

The Archaeological Walk

This was a very interesting walk, which lasted about 3 hours. Our leader, John Morris of the Chiltern Woodlands Project had a number of interesting features to show us. For those who are interested but were not able to attend here is a brief summary:

Boundaries: Boundaries are marked at the edge of the wood and also within it, perhaps to indicate borders of property, or perhaps to control the movement of stock. They took the form of a bank and ditch, possibly with a hedge on the bank. What remains is a shallow depression showing the line of the ditch with low banks on either side. Sometimes there is a line of trees on the banks. These could be the remains of the ancient hedges which once topped the banks.

"The Stock Enclosure" is the most interesting and probably the oldest of the feature we saw. This is a large area of land which was once surrounded by a bank with a ditch inside it. It is at a high point in the wood, and the theory is that it was used to keep stock in, perhaps for annual sort out, at which animals could be reattributed to their owners. The bank is still quite high in places and was once probably topped by a stockade or a hedge. There is a dew pond nearby.

This is probably an ancient feature - early medieval, or possibly as much as 2000 years old. The construction of a stockade of this size certainly represents a considerable investment of time and labour, which must mean that it was important to its builders what ever their purpose may have been.

Paths: There are many old paths which once crossed the wood, which, with an experienced eye, can still be traced. Prior to the "inclosures" there was no Common Wood Lane, Hazlemere Road was merely a track, and therefore there would have been tracks across the wood leading to all the different places people visited frequently.

Holes in the Ground:

Sawpits are usually only found in ancient woodland. They would have been used when people sawed up large trees, perhaps oak or beech, into planks, sawing along the grain. Only ancient woodland would have trees of sufficient age and size. The sawpits are fairly deep depressions about 4 paces long by 2 paces wide. A wooden framework would have been built on top of the pit. One man, the underdog, stood in the pit, while another, top dog, was above. They worked the 2 man saw between them. One of the tasks the archaeologists would like to complete is to count and map of all the sawpits. This would give an indication of the amount of timber production. Quarries are a common feature in the Chiltern landscape. The geology of the area is varied and there are a number of useful materials that people could extract from the ground - chalk, flint, clay, pudding stone, gravel and wind blown sand. All the flint to build St Margaret's church came from Common Wood in the mid 19th century. Tile makers were active in Tylers Green from the 13th Century; they would have been digging out clay. Today we can see a number of deep pits and other lesser holes they produced. When looking at the quarries it is interesting to consider where the access may have been. The shallower end will often indicate where the materials were hauled up and carried away. Sometimes you can find the remains of a spoil heap. Trees growing on the quarry floor can indicate a minimum age, up to perhaps of 200 years.

Dew Ponds were created to provide water for stock. They are now shallow rounded depressions with mud or water at the bottom. Originally they would have had a stamped clay floor. This is now often cracked so they no longer hold water all the time.

Vegetation:

Vegetation can be an interesting clue to woodland history. There are some large colonies of blue bells in Common Wood. Blue bells do not like heavy grazing, or disturbance. They spread at a rate of about one foot per year, so it is possible to work out how long an area has been settled and free from heavy grazing. The age of trees can be useful in determining how long an area has been planted and therefore where old tracks may have lain- borders of young trees running through the middle of more ancient ones.

The Douglas firs are an interesting feature. They were planted at the time of the "inclosures" to provide avenues. These avenues have long since overgrown but the trees bordering them still remain.

We saw a dead tree, about 250 years old. It provides useful information about the nature of the wood prior to the replanting at the "inclosures". It is a beech and has a girth of about 17 feet. It probably fell about 20 - 30 years ago, as evidenced by the cherry tree of that age which is growing close beside it, a thing it could not have done if the beech had been alive.

When The Chess Valley Archaeological Society, have completed their full survey there will, of course, be much more information, and a map to show all that has been discovered.