NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

CENTURY of CHANGE

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BACKGROUND NOTES

Miner2Major
The Real Sherwood Forest

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These Background Notes support historical enquiry into the Natural Environment theme for the Century of Change.

Century of Change focuses largely on the period 1850 and 1950 but the story of the natural environment clearly goes back much further. In this session we focus on:

- What is a forest?
- How has Sherwood Forest changed over time and why?
- What was it like to live or work in the Sherwood Forest area through the Century of Change?
- What is a forest for?

We are grateful to both the Sherwood Forest Trust and Greenwood Trust for their support in creating these resources. There are two wonderful videos from the Sherwood Forest Trust that provide the best introduction into the work and aims of Sherwood Forest Trust. The first is a call to action which is inspiration for looking to the future of Sherwood Forest. The second highlights the work of Sherwood Forest Trust and how partnership working is essential to stem the decline of the heathland. We have provided transcriptions of both.

Sherwood Forest Trust
Ancient Sherwood Forest
https://vimeo.com/457723396

Sherwood Forest Trust
Explainer Video
https://vimeo.com/454671152

What is a forest?

We all think we know what a forest is, but a 'forest' historically was a legal term meaning land preserved for a special purpose. Sherwood Forest's first special purpose was as a Royal Hunting Ground, just after the Norman invasion.

Forests are an intricate ecosystem which contains trees, shrubs, grasses, wildflowers and more.' A mature oak tree for instance can support 271 different species of insect, 34 different types of butterfly, not to mention birds, bats, lichen and fungi.

Sherwood Forest is made up of grassland, heathland and woodland. Geologists describe the landscape character of Sherwood Forest as being fairly dry and sandy. The soil is based on Bunter Sandstone. The most recognisable example of Bunter Sandstone, nearby, is the outcrop beneath Nottingham Castle. It is a friable type of stone which was laid down in a lagoon hundreds of thousands of years ago. The sandstone is full of pebbles. Pebbles are evidence of the action of water in ancient times. Pieces of friable rock were turned over and over in the water until they became pebbles.

The characteristic woodland is the natural woodland that returned after the Ice Age. It is a broad-leaf woodland, made up of

deciduous trees; trees that drop their leaves in winter. The trees that have been native to the area for thousands of years are:

- Oak, both Pedunculate and Sessile Oak
- Holly
- Silver birch
- Sweet chestnut, (no horse chestnut because that came later with the Romans)
- Lots of gorse and bracken.

Bluebells are an indication of broad-leaf woodland. They are not found in more recent plantations where conifers and firs are grown purely to supply timber.

Sherwood Forest Trust's explainer video is packed with information about the forest. https://vimeo.com/454671152

Sherwood's habitats are mainly woodland, heathland and grassland.

The national nature reserve is the biggest and best place to find ancient Oakland in Europe.

An ancient Oak is at least 500 years old.

The Sherwood Constituency has 2% woodland cover.

The Nottingham North Constituency has 5% woodland cover.

Sherwood constituency has 2020 ancient trees.

The Nottingham North Constituency has 2 ancient trees.

90% of Sherwood's heathland has gone.

Over the last two hundred years the great forests are now just fragments in a modern landscape.

Over the years the forest has transformed. It no longer stretches from Bestwood to Ollerton or Mansfield to Newark. It is much smaller.

The Sherwood Forest is the type of landscape that includes heathland and grassland. There's heathland at Oak Tree Heath and at Sherwood Heath. Heathland is a valuable ecological habitat and it is vanishing quickly. Nottinghamshire has lost about 85% of its Nottinghamshire heathland since 1800.

The forest has been important for farming for centuries.

The Century of Change from 1850 to 1950 had a huge impact on both the size of the forest and how it was used.

Many trusts, estates, and the public are working to protect these vulnerable habitats and landscapes.

How has Sherwood Forest changed over time and why?

Royal Hunting Forest

The Sherwood Forest name was first recorded in 938 AD. Sherwood Forest became a Royal Hunting Forest after the Norman invasion of 1066. It was managed specifically for hunting. The Forest at this time was a dappled landscape with woodland cover and open areas. Hunting forests needed woodland cover for the deer, for when the fawns were being born but they also needed to have wide open spaces so the King and his entourage could enjoy a good gallop and chase prey. The King's hunting parties would have been large, up to 150 people.

So if there was a Robin Hood we can imagine him in a dappled woodland landscape with these wide open areas. Forests had been managed in this way for this purpose for centuries until the 1700s.

The Crown lost interest in the forest and the land was gifted to or sold to Dukes in the area. The area covered by Clumber, Thoresby and Welbeck became known as the Dukeries. Rufford Park and Newstead were also large estates in the area.

A Century of Change 1850 to 1950

Sherwood Forest has always been a rich resource for local people, providing timber for buildings and industry, game to eat or for sport, employment in the mills and mines and it's a great natural resource to enjoy. There have been many struggles about who owns these resources and who has access to them and how they should be used.

The 18th century was a time of great social change. It was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution which brought great wealth and better standards of living to some but harsh working conditions for others.

Towns and villages at the beginning of the Century of Change were small by today's standards. There was a strong overlap between rural and town life. Those living in the countryside were mostly self-sufficient. They grazed livestock and farmed crops on strips of land.

Before 1750, everyone, rich or poor, had the right to farmland. Land was divided in to strips about 1 acre in size and split among the poorer people (peasants), so that good and bad growing land was shared equally. There were very few hedges as we would recognise them today. There would have been very little to divide land.

Politicians believed enclosing the land would make it easier to farm and so landowners could produce more crops, making their estates more profitable. The land was given to landowners who could pay for fencing (enclosing). Smaller landowners were forced onto the poorer quality land. The poorest people lost access to land altogether so were unable to catch game or fish to eat or even gather firewood for their homes.

During the 1700s each village needed an Act of Enclosure to enclose its lands into larger areas to farm. In 1801, 50 years before

the Century of Change, Parliament passed a General Enclosure Act which meant any village had a right to enclose its land if three quarters of its landowners agreed.

In addition to this change the Game Laws were also introduced. The Game Laws of 1816 meant only landowners would hunt game, pheasants, partridge, hares and rabbits. The penalties for poaching were severe, even being caught with equipment that could be used for poaching, such as nets, could lead to a sentence of transportation.

Landowners employed gamekeepers to prevent local people from accessing their land. Often poachers and gamekeepers lived side by side in communities.

For many this was a time of great hardship. The story of the mills in the area shows that there had been a thriving cottage industry in Nottinghamshire where whole families worked from home to make stockings. These were framework knitters. Of the 9,000 framework knitters working nationally 2,000 were in the Nottinghamshire area.

The rapid rise of mills in the area provided employment. The mills used machinery to produce cotton faster than the workers could. This marked the start of the end of the cottage industry for framework knitters. To make matters worse, a change in fashion meant the work of stockingers disappeared almost overnight. Men began to copy the French fashion for long trousers, not breeches, and, importantly, stockings.

Landowners were profiting from the laws they were making in Parliament, whilst poorer families in the area were finding it harder and harder to make a living. Work was becoming harder and harder to find and they could no longer catch game to feed their families without the fear of being criminalised and transported.

At the time of the Rufford Park Poachers, just four men owned about 88,000 acres of what had been ancient Sherwood Forest. The four men were: The Dukes of Norfolk, Portland, Kingston and Newcastle. That's why people still call the northern part of Sherwood Forest 'The Dukeries.'

What was it like to live and work in Sherwood Forest in during the Century of Change?

The Rufford Park Poachers

The story of the Rufford Park Poachers is a perfect example of the conflicting demands on the resources of Sherwood Forest. Sherwood Forest has always been both a rich resource and a source of conflict for local people. The story of the Rufford Park Poachers is a great example of how this struggle played out in 1851.

The Rufford Park Poachers booklet by Sam Millard has been provided as a resource. This youtube video of the Longest Johns singing the ballad of the Rufford Park Poachers is a great introduction:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mkyA92XuTg

Today anyone can visit Rufford Park but in 1851 it was owned by Lord John Lumley-Savile, Earl of Scarborough. Lord John Lumley-Savile had 'enclosed' some parts of Sherwood Forest that previously had been 'common land'. Anyone could access common land to catch game to eat or collect firewood to heat their homes. Lord Savile decided he would keep the land and the deer, rabbits and other game for himself, to hunt for sport. He was wealthy so didn't need the game for food. Shooting pheasants at this time was considered a high-class sport.

Back in 1851 a road ran from Mansfield to Bilsthorpe. One moonlit night, 30 to 40 poor and hungry men set out along the road to walk into Rufford Park. They were carrying nets. They wanted to trap some rabbits so they could feed their families. The men were poor framework knitters. Machines and mills were starting to take away their trade and the increased competition was forcing their wages down. Previously they had been able to take wood and game from Sherwood Forest, but now taking game from Lord Savile's land ('poaching') was a criminal offence. Lord Savile employed gamekeepers to keep people off his land. Anyone who tried to catch game could be beaten by the gamekeepers or arrested. Those arrested might be put in gaol, or even taken away from their family and 'transported' to Australia where they would be condemned to do 'hard labour.'

On 13th October 1851 the men decided that the best form of protection was to go to look for game as part of a large group. The would-be poachers made their way out of Mansfield, along the Bilsthorpe Road towards Inkersall Farm. The road ran through the land of Lord Savile. The gamekeepers were expecting them. Census records from the time show that gamekeepers and poachers lived alongside each other, some on the same streets. There were about 30 to 40 poachers. They had no weapons but along the way they gathered large pebbles from the sandy soil, just in case...

Ten gamekeepers were lying in wait. They had pistols (guns) and flails. A flail was a wooden tool used on farms, a piece of wood swinging on a chain.

Two of the gamekeepers were hurt by the stones. Many of the poachers were hurt too. One had a broken arm. One died from his injuries. The stakes were high on both sides. Gamekeepers were paid to stop poachers from taking Lord Savile's 'game'. If they failed, they would lose their jobs.

Several of the poachers were arrested and tried in court. The case became a newspaper sensation and was reported all over Britain. They were sentenced to 'transportation' and hard labour. Sam Millard's research for the booklet found that, in fact, only one went to Australia. The others served about 6 years in English gaols and were later released.

What is a forest for?

In Victorian times, wood supplies came from North America and Canada but during the First and Second World Wars, this was no longer possible. There was a desperate need for timber in this country. Oak is wonderful for timber but it is very slow growing. Oak trees can live for 1,000 years. There is a saying that an oak

takes 300 years to grow, 300 years to flourish and 300 years to die. Oak is used in castles, cathedrals, and in house building. A lot of timber is used in times of war, to rebuild bombed homes or to create props for the coal mines that were producing fuel. During the First and Second World Wars, there was a need for timber that could be grown very quickly.

At the beginning of the 20th century woodland coverage was at an all-time low, just 5 percent of total land area. The Acland Committee reported back to Prime Minister at the time, David Lloyd George, advising that the best way to bring back the forests would be a state organised plan for the future of the woodland.

The Forestry Commission was set up in 1919, shortly after the First World War. Its aim was to restock forests. The Forestry Commission bought up land specifically to produce timber. In Nottinghamshire there was land that was suitable for fast growing conifers and pines. This is not the natural woodland of the area but it solved a problem caused by wartime and the increasing demand for timber from the mines.

The Forestry Commission is one of the top four landowners in the UK today.

- The Forestry Commission owns 2,200,000 acres
- Ministry of Defence owns 1,101,851
- Crown Estate owns 678,420
- National Trust owns 589,748.

Many tourists who come to Sherwood Forest think it is and has always been a pine forest. This is not the case. The landscape changed because of this desperate need for timber during the war.

Farming

Farming has always been important to Sherwood Forest despite its sandy, infertile soils. Here's a list of what is produced on the Thoresby Estate on around 2470 hectares today.

- 42 million potatoes for the table market, supplying supermarket's directly and via packhouses and merchants.
- 19 million onions are produced, stored and sold to supermarkets and processing markets.
- 92 million carrots are supplied to supermarkets via a range of packers.
- 3.7 million bags of sugar are produced at the British Sugar factory from the sugar beet grown on the farm.
- Biscuit making and feed wheat, feed barley, oilseed rape, field beans and bread-making wheat.

Thoresby Farm supplies three anaerobic digesters with maize to produce green energy, all within a seven mile radius of the main farm.

Sherwood Forest is much more than woodland it is made up of woodland, important and precious heathland and grassland habitats and farmers use the land to provide food and fuel.

So what is a forest for?

This is an important question for young people to explore.

Since Sherwood Forest was named in 938 AD, it has been used for many purposes serving sometimes conflicting purposes. Today the Forest is vulnerable. Nottinghamshire has lost about 85% of its Nottinghamshire heathland since 1800. Sherwood Forest Trust, Greenwood Community Forest and RSPB and others are all trying to look after the grassland, woodland and heathland.

This video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwoG_4DqqaA shows why the heathland is important and what can be done to protect it.

The Sherwood Forest Trust works with local schools to raise awareness of the issues facing the natural landscape of Sherwood Forest.

The Greenwood Community Forest works with schools on a tree planting scheme as part of the Miner2Major Project. Both are happy to work with local schools.

The session notes provide opportunities to look at the past but also the future of Sherwood Forest.

Further Resources

The main sources for children to find out about the natural environment of Sherwood Forest are:

- The RSPB www.visitsherwood.co.uk/about-sherwood-forest
- The Sherwood Forest Trust - a charity focussed on the Forest - www.sherwoodforest.org.uk
- The Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust (especially to find out about the animals, insects and other creatures who live in the environment) - www.nottinghamshirewildlife.org/champions-sherwood-more
- The Woodland Trust (who are interested in all British woods and forests, not just Sherwood Forest.) www.woodlandtrust.org.uk
- Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre at Edwinstowe.
- Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust nature reserves all over Nottinghamshire, many with woodland. www.nottinghamshirewildlife.org/nature-reserves
- Sherwood Forest events (eg the Major Oak Woodland Festival)
- The RSPB at Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre, Clumber Park (National Trust) and Newstead Abbey are all in Sherwood Forest. All have regular public events.

Children and their families can also visit Sherwood Forest e.g. cycling or walking in pine forest at www.forestryengland.uk/sherwood-pines/cycling-and-mountain-biking-trails-sherwood-pines

There's lots of information on the website of the local historical society including old postcards of the most famous parts of Sherwood Forest. Look past Robin Hood to get to the accounts of Victorian and later tourists who visited the ancient woodlands of Birklands and Bilhaugh (the name of two areas of the most ancient oak and birch woodland which remain in Sherwood Forest today.)

There's a general timeline of Sherwood Forest on the Edwinstowe Village history website. (The latter part concentrates only on Edwinstowe village.) www.edwinstowehistory.org.uk/local-history/sherwood-forest