, was, in many instances, near ten per cent. on the original expense of planting.³⁰

Mr. Billingsley dwelt so earnestly on the benefit of plantations in this quarter, that it is surprising they were not more increased. The fashion of planting extended in succeeding years from the border land of the eastern district to Hadspen and Compton Pauncefote; but the high price of corn, whilst it enabled proprietors to back their mansions with wood, yet did not induce them to plant woods for shelter on the cold Lias soil.

To the south of the county, among the hills where the Parret rises, woods have been always encouraged, and the late Lord Portman, by his energetic and well-directed planting on

²⁸ Acland's *Farming of Somersetshire*, 1851, London, p. 4.

²⁹ There are most valuable articles, by Mr. Davis, in the Bath Society Papers vol. vii, 1, (1765); vol. x, 301.

³⁰ Billingsley's *Survey of Somerset*, 2nd ed., p. 127.

the Staple hills, restored part of the woodlands of Neroche Forest; the present Viscount continues the good work.³¹

Still further west, the Quantock hills have had proprietors, notably the Esdailes and the Pophams, whose plantations on the southern slopes fitly counterpoise the coppices and large trees of Cockercombe and Seven Wells on the north.

Finally, the county's noblest sylvan offspring is her latest—the plantations on the Forest of Exmoor.

Mr. Billingsley, writing in 1792, says—that excepting a few willows and thorns by the sides of the rivulets, not a tree or bush, out of the Simonsbath estate of 200 acres, is to be seen on the whole forest of 20,000 acres. Sir Thomas Acland, writing in 1851, lamented that much time was lost after 1818, before effectual steps were taken in the forest, to construct those outworks which are necessary to enable the farmer to wage war with climate.

“The experience of the hill country,” says Sir Thomas Acland, “points to plantations of lofty Beech hedges (each of which is a plantation in itself) as the only effectual means of providing what the hill countryman expressively calls ‘succour.’ This deficiency is now, however, in course of being supplied, good hedges are rising, and the farm houses are being surrounded with plantations which will give them an air of comfort and respectability.”³²

Within the last few years, Sir Thomas Acland has extended his planting in the parishes of Selworthy and Winsford, and has planted about 100 acres; what is found to answer so well is the Douglassii Fir, particularly in places where the woods are not thick enough.

The repeal of the Corn Laws has brought down the price of corn twenty-five per cent. Those proprietors of land in

³¹ “Let his plantations stretch from down to down,
First shade a country, and then build a town.”

Pope's *Moral Essays*, Epust. iv, line 15 from end.

³² *Farming of Somersetshire*, p. 29.

Somerset, who have the advantage of having a permanent supply of water to their low-lying arable fields, are wisely laying them down to grass. The hill tops and high table lands require, before they can come to their full value as grass land, the protection of plantations, which even at an early growth give shelter to the pasture and the young stock and flocks. "Its an ill wind that blows nobody any good," and the low price of corn may stimulate the growth of wood as well as grass, and so increase the amenity of a district. The owners of land in Somerset may be usefully reminded of the words of Sir Walter Scott, "that improvement by plantation is at once the easiest, the cheapest, and the least precarious mode of increasing the immediate value as well as the future income of their estates."³³

³³ *Quarterly Review*, October, 1827.
