

## HATFIELD FOREST

### NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

*“Hatfield is of supreme interest in that all the elements of a medieval Forest survive: deer, cattle, coppice woods, pollards, scrub, timber trees, grassland and fen, plus a seventeenth-century lodge and rabbit warren. As such it is almost certainly unique in England and possibly in the world .....The Forest owes very little to the last 250 years ..... Hatfield is the only place where one can step back into the Middle Ages to see, with only a small effort of the imagination, what a Forest looked like in use.”*  
Said by Oliver Rackham, the well known landscape historian, who has spent a lifetime studying the Forest.

#### **The Ancient Trees at Hatfield Forest**

Hatfield Forest has 884 pollard trees of Oak, Ash, Field Maple, Hornbeam, Crab Apple and Hawthorn. Many of these are more than 400 years old, some as much as 600 years old.

The ancient and pollarded trees provide a last refuge for very rare and specialised wildlife, including decaying-wood beetles and fungi, hole-nesting birds and bats, which also feed on the unimproved pasture. The Forest is in the top ten sites for its assemblage of relic “old forest” decaying wood insects. This also means it is very, very special in a European context.

Two thirds of the Forest area is covered with coppice, some of which is managed in rotation and some is left as minimum intervention. Some blocks are made up of Hazel, with oak standards in other blocks Hornbeam predominates. There are many veteran stools, some which are at least 500 years old.

#### **Management of the Ancient Trees**

Some work was carried out in the late 1970’s to try and bring the old pollards back into a cutting cycle, with varying success. The emphasis now is predominantly on creating new pollards from saplings to provide a new generation and crown reduction on the old pollards to keep them from falling apart.

A recent survey has been carried out by Treework of all the veteran pollards on the site, which has included a full arboricultural assessment providing a specific management plan for each tree. This work will guide our future management with the intention of prolonging the lives of our veterans. The funding for this work came from English Nature, Essex County Council and The National Trust Biodiversity Fund

Other areas of our work includes soil conservation, which we manage by limiting vehicle movement, the use of a burning trailer to avoid any burning on the ground and using hawthorn brush to protect the soil and roots around the base of our veteran trees.

## **Historical Significance of the Forest**

Hatfield Forest was declared a Forest, in the early 12<sup>th</sup> Century, when Fallow Deer were introduced, it was part of the great Forest of Essex. Its function was the supply of deer for the King's table, for the parks of gentry near and far, and for the occasional ceremonial hunt. It is the continuity of use, by commoners and owners, which has ensured the long-term survival of the Forest in its present traditional form.

It is a truly remarkable place, as an example of a land-use system and vegetation pattern dating from early medieval times, which is still intact and functioning today and has a particularly well-documented and researched history. The Forest has had a continuity of grazing almost throughout its history and is presently grazed from May through to the end of October by a low input beef herd under licence. Approximately 150 adult cattle graze the site during that period. The grazing density is set at one livestock unit per open grassland and one per five hectares in the grazed woodlands.

Due to the lack of ploughing there are many hundreds of earthworks, which indicate man's activities over the centuries from well before it was declared a Forest right through to modern relics from the Second World War. In the eighteenth century there was an introduction of a designed landscape adapted by Capability Brown. The National Trust was given the site in 1924.

## **The significance of the Forest as a place for people**

For the estimated 250,000 annual visitors, Hatfield Forest is an area of unspoilt countryside, providing a safe haven for children to learn, play games and explore the wide, open spaces in a natural adventure playground. It also provides a superb outdoor classroom where children and adults can research and learn about the countryside, management, wildlife, art and history.

The visitor facilities at the Forest have recently been much improved, by the refurbishment of existing buildings. There are two large classrooms available for both children and adults, new toilets, much improved café facilities, improved access and landscaping.

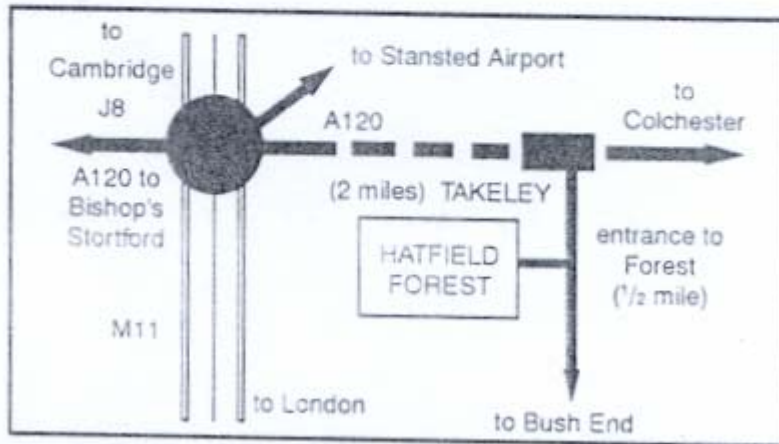
## **Conservation of the Forest**

The Forest extends over 424 hectares and has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a National Nature Reserve. It is an oasis in a landscape dominated by agriculture, roads and Stansted Airport. The ecology is in notably pristine condition, only little affected by recent and destructive land use practices and the occasional air crash! The ancient coppices and wood pasture are likely to be managed relics of the original wildwood which across northern Europe are now extremely rare.

Rackham, O. (1976). *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*. J M Dent, London.

## Location

Hatfield Forest is signposted from the A120 in the village of Takeley, 2 miles east of junction 8 of the M11 in Essex. The nearest railway station is at Bishop's Stortford (which lies 3 miles to the west of the Forest) and bus routes pass through Takeley.



## Images:



**Ancient oak coppice**



**Layering hornbeam developing into a 'phoenix tree'**



**Ancient field maple trunk with aerial root**



**Creating veteran trees from maiden trees**



**Standing decaying horsechestnut trees**