

A SURVEY OF THE WOODLANDS OF SOMERSET FROM 19TH CENTURY TITHE MAPS

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SUMMARY

A method is described whereby all the plots of land marked as woodland in the tithe surveys of *c.* 1837–43 were listed and their boundaries copied on to modern Ordnance Survey maps. These lists were abstracted from the original tithe commutation documents of each parish and the position of the wooded plots located on the tithe maps. Only plots with an area of at least 1 acre 1 rood (approximately 0.5 ha) were carried forward to the final report, but smaller, adjacent plots were included if together their total area was above the chosen threshold. The potential of this survey for conservation evaluations and in local authority planning decisions is discussed.

KEYWORDS

Ordnance Survey Maps, Somerset, tithe surveys, woodlands, conservation evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

The background to this survey was the need, expressed by both English Nature and The Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) to find all the old woodlands in the county and to delineate their boundaries. To this end, all the information on woodlands was abstracted from the tithe maps and apportionments that were prepared for almost all Somerset parishes during the 19th century and the results have been transferred to modern Ordnance Survey (O.S.) maps. The boundary of Somerset was taken as the post-1974 county. However, the parish boundaries were kept as they were at the time of the tithe commutation, that is between about 1837 and 1843, the precise dates of surveys varying between different parishes. Since then there have been considerable alterations to parish boundaries, including the incorporation of detached areas into neighbouring parishes and, in the extreme, the elimination of some parishes altogether.

This survey from the tithe records of about 1840 does not necessarily provide information about local ancient woodlands, as these are, by definition, areas that have been wooded continuously since 1600. However, if, on the tithe map, an area was described as *wood*, rather than *plantation*, it may well have been mature, say a hundred years old then, so that we are likely to be considering an area that has been wooded at least since 1740 and probably from a far earlier date.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Source Material

As part of the tithe commutation process in the 19th century, all the plots of land in each parish in the county were surveyed and recorded. Copies of the resulting tithe maps and apportionments, invaluable sources of information on the early Victorian countryside, are held at the Somerset Record Office, Taunton.

In each parish, the tithe surveyors numbered each plot of land, whether house, garden, field or wood, and prepared a map to show its whereabouts. The accompanying apportionment document contained the following information for each plot: the owner, the occupier, the plot number, its name, the usage or state of cultivation, the area, in acres, rods and perches, together with the tithe rent. The plots were listed in alphabetical order of their owners.

The descriptions of the woodlands given under the heading of *Cultivation* are particularly relevant to this survey; however, the extent of the details given varied considerably between the different parishes. Some recorders, for example, specified clearly whether there was *timber*, *timber and coppice*, or *coppice and plantation*. Others used just the term *wood* or *plantation*, or even gave only the name, for example 'Week Park Woods', 'Farringdon Hill Copse' or 'Road Coppice'. There was also ambiguity between the usage of the terms *copse* and *coppice*. Some tithe maps had helpful symbols distinguishing between broad-leaved trees, conifers or coppice. Others contained no symbols or only 'artistic' representations of woods, of doubtful value.

Abstracting the Records

A team of volunteers working at the Somerset Record Office took about six years to complete the project. The team had eight members, but as space was limited at the Record Office, only a few could work on the large tithe maps at any one time. In the last year, more rapid progress was made by the injection of a worker appointed by the Manpower Services Commission for four days a week.

Information was assembled parish by parish, making a list from the apportionment of all the plots of any type of woodland, with their plot numbers, names, type of cultivation and area. Fruit orchards were not included. Table 1, an example of one of these interim records, is part of the list from Whitelackington parish.

Table 1. A page of the interim records, using the Whitelackington tithe apportionment, 1838.

Adjacent Plot	Owner or New No.	Plot No.	Plot Name	Cultivation	Area A.R.P.	Notes	
Ilton & W8	Lord Egremont John Lee	312	Plantation in Lr. Harvey Park	Coppice	0.2.23	Small	
		155	Whitelackington Wood	Wood	22.2.00		
	W7	W3 (2 parts)	178	Plantation	Plantn.	0.0.10	Small
			179	Plantation	Plantn.	0.0.29	Small
			180	Plantation	Plantn.	0.0.11	} Estimated position; boundaries changed
			183	Plantation	Plantn.	0.1.38	
			185	Plantation	Plantn.	1.2.04	
	186	Plantation	Plantn.	1.0.30			
	W1 (4 pts)	W3 (2 parts)	187a	Plantation	Plantn.	1.0.29	}
			190	Plantation	Plantn.	3.0.19	

Adjacent Plot	Owner or New No.	Plot No.	Plot Name	Cultivation	Area A.R.P.	Notes
234a	W2	219	Putcombe	Plantn.	10.2.09	
229	W5 (2 pts)	226	Plantation	Plantn.	1.0.33	
	W4	231	Plantation	Plantn.	1.3.17	*
219	adj. W2	234a	Part of Yonder Owens Wood	Furze	4.0.00	
	W1	246	West Wood Plantation	Plantn.	6.1.39	
Kingstone		242	Willow Bed	Willows	0.1.09	Small
	W1	249	Pond and willow bed	Willows	0.3.08	
	W1	249a	Willow Bed	Willows	1.0.26	
	W6	216a	Putcombe Oak Wood	Wood	2.1.08	
		222	Willow Bed	Willows	0.3.33	Small
226	W5	229	Willow Bed Plot	Willows	1.1.25	Est. 1 a. is *
183	W3	184	Plantation	Plantn.	1.2.07	
183		187	Willow Bed	Willows	0.2.10	
		13	Island	Willows	0.3.31	Small
		63	Willow Bed	Willows	0.0.09	Small
Stocklinch		135	Willow Bed	Willows	0.0.30	Small
		212	Plot of the Wood	Wood	0.0.17	Small

(Key: an asterisk (*) indicates that area is no longer wooded)

An arbitrary decision was made to include in the final report only woods of at least 1 acre 1 rood (approximately 0.5 ha) in total area. Nevertheless, initially all plots had to be listed, regardless of size, in case there were adjacent wooded plots that together would bring the total area over the chosen threshold. This necessitated locating each woodland plot on the tithe map, as occupiers of adjacent plots with different owners were not listed together in the apportionment document (*see* the example from Creech St Michael, Table 2).

Table 2. An example of small adjacent wooded plots which, when combined, reach the arbitrary threshold for inclusion in this survey. (Taken from the Creech St Michael tithe apportionment, 1839).

Owner	Plot No.	Cultivation	Area A.R.P.
Joshua James	54	Coppice	0.2.24
Elizabeth Richardson	53	Coppice	0.2.36
Elizabeth Richardson	55	Coppice	0.3.06

Total 2.0.26

Small areas of woodland along parish boundaries were particularly important. These had to be listed and mapped, together with the name of the neighbouring parish, so that a cross-reference could be made later to determine whether a cross-boundary wood was sufficiently large to be included in the survey; for example, Plot 136 on Whitelackington tithe map is on the boundary with Stocklinch parish (*see* Table 1).

Maps and Lists

The woodlands of area 1 acre 1 rood and above were first traced on to an overlay of the appropriate 1:25000 modern Ordnance Survey map and numbered as in the apportionment. The list of wooded plots was rearranged to group adjacent plots together, regardless of ownership. Inspection of this list enabled isolated plots too small to be included in the survey to be marked for omission from the final report (*see* the examples in Table 1). The remaining, larger, woodlands in each parish were renumbered using a simple banding system across the map overlay, together with a letter code to identify the parish, from example 'R' for Ruishton, 'SSM' for Stoke St Mary and 'WH' for West Hatch.

Finally, each qualifying woodland was traced from the overlay on to an uncoloured sheet of the Ordnance Survey map, outlined in red and numbered according to the parish. Areas of plantation were shown with oblique red lines. A list of these woods was prepared to accompany the map, with details of any sub-divisions arising from either the original tithe map plots or from variations in usage, for example woodland or copse. This list also contained the grid reference, the name, the type of management and the area of each wood (for example, the final report on Kilton parish, Table 3).

It was found useful to have the classification of woods used in the particular parish at the head of each page of final records as the terms used varied considerably between parishes. If the original tithe map had symbols to distinguish the types of tree present, for example conifer or broadleaf, this formation was noted in the margin of this report. An asterisk (*) was used to draw attention to areas that are no longer wooded.

Table 3. Final report on the woodlands in the parish of Kilton, abstracted from the tithe apportionment, 1842.

Wood No.	O.S. Map & Grid Ref.	Plot No. on Tithe Map	Plot Name	State of Cultivation	Area adjacent woodland A.R.P.	Total Area A.R.P.
Kn 1	ST 14	279	Shervage Wd.	Coppice	24.000	51.200
	ST 14	276	Shervage Wd.	Coppice	22.200	
	ST 13&14	280	Part Shervage	Coppice Wood	5.000*	
	(164402)					
Kn 2	ST 14	193	Masons Copse	Copse	2.2.19	9.0.32
		195	Furze Ground	Copse	2.0.11	
		196	Long Copse	Copse	4.2.02	
	(165430)					
Kn 3	ST 14	184	Sessons Copse	Copse	1.3.08	4.0.18
		188	Sessons Copse	Copse	2.1.10	
	(166432)					
Kn 4	ST 14	27	The Wood	Wood	17.1.23	20.3.24
		30	Western Ground Copse	Copse	3.2.01	
	(157440)					
Kn 5	ST 14	286	Griffiths	Plantation		8.2.15
	(182428)			Plantation		(Est. 5 a is *)

Wood No.	O.S. Map & Grid Ref.	Plot No. on Tithe Map	Plot Name	State of Cultivation	Area adjacent woodland A.R.P.	Total Area A.R.P.
Kn 6	ST 14 (180426)	290	Plantation	Plantation		1.2.16
Kn 7	ST 14 (186426)	300	Plantation	Plantation		2.2.16
Kn 8	ST 14 (184421)	313	Furzey Field	Plantation Plantation		9.3.31

(Key: an asterisk (*) indicates that area is no longer wooded)

LIMITATIONS OF THE SURVEY

As stated above, the state of cultivation given in the tithe apportionment, particularly the description of the woodland management, was not standard for all parishes. In addition, some field boundaries have changed so much that it proved difficult to locate the woodland area on a modern map and an element of approximation was necessary in a few cases. In some parishes the tithe map information was incomplete, for example:

1. Tithe maps for some of Lord Portman's estate (e.g. Thurlbear) did not record the woods, but showed only the outline of rented farms. A Portman estate map from 1828 did give more detail and these woods are shown in green on the Ordnance Survey map, with appropriate details of the source included on the final parish list.
2. In some parishes there was no information on the land owned by the church, for example much of East Cranmore.
3. Many common lands had no information on the state of cultivation. Enclosure maps were consulted, but no reference to land use was found. These commons were shaded with horizontal pencil lines on the Ordnance Survey maps.

DISCUSSION

The main value of this tithe map information is in ecological evaluations for wildlife conservation. English Nature, the Somerset Trust for Nature Conservation and other conservation bodies all give priority to old woodlands. Designation of woods as Sites of Special Scientific Interest or as County Wildlife Sites (called Sites of Nature Conservation Interest until January 1992) depends on a knowledge of how long the land has been wooded. English Nature's Inventory of Ancient Woodlands (Lister and Pinches 1986) shows the oldest woodlands above 2 ha in area; the tithe map survey extends the list of the same type of woodland down to 0.5 ha.

The results of this survey make a significant contribution to local authority planning decisions. Every few years the Somerset Environmental Records Centre (SERC) is asked to submit boundaries for County Wildlife Sites to be copied on to Local Authority Local Plans. Most of these tithe map sites meet SERC's strict County Wildlife Site criteria and are submitted. When such sites are marked on the Local Plans they come under the

County's Structure Plan policy NC1, under which there is a presumption against development. Of course, this does not by any means provide total protection – a Planning Committee could decide against the presumption – but in the last few years it has proved to give a fair degree of protection.

Copies of the final records in the form of 1:25000 Ordnance Survey maps and lists of woods for each parish are now lodged with SERC. Appropriate parts of these records are available for consultation, by previous appointment, by organisations or individuals, limited only by the Centre's confidentiality policies. Information about the availability of the maps, costs of copying, etc., may be had from the Director, SERC, Pickney, Kingston St Mary, Taunton TA2 8AS. Research workers, both academic and amateur, have found the maps to be invaluable for drawing up reports and for choosing sites to visit for recording. A typical example is the survey by Wolseley and O'Dare (1990). These authors used the information on ancient woodlands both to select areas to visit and as a basis for classification of sites in their study of the lichen flora of Exmoor.

The availability of these tithe maps and lists, together with English Nature's Inventory of Ancient Woodlands, means that Somerset has maps of all the long-standing woods in the county above 0.5 ha in area. The presence of such a consistent set is unique to this county.

REFERENCES

- Lister, J.A., and Pinches, A.L., 1986. *Inventory of Ancient Woodland, (provisional)*. Nature Conservancy Council, Peterborough, Cambs.
- Wolseley, P.A., and O'Dare, A.M., 1990. The use of epiphytic lichens as environmental indicators in Exmoor woodlands. *Ecology in Somerset*, 1, 3–22.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Anderson, a geography graduate, was involved with both teaching and teacher-training in Kenya for many years. After returning to this country she joined the staff of Bishop Fox's School, Taunton, and remained there until her retirement. Margaret manages the Thurlbear Wood Reserve for the STNC.