

VCH Oxfordshire Texts in Progress

Wychwood and Cornbury

Social History

The Middle Ages to 1500

Late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman kings may have hunted regularly in the wider Wychwood forest, as suggested by the early establishment of a royal lodge at Woodstock,¹ and the granting of neighbouring lands for hunt-related services such as carrying the king's horn or providing a towel or roasting spit when he hunted in Wychwood or Cornbury.² Wychwood, Cornbury, and Woodstock were all retained within the royal demesne forests in 1086,³ and from c.1105–10 Henry I issued several charters from his lodge at Cornbury, witnessed amongst others by leading lay magnates, the bishops of Lincoln and Durham, the queen and her brother (a future king of Scotland), and various royal officers including a huntsman.⁴ Thereafter Cornbury seems to have been entirely eclipsed by Woodstock as the area's favoured royal residence and park,⁵ and though the demesne forest continued as an important deer reserve, with Cornbury called a 'chase' in 1256, there is little later evidence for royal visits.⁶ A brief stay by Edward IV in August 1461 was apparently unusual,⁷ and from the 1490s kings were more likely to stay at Henry VII's new hunting lodge and park at Langley,⁸ on the demesne forest's north-western edge. The name Kingstanding, for a site near High Lodge, may recall a viewing point for watching staged hunts, but its date is uncertain.⁹

More commonly the Crown sent its professional huntsmen to take deer from Wychwood for the king's use or as gifts for royal servants, royal favourites, and religious houses,¹⁰ and occasionally it granted prominent laymen the right to hunt there in person. In 1286 the earl of Cornwall was licensed to hunt deer in the forest whenever he visited, and in

¹ *VCH Oxon.* XII, 325, 435–6; Blair, *A-S Oxon.* 108.

² *Cal. Inq. p.m.* VI, p. 369; *Book of Fees*, I, 252; *Oxon. Eyre, 1241*, p. 150; Schumer, *Oxon. Forests*, 135 n.

³ *VCH Oxon.* I, 400–1 (incl. woods at Shipton 'in the king's enclosure').

⁴ *Reg. Regum Anglo-Norm.* I, pp. 43, 96; above, estates (Cornbury: ho.).

⁵ *VCH Oxon.* XII, 436–9. Henry gave away Shipton-under-Wychwood manor around the same time: above, Shipton, manors.

⁶ *Close 1254–6*, 278; above, econ. hist. An assertion (*Country Life*, 22 Sept. 1950, 922) that 'almost every king and queen until Charles I' visited Cornbury Lodge is without foundation.

⁷ *Cal. Pat.* 1461–7, 71; for his much more frequent visits to Woodstock, H. Kleineke, *Edward IV* (2009), 180.

⁸ Above, Shipton, manors (Langley).

⁹ *PN Oxon.* II, 387; not recorded until the 19th century.

¹⁰ Above, econ. hist.

1448 Lord Sudeley was given custody of the forest with the right to take 'reasonable' venison 'for the solace of him and his friends'.¹¹ Otherwise evidence for recreational hunting in the demesne forest and Cornbury park is scarce, although poaching at all social levels remained common.¹² In addition the forest remained an important source of royal patronage, exercised through regular grants of timber, underwood, fuel, and deer, and through the disposal of increasingly lucrative forest and park offices, latterly to some very high-status recipients.¹³

In Wychwood, as elsewhere, Henry II's imposition of forest law far beyond the demesne woods led to conflict with local lords, leading to major reductions in the forest's legal boundaries in 1229 and again in 1298–1300.¹⁴ Thereafter the Crown gradually reasserted control not only over the emergent 'purlieu' woods but often further afield, a process which, perhaps surprisingly, seems to have been generally accepted. In 1307 (several years after the forest's supposed reduction) Eynsham abbey paid 100 marks to free its Charlbury and Eynsham woods from the forester's regard, nevertheless accepting that the king's deer could still graze there, and by the 1330s freemen from villages both within and beyond the purlieu routinely attended the foresters' periodic forest inquests as earlier.¹⁵ Tensions over forest jurisdiction may have become less pronounced during the later Middle Ages, as pressure on resources eased and forest administration became more lax, reflected in the apparent demise of regular forest inquests. Forest swanimote courts, by contrast, continued into the 16th century, although by then they were as much concerned with administering villagers' legitimate grazing rights in the forest as with shoring up the Crown's rights.¹⁶

For surrounding villages the forest was both a potent symbol of Crown authority and a valuable resource. Legitimate grazing was supplemented by illicit taking of fuel and other essentials on a large scale,¹⁷ and poaching was widespread across a broad social spectrum, using bows and arrows, dogs, and sometimes ropes or nets. Offenders within the demesne forest and Cornbury came from surrounding purlieu villages and sometimes further afield, and included a few serial offenders working with partners (including beneficed clergy) who helped distribute the carcasses. Others were the servants of high-status lords or ladies such as the countess of Gloucester, who habitually sent her men into the forest to take venison when she was resident at Shipton, perhaps from her private woods near Leafield. Those arrested faced imprisonment unless they could find pledges willing to give surety, which

¹¹ *Cal. Close* 1279–88, 396; *Cal. Pat.* 1446–52, 251, 509; Watney, *Cornbury*, 49–50.

¹² Below

¹³ Above, estates; econ. hist.; below, local govt.

¹⁴ Schumer, 'Perambulations', 1–19; above, par. intro. (boundaries).

¹⁵ Schumer, 'Perambulations', 20–3; Schumer, *Oxon. Forests*, pp. ix–xi, 110–36, 145–60; *Cal. Pat.* 1301–7, 493.

¹⁶ Below, local govt.

¹⁷ Above, econ. hist.

most apparently did from within their own communities. Fines were imposed retrospectively in the 13th century by the royal justices at the forest eyre, although as the latter were held so infrequently some offenders and the officers who reported them had usually died in the meantime.¹⁸

The hereditary forester had his own prison at Langley, and local relations with him and other officers must have often been strained, potentially leading to violence. Local vills sometimes failed to send representatives to the inquests held upon suspicious deaths of deer, and were collectively fined as a consequence,¹⁹ suggesting an element of communal resistance. The law was not, however, entirely inflexible. Some offenders were excused fines on grounds of poverty, and occasionally the justices granted poached carcasses to the poor.²⁰

Some other instances of violence were unrelated to forest law. A hermit and two boys were murdered in the forest in 1204,²¹ and in 1287 the forest's main routeways were ditched and cleared of underwood perhaps partly to deter robbers.²² Poaching and wood-stealing apart there is, however, no evidence that the forest was a particularly lawless place, given its close supervision, its hierarchy of local officers, and (by the later Middle Ages) its system of bailiwicks and lodges.²³

1500–1660

By the mid 16th century Cornbury park was emerging as a gentry seat, occupied with the keepership by high-status royal administrators such as Sir Thomas Brydges (who may have remodelled the house), the Fortescues (who mostly sublet it), and from 1615 Lord Danby, who undertook major building work and made generous bequests to his servants there. Queen Elizabeth and James I visited in 1575 and 1605 respectively, and Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, occupied the house intermittently and died there in 1588.²⁴ Alongside their national roles all those keepers were closely involved in forest administration including appointment of officers, and from the 1590s they were also lessees of the coppices,²⁵ sometimes exploiting their position for their own ends. Over 100 deer a year were routinely killed on the Fortescues' instructions, some possibly for their own use,²⁶ and in the 1630s

¹⁸ Schumer, *Oxon. Forests*, pp. xii–xiv, 15–16, 20–8, 65–71, 127–8, 133–6, 145–6, 156, 158–60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* xii, 66.

²⁰ *Ibid.* xiv, 151.

²¹ *Cur. Reg.* III, 145.

²² *Cal. Fine* 1272–1307, 234.

²³ Above, econ. hist. (forest organization); below, local govt.

²⁴ Above, estates (Cornbury); TNA, PROB 11/194/124 (Danby will).

²⁵ Above, econ. hist.; below, local govt.

²⁶ TNA, E 134/7Jas1/Mich46; E 134/7Jas1/Hil24.

Danby's steward erected kennels for hunting dogs just beyond the park wall, encroaching on the forest.²⁷ James I and Prince Henry sometimes also hunted in the vicinity, possibly within the demesne forest itself,²⁸ while regular poaching continued, some of it within the park.²⁹



Left: Sir John Fortescue (d. 1607);
right: Henry Danvers (d. 1644),
earl of Danby

Disputes over jurisdiction led sometimes to confrontation. During the mid 16th century the countess of Warwick, her husband Sir Edward Unton, and her assignee the earl of Leicester secured jurisdiction over the forest as appurtenant to Langley manor,³⁰ and after Leicester's death William Harman claimed similar rights against the queen's appointee Sir John Fortescue, perhaps as lessee of Langley. Faced with an injunction to desist, Harman allegedly confronted Fortescue, the sheriff, and the sheriff's men in the forest before attacking Newell and Ranger's Lodges, intimidating the keepers there, and seizing deer carcasses.³¹ Present with Fortescue was his deputy Mr Stafford, who for a time occupied Cornbury House.³² A few years later Fortescue's son and successor came under scrutiny, accused of committing wastes in the forest and of demolishing Newell Lodge, whose materials he used for his own buildings at Cornbury. Some keepers, too, were accused of neglecting or exploiting their office, Richard Batten (of Ranger's Lodge) allegedly 'selling' some of the forest ridings and later his whole walk, presumably meaning the herbage.³³

Some keepers were moderately prosperous men, who often had farming interests in neighbouring parishes and who generally occupied the lodges with their families. Richard Taylor (d. 1526) of Newell Lodge owned furred gowns and a silk doublet, a feather bed, and several sheep, and bequeathed wages for two chantry priests. Leonard Box (d. 1624) of High Lodge left goods worth over £226, divided between the lodge and Coldstone Farm in

²⁷ Above, par. intro. (settlement).

²⁸ *Country Life*, 22 Sept. 1950, 923; TNA, C 99/93/3, m. 2d. (mentioning rabbit warrens impeding the king's hunting).

²⁹ *Cal. SP Dom.* 1629–31, 270.

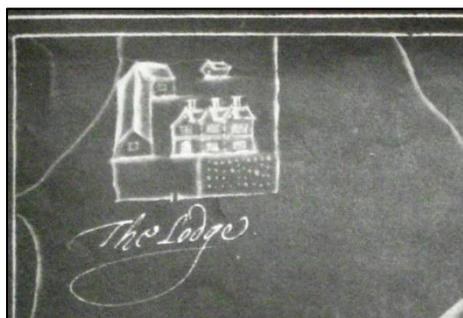
³⁰ Above, estates; econ. hist.; below, local govt.

³¹ TNA, E 133/6/923; *ibid.* CRES 40/10, f. 427. Harman denied acting aggressively, and was involved in lodge repairs in 1594 (CRES 40/10, f. 256).

³² *Oxon. Visit.* 48; Watney, *Cornbury*, 70–2.

³³ TNA, E 134/7Jas1/Hil24; E 134/7Jas1/Mich46.

Ascott, where he ran a sizeable mixed farm. His luxuries at the lodge included silver bowls and spoons, chests and cupboards, and a canopied bed.³⁴ In such instances the keeper's prosperity must have derived primarily from farming or other offices, since their wages from the Crown comprised only £6 a year 'and some petty perquisites not worth reciting', principally an allowance of firewood.³⁵ The chief ranger under Danby (based at Ranger's Lodge) was the gentleman of his bedchamber Acton Drake, and though Danby pleaded Drake's and the other keepers' alleged poverty to the sheriff in 1635, he subsequently left Drake his bedroom furniture, the lease of King's coppice, and Langley manor for life.³⁶ Some later holders of Ranger's walk included the aged Col. John Legge (appointed c.1684 following representations by the duke of York) and Lord Cornbury's relative the Hon. Baptist Leveson Gower (fl. 1735–59),³⁷ although most keepers of the other walks were of lesser status. Acton Kew, possibly of High Lodge, was described in 1700 as 'a plain man, but ... honest', and helped with administration of the park.³⁸ The lodges themselves, though substantial buildings,³⁹ were often in disrepair, and keepers sometimes suffered long delays in obtaining authorization and reimbursement for essential work.⁴⁰



Ranger's Lodge in 1617
(OHC Photo 7/2)

From the early 17th century both James and Charles I sought to increase their income from the royal forests by resurrecting moribund rights and re-extending forest boundaries.⁴¹ At Wychwood a Crown survey of c.1609 re-imposed long-defunct assart rents across much of the former forest area, and in the 1630s reinvigorated forest courts and eyres imposed heavy fines for offences against the deer and woodland over the previous twenty years, both in the purlieu and in the forest proper. Opposition to such moves was

³⁴ OHC, MSS Wills Oxon 178.59; 295/2/92; 1/4/23 (Brize's Lodge); cf. TNA, PROB 11/408/482 (High Lodge, 1692).

³⁵ *Cal. SP Dom.* 1635–6, 338; *Cal. Pat.* 1596–7, p. 212; BL, Add. MS 6027, f. 59v.

³⁶ TNA, C 99/93/1–3; *ibid.* PROB 11/194/124; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1635–6, 338.

³⁷ Watney, *Cornbury*, 148–9, 184–5; Oxf. Jnl Syn. 29 Sept. 1759.

³⁸ Watney, *Cornbury*, 180; Ascott par. reg. s.a. 1711; above, econ. hist. The keeper was either him or his son of the same name.

³⁹ Above, par. intro. (settlement; built character).

⁴⁰ e.g. TNA, CRES 40/10, ff. 255–7; *ibid.* LR 2/1, f. 57; *ibid.* E 134/7Jas1/Hil24, enqs on behalf of Ric. Batten.

⁴¹ R.W. Hoyle (ed.), *The Estates of The English Crown, 1558–1640* (1992), 325–6, 345–6; P.A.J. Pettit, *The Royal Forests of Northants: a Study in their Econ. 1558–1714* (Northants Rec. Soc. 23, 1968), 83–95; R. Grant, *The Royal Forests of England* (1991), 186–98.

most marked in the Woodstock area, which had long been effectively free of forest jurisdiction, but also created tensions around Wychwood itself, where landowners, tenants, and forest officers were all affected. Parliament forced a retreat in 1641, when Wychwood's boundaries were restored to those of the demesne woods; even so the forest wall begun by Charles I and completed during the Interregnum encircled the purlieu as well as the forest, potentially controlling lords' access to their own property and villagers' access to forest grazing and to Ramsden and Finstock heaths.⁴² In reality free access continued, not least because gates were seldom locked or policed.⁴³

During the Civil War Cornbury park was fortified with a gun emplacement just over its eastern boundary, overlooking the Evenlode valley and built probably with the agreement of the Royalist Lord Danby before his death in 1644. Royalist troops were apparently stationed there by the previous March.⁴⁴ Cornbury was subsequently disputed between Danby's sister and heir Lady Gargrave and their Parliamentary brother (and regicide) Sir John Danvers (d. 1655), and by 1646 was occupied by Parliamentary forces under Thomas Fairfax.⁴⁵ The forest itself became state property during the Interregnum, while most of the surrounding purlieu woods were confiscated from the Royalist Lord Craven. The latter were sold in 1654, although Parliament subsequently sought to recover them to help finance the forest wall.⁴⁶ In 1658 there was concern at certain 'suspicious and dangerous persons' living near the forest, who were holding meetings and committing unspecified 'misdemeanours'. The forest keepers were ordered to find, arrest, and disarm them, reporting their names to Council and delivering them to a JP.⁴⁷

1660–1857

Charles II's grant of Cornbury to the earl of Clarendon completed its transition into a prestigious country seat.⁴⁸ Clarendon entertained the king and queen and the duke of York there in September 1663,⁴⁹ and his friend the diarist John Evelyn visited in 1664, accompanied by the architect Hugh May and the queen's secretary.⁵⁰ Later visitors included William III, Alexander Pope, Horace Walpole, William Pitt the elder, and Mary Granville (Mrs

⁴² Schumer, *Oxon. Forests*, pp. xv–xvi, xviii, 161–24; Schumer, 'Perambulations', 23–5; above, par. intro. (boundaries); below, local govt.

⁴³ Below (1660–1857).

⁴⁴ B.H. St J. O'Neil, 'A Civil War Battery at Cornbury', *Oxoniensia* 10 (1945), 73–8; OHC, MS Wills Oxon. 115/4/4.

⁴⁵ Above, estates (Cornbury).

⁴⁶ *Cal. Cttee for Compounding*, II, 1617; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1655–6, 306–7; 1656–7, 39; TNA, C 54/3731, no. 3.

⁴⁷ *Cal. SP Dom.* 1657–8, 373.

⁴⁸ Above, estates (Cornbury).

⁴⁹ Watney, *Cornbury*, 133–4; *Cal. SP Dom.* 1663–4, 271, 280–1; cf. *ibid.* 1667, 496; 1683, 254.

⁵⁰ E.S. de Beer (ed.), *Diary of John Evelyn* (1955), III, 381–2; above, estates (Cornbury: ho.).

Delaney), a correspondent of Swift.⁵¹ The high-level connections of Cornbury's owners also brought national politics to the area. Clarendon's sudden fall and exile in 1667 left the house temporarily unfinished,⁵² and in 1690–1 the 2nd earl was placed under house arrest there for his Jacobite sympathies, distracting himself with management of the park and estate.⁵³ The 4th earl's son Henry (1710–53), Viscount Cornbury, continued the Jacobite tradition, visiting the Pretender James Stuart in Rome in 1731 and supporting schemes for a Stuart restoration. There is, however, no evidence to support the story that he hid rebels at Cornbury during the events of 1745, or that the Young Pretender visited *incognito* in 1750, when Henry was, in fact, abroad.⁵⁴



Left: Edward Hyde (d.1674), earl of Clarendon, to whom Charles II granted Cornbury park in 1661; right: Henry Hyde (d.1709), the 2nd earl

Charles II and his successors exploited the forest in traditional ways, periodically requesting deer for the royal palaces and making occasional grants of timber.⁵⁵ Recreational deer hunting by owners of Cornbury and others continued intermittently alongside the growing fashion for fox hunting, in which the king and his party indulged while visiting in 1663.⁵⁶ Increasingly, however, the Crown's rights over both deer and forest were usurped by the owners of Cornbury, who by the late 18th century (as hereditary rangers and lessees of the coppices) treated the whole as virtually private property. Wide-ranging claims by the duke of Marlborough in 1792 included the sole right to deer and other game, to forest woodland other than timber and saplings, and to royalties including fines, waifs, strays, and mineral rights, while as ranger he appointed the forest keepers, who answered to him rather than the Crown.⁵⁷ In addition he disposed of the forest lodges, taking timber for their repair and installing private lessees at the grander Ranger's and South Lawn Lodges, which became effectively small country houses occupied by gentry and retired military men, set amidst large private grounds. Some of their occupants treated the forest in an equally cavalier fashion, Admiral Pigott (at Ranger's) demanding a firewood allowance from the keepers, and

⁵¹ *Cal. SP Dom.* 1695, 96; Watney, *Cornbury*, 186–9.

⁵² Watney, *Cornbury*, 143; *ODNB*.

⁵³ Watney, *Cornbury*, 163–6; *ODNB*. His son sided with Wm III.

⁵⁴ *ODNB*; Watney, *Cornbury*, 184–6.

⁵⁵ *Cal. SP Dom.* 1663–4, 639; 1672–3, 387; above, econ. hist.

⁵⁶ Watney, *Cornbury*, 134, 162, 200.

⁵⁷ *Wychwood Rep.* (1792), 9, 12–14, 30, 43–4

clearing part of the Crown's neighbouring Cranehill coppice.⁵⁸ Disposal of annual grants of deer fell also to the duke, governed by a custom of 'composition deer' which was claimed to be ancient, but which was actually relatively recent. Under that a total of 103 deer were distributed every year, 36 to the duke as ranger, 12 to the Crown, and 12 to the keepers, with the rest going mostly to local and Crown officers and local landowners.⁵⁹ The 1st Lord Churchill alleged (on largely spurious grounds) even more extensive rights, prompting a protracted lawsuit which ran from 1834 until his death in 1845 and cost the Crown over £7,580.⁶⁰ In addition he and his predecessors wielded increasing influence over surrounding villages as local landowners, as the Cornbury estate expanded.⁶¹

For local people the forest remained a vital source of wood and fuel as well as of legitimate grazing.⁶² Besides illegally cutting firewood villagers allegedly broke coppice fences, promoted windfalls by chipping at trees and roots, and brought in carts by night, scarcely one in twenty offenders being prosecuted according to an estimate in 1848.⁶³ Those convicted, up to 40 a year in the 1840s, came (where identifiable) from virtually all the surrounding villages and sometimes from further afield.⁶⁴ The forest also provided nuts (sold for nut oil) and birds' eggs.⁶⁵ Deer poaching, though less endemic than wood offences, remained common, using guns, nets, and ropes.⁶⁶ The underkeeper James Millin was shot by poachers in 1824, and a widespread trade in poached deer led allegedly to fights and robberies, each carcass bringing £3–£9 in the early 19th century.⁶⁷ Those involved reportedly included respectable tradesmen and innkeepers as well as ordinary villagers, and keepers occasionally raided villagers' houses in search of poached carcasses.⁶⁸ Illegal activities were facilitated by uncontrolled access: gates to both forest and park were generally left open, and in 1753 some people were suspected of having false keys.⁶⁹ Less typical were the activities of the Dunsden brothers, notorious highwaymen who were rumoured to have a hideout near Widley copse. They were finally captured in 1784 during a

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 7, 9, 30–1, 34, 36; above, par. intro. (settlement; bldgs). South Lawn was successively occupied by Gen. Boscawen and Charles Fettiplace esq.

⁵⁹ *Wychwood Rep.* (1792), 7, 38, 43; cf. *Sel. Cttee Forests* (1848), p. 299; OHC, M120/4/A/1.

⁶⁰ *Sel. Cttee Forests* (1848), pp. 56–9, 63–4, 91, 582–3, 693; TNA, CRES 40/10.

⁶¹ Above, estates; for social involvement, C. Tyzack, *Wychwood and Cornbury* (2003), 98–102, 124–6; *Oxon. FS*, 96–7; *VCH Oxon.* X, 129; above, Leafield.

⁶² Above, econ. hist.

⁶³ TNA, LRRO 3/82, warrant Feb. 1721; *Wychwood Rep.* (1792), 51; *Sel. Cttee Forests* (1848), pp. 60, 62.

⁶⁴ *Sel. Cttee Forests* (1848), pp. 707–12; identifications by B. Schumer.

⁶⁵ J. Kibble, *Historical and Other Notes on Charlbury* (1927), 65.

⁶⁶ e.g. *ibid.* 66–7; M.S. Gretton (ed.), *Oxon. Justices of Peace in 17th Century* (ORS 16, 1934), 57; BL, Add MS 38476, ff. 227, 229; *Oxf. Jnl Syn.* 29 Sept. 1759; 30 Jan. 1766; 31 Dec. 1768.

⁶⁷ *Oxf. Jnl* 7 Aug. 1824; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d.191a, ff. 142b, 185–90; Watney, *Cornbury*, 207 n.

⁶⁸ J. Kibble, *Historical and Other Notes on Wychwood Forest* (1928), 10–12; Kibble, *Charlbury*, 66.

⁶⁹ *Oxf. Jnl Syn.* 16 Mar. 1765; *Wychwood Rep.* (1792), 51; *Sel. Cttee Forests* (1848), p. 55.

violent confrontation at Capp's Lodge, and their corpses gibbeted nearby after their execution.⁷⁰

Seasonal communal events in the forest included some with early origins. A Whit Sunday hunt involving people from Burford and neighbouring villages, led by a 'Whitsun lord' or 'lord of sports', was established by 1593, when because of plague it was temporarily suspended and the town received a gift of two bucks instead. Probably the hunt was of medieval origin, but forest courts imposed heavy fines on the chief participants in the 1630s,⁷¹ and it was subsequently replaced by a Whitsun procession from Burford to Capp's Lodge, where a boy and girl elected as 'lord and lady' demanded two bucks and a fawn from the keepers, and entertainments (at least by the 19th century) included cock-fighting and backsword. The practice was apparently suppressed by an evangelical curate of Burford c.1827,⁷² although the annual gift of deer to Burford continued until disafforestation.⁷³ A comparable Whit Monday hunt in Witney's Chase woods continued into the 1850s, attended by crowds from Witney and nearby villages who were allowed to use dogs to take one deer each for Witney, Hailey, and Crawley. The 1st Lord Churchill sometimes participated with his staghounds, and by the early 19th century the hunt, accompanied by a beer cart, formed part of a wider calendar of village festivities involving youth ales, feasting, and morris dancing, the hunt itself announced by locals parading the streets blowing 'peeling horns' made from green willow bark.⁷⁴ A two-day forest fair in September was established by local Methodists in 1796 as a more decorous alternative to Witney feast, incorporating a genteel picnic at Newhill Plain. Within a few years it attracted other revellers, however, and by the 1820s featured stalls and side shows including menageries, eating and drinking booths, boxing, theatrical performances, and a dancing saloon, attended by up to 20,000 people including local gentry, casual visitors, and numerous villagers. Damage and disorderly behaviour prompted its occasional suspension during the 1830s–40s, and in 1842 Lord Churchill laid barricades and trenches to prevent the carts and waggons from gaining access.⁷⁵ By 1855 ten excursion trains brought revellers to Charlbury station, but thereafter the fair was suppressed.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d.191a, ff. f.139b–142a, 178, 182; Oxf. Jnl Syn. 30 May 1784.

⁷¹ Watney, *Cornbury*, 97; TNA, C 99/93/3, m.2d. Like the Witney hunt (below) it may have been confined to neighbouring purlieus.

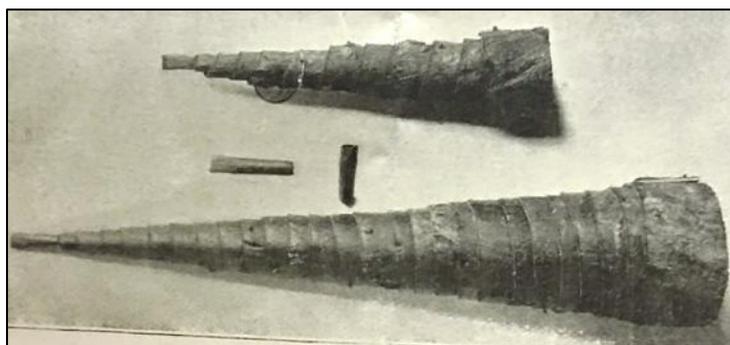
⁷² Oxf. Jnl Syn. 28 July 1765; Brewer, *Oxon.* 476; Bodl. MS Top. Oxon. d.191a, ff. 138–139a, 171–2; D. Clark et al., *Burford: Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town* (2008), 109–10, 153.

⁷³ OHC, Wychwood inclo. award, pp. 25–6 (awarding the corporation £150 in compensation)..

⁷⁴ A. Howkins, *Whitsun in 19th-Century Oxfordshire* (Hist. Workshop Pamphlets 8, 1973), 15–18; *Folklore* 8.4 (1897), 310–12; C. Bloxham, *May Day to Mummers* (2002), 141–4; *VCH Oxon.* XIV, 59; Bodl. MSS Top. Oxon. d.191a, ff. 182–4; d.200, f. 7.

⁷⁵ Watney, *Cornbury*, 207–8; C. Tyzack, *Wychwood and Cornbury* (2003), 121–3; Kibble, *Wychwood*, 19–22; Bodl. MSS Top. Oxon. d.193 ff. 132–137b; d.191a, f. 174; *Oxf. Jnl* 25 Sept. 1830; 1 Sept. 1832; *Oxf. Chron.* 17 Sept. 1842; 16 Sept. 1848.

⁷⁶ Miller (ed.), *Rain and Ruin*, 149.



Traditional Oxfordshire 'peeling horns' as used during the Whitsuntide Wychwood hunt

Long before then disapproval of such activities was adding to the mounting pressure for inclosure, which by the early 19th century was advocated on 'moral' as well as economic grounds. Arthur Young alleged in 1809 that 'the vicinity is filled with poachers, deer stealers, thieves, and pilferers of every kind' who were 'a terror to all quiet and well-disposed persons', adding that poor rates in villages around the forest were (despite their access to forest resources) consistently higher than in comparable places elsewhere.⁷⁷ Others invoked the seasonal nature of forest labour, contrasted with the fuller and more regular farm employment which it was claimed inclosure would bring.⁷⁸ Implementation was postponed by the dispute with Lord Churchill, but under the award of 1857 the forest was replaced by privatized fields and residual privatized woodland. The only compensation for those most reliant on its resources was a ring of small and short-lived village commons on some of the poorest land.⁷⁹

Since 1857

To 'improving' farmers such as Charles Belcher (first tenant of the new Potter's Hill farm), Wychwood's conversion to 'productive' farming was a national triumph to be celebrated by all 'patriotic Englishmen', replacing poverty with plenty, and idleness and 'dissipation' with 'honest employment'. Others lamented the loss of 'beautiful scenery' to 'gain and greed',⁸⁰ while neighbouring villages lost not only economic resources but a way of life, disrupting local communities.⁸¹ The psychological impact of the landscape's sudden and dramatic transformation must have been profound, and loss of the forest as a place to roam was still lamented in the 1920s.⁸² Ultimately the new farms probably did provide more regular (if still

⁷⁷ Young, *Oxon. Agric.* 238.

⁷⁸ *Sel. Cttee Forests* (1848), pp. 60, 62, 89.

⁷⁹ OHC, Wychwood inclo. award; above, econ. hist.

⁸⁰ C. Belcher, 'On Reclaiming of Waste Lands as instanced in Wichwood Forest', *Jnl Royal Agric. Soc.* 24 (1863), 280–1, 284–5; F. Emery, 'The Transformation of Wychwood : Some Fresh Evidence', *Oxon. Local Hist.* 2.1 (1984), 19–22; *Oxf. Jnl*, 8 Oct. 1859.

⁸¹ K. Chandler, 'Wychwood Forest: A study of the effects of enclosure on the occupational structure of a group of Leaffield workers', *Oxon. Local Hist.* 3.5 (1990), 209–17; above, Leaffield.

⁸² Kibble, *Wychwood*, 1–2, 4.

seasonal) work, although even in the early pioneering phase Belcher claimed that wages were no higher than usual for the district.⁸³

Those taking up the new farms came mostly from outside the area,⁸⁴ and though cottages were built for specialist farm workers the majority of labourers continued to live in neighbouring settlements. Plans for a new school and church came to nothing, and though Wychwood became a parish with its own meeting it lacked any real community focus,⁸⁵ its leading farmers and other residents looking to neighbouring places or further afield. John Simpson Calvertt (d. 1900), a Lincolnshire farmer who moved to Fairspear in 1875, had wide social connections across the area, serving on the Chipping Norton Board of Guardians and, as a keen huntsman, meeting frequently at Cornbury and elsewhere with fellow farmers, gentry and clergy. At Shipton he regularly attended Conservative Association dinners and helped establish the new Beaconsfield village hall, while at Leafield he supported the parish church and served as a trustee for Leafield school. Despite falling wages during the agricultural depression, relations with his labourers seem generally to have been good: Calvertt often attended the Leafield club feast, and on several occasions provided communal dinners and entertainments to mark family weddings or (in 1887) Queen Victoria's jubilee.⁸⁶ An exception to Wychwood's lack of social provision was its cricket club, established by 1862 when Calvertt's predecessor W.T. Buckle provided a playing field, while a slightly later ground (near Ranger's Lodge) was provided presumably by Lord Churchill.⁸⁷ Otherwise the parish continued to lack much social focus until its break-up in 1949, when the bulk was combined with Leafield, and the woodland (including High and Ranger's Lodges) with Cornbury.⁸⁸

Cornbury itself remained the centre of a substantial estate, supporting a large body of resident servants, gamekeepers, gardeners, and other estate workers. Many in 1861 came from the immediate area, with others from outside the county, although the proportion of locals seems subsequently to have fallen.⁸⁹ The 2nd Lord Churchill and his wife (Lady of the Bedchamber to Queen Victoria)⁹⁰ took a close philanthropic interest in surrounding villages, particularly Finstock, and in the early 1890s the 3rd Lord's lessee Llewellyn Wynne (who unsuccessfully sought election as Conservative MP for North Oxfordshire) regularly opened the park to local clubs and societies, hosting Whit Monday sports accompanied by stalls and

⁸³ Belcher, 'Wichwood Forest', 283.

⁸⁴ TNA, RG 9/910, ff. 112–14; the exception was Rob. Morris at Smallstones.

⁸⁵ Above, par. intro. (settlement); below, local govt.

⁸⁶ Miller (ed.), *Rain and Ruin*, passim.

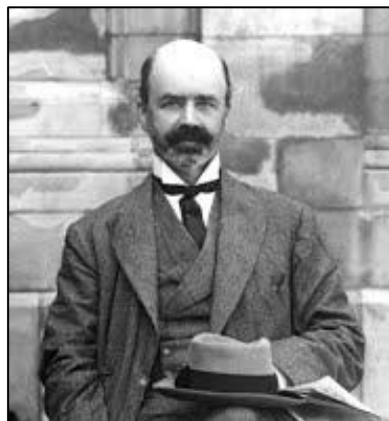
⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 40–1, 112; *Oxf. Jnl* 2 Aug. 1862; 5 Oct. 1867.

⁸⁸ Above, par. intro. (boundaries).

⁸⁹ TNA, RG 9/910, ff. 108–112v.; RG 12/1178, ff. 38 and v.; C. Tyzack, *Wychwood and Cornbury* (2003), 138.

⁹⁰ Tyzack, *Wychwood*, 124–6. Victoria visited her at Cornbury in 1886 after Lord Churchill's death, arriving through Charlbury station.

roundabouts, and allowing public skating on the lakes in winter, as well as starting a soup kitchen and supporting local allotments.⁹¹ Regular shooting parties and gatherings of the Heythrop Hunt nevertheless contributed to the remaining woodland becoming less accessible, the large-scale introduction of game birds being remembered in the 1920s as the point when ‘all entry to the forest was put down with a strong hand’.⁹² The Churchills’ successors Harvey Du Cros and Vernon Watney, both wealthy businessmen, continued in similar vein, adopting the lifestyles of leisured country gentry while also (particularly in the Watneys’ case) taking a strong paternalistic interest in the wellbeing of their estate workers and of local villagers.⁹³ Watney also took a close interest in Cornbury’s past, publishing a major and thoroughly researched history in 1910.⁹⁴



Left: John Simpson Calvert (d.1900), a Lincolnshire farmer who moved to Fairspear Farm in 1875; centre and right: Vernon Watney (d.1928), owner of Cornbury Park from 1901, and his son Oliver (d.1966)

During the Second World War parts of the park and house were requisitioned by the military, but otherwise Watney’s son Oliver (d. 1966) continued the earlier pattern, maintaining a large estate staff, and serving on local bodies and as JP.⁹⁵ Thereafter the estate was run on increasingly commercial lines by Lord Rotherwick, whose reluctance to allow public access through the former forest woodland led to acrimonious public enquiries during the 1980s, inflaming an issue first raised in the 1950s.⁹⁶ A single public footpath from Finstock to the road past Waterman’s Lodge, avoiding most of the woodland, was eventually agreed in 1990, while traditional Palm Sunday access to the Wort and Chalybeate wells continued in 2017. Leafield inhabitants were additionally allowed to collect fallen wood from a designated area on Thursday afternoons, while Charlbury inhabitants had access to the

⁹¹ Tyzack, *Wychwood*, 124–8; Miller (ed.), *Rain and Ruin*, 122, 141–2, 146, 153, 159, 165–6, 182, 216, 226.

⁹² Kibble, *Wychwood*, 4; cf. Miller (ed.), *Rain and Ruin*, 34, 36–7, 50, 151, 159, 166, 168, 245, 262.

⁹³ Tyzack, *Wychwood*, 128–45; above, estates.

⁹⁴ V.J. Watney, *Cornbury and the Forest of Wychwood* (1910).

⁹⁵ Tyzack, *Wychwood*, 145–50.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 150; C. Hall, ‘Path Opponents make Strange Bedfellows’, *The Rambler* (Dec. 1988/Jan. 1989), 29; ‘The Secret Forest: the Case for Access to the Ancient Forest of Wychwood’ (CPRE 1982).

park on New Year's Day.⁹⁷ From 2004 Cornbury became more widely known as home of the Cornbury Music Festival, a successful summer rock and pop event relaunched in 2011 as the Wilderness Festival, with wider activities built around it.⁹⁸ The Wychwood Project, a community-based educational, ecological, and historical project covering the presumed area of the Norman forest, was started in 1997, and in 2017 managed four conservation areas some distance from the former demesne forest. From 2000 it also resurrected the September 'Forest fair', held in various locations across the area, and featuring displays by local crafts and businesses as well as morris dancing and other entertainments.⁹⁹



Left: the present-day Wychwood Forest Fair, and (right) the Wilderness music festival at Cornbury Park

⁹⁷ *Oxf. Mail* 28 June 2010; www.charlburygreenhub.org.uk/countryside/wychwood-forest-cornbury-park.html; www.leaffieldvillage.co.uk/local-information/rights-to-access-the-wychwood-forest; www.cornburypark.co.uk/palm-sunday-walk.html (accessed 4.4.2017).

⁹⁸ *Oxf. Times* 18 Nov. 2010; 9 Aug. 2013. From 2011 the 'Cornbury Music Festival' (held elsewhere) had no links with Cornbury.

⁹⁹ www.wychwoodproject.org; local information.