Conservation Management and Ecological Consultancy

sundew ECOLOGY

Maidenhead Great Park

Rushington Copse, Ancient Woodland Assessment

Client: Maidenhead Great Park

Ref MGP1 (2.0)

Alex Cruickshank MSc MCIEEM, Ecologist and Conservation Manager, Sundew Ecology.

www.SundewEcology.co.uk

alex@SundewEcology.co.uk

07717291572

1 Introduction

A woodland is considered 'Ancient' if it has been present since at least 1600 (Rackham, 2006).

Many of the species (plants, animals, fungi etc) that live in woodlands are slow to spread and colonise new areas. This means that areas which have been wooded for a long time are more likely to support a wider range of wildlife than newer woodlands. Ancient Woodlands are very important for wildlife and impossible to recreate in a short time.

A woodland can be assessed for whether it should be considered ancient using:

1. Documents, including surveys, maps and place names.
2. Archaeology, including boundary earthworks called woodbanks.
3. Woodland structure, including giant and ancient coppice stools,
4. Vegetation structure, including the occurrence of specific 'ancient woodland plants' (Rackham, 2006)

Ideally a combination of these criteria will be used to determine a woodland's history.

Rushington Copse is a small (c1.9ha), roughly square, straight edged area of woodland on the east edge of Maidenhead Golf Course. It is bounded on the southeast and southwest sides by clearly much younger woodland. Those younger areas are not part of this study.

2 Aim

To identify whether Rushington Copse, Maidenhead should be considered 'Ancient Woodland'.

3 Methods

Guidance in 'Field Surveys for Ancient Woodlands: Issues and Approaches' was followed (Glaves et al, 2009).

Various documentary evidence was collected.

Two field surveys were undertaken, in January 2022 when most vegetation was not in leaf and potential archaeological features are more apparent, and April 2022 when woodland ground flora is identifiable.

Both surveys took about three hours each and covered the whole of the woodland. Plants were attributed an abundance on the DAFOR scale – Dominant, Abundant, Frequent, Occasional or Rare.

4 Results

4.1 Documentary evidence

1. The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) Biodiversity Report for Maidenhead Golf Course, dated 10 May 2021, ref TVERC/21/093 (TVERC, 2021) states:

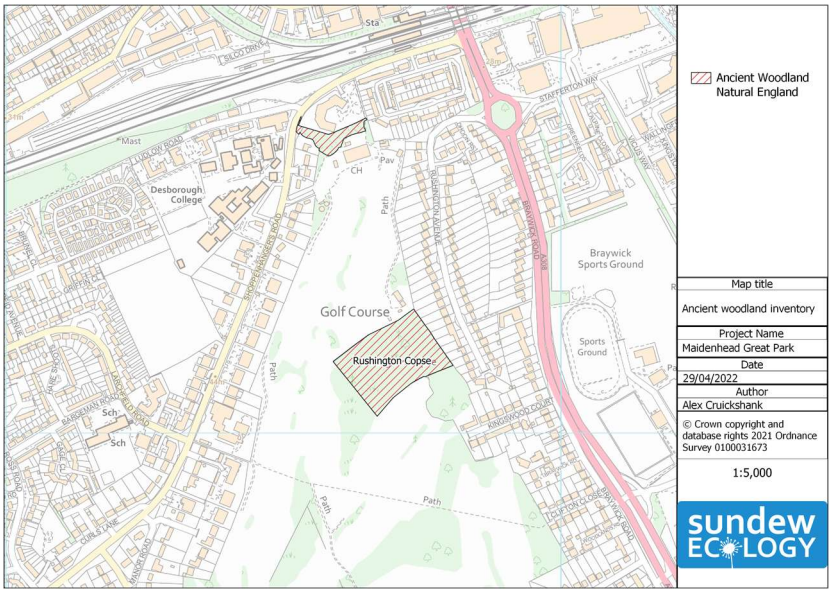
   "No Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland was found within 500m of the search area"

2. Information request response from Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead, dated 13 June 2017

   "Rushington Copse does not appear on Natural England's provisional inventory of ancient woodlands. However, the inventory is provisional and excludes woodlands below 2 hectares in size. We have had an external desk top assessment undertake a few years ago that indicates the woodland is probably ancient – extract of data attached. We have no information that contradicts this assertion and therefore the precautionary principle is applied that it is ancient. The woodland contains many bluebells, a ground flora species that is an indicator of ancient woodland."

3. Natural England's Ancient Woodland Inventory (https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/ancient-woodland-england/explore) (below)

   "Name: Rushington Copse
   Theme: Ancient Woodland,
   Theme Name: Ancient replanted woodland
   Object ID 53251
   Area: 1.99ha"

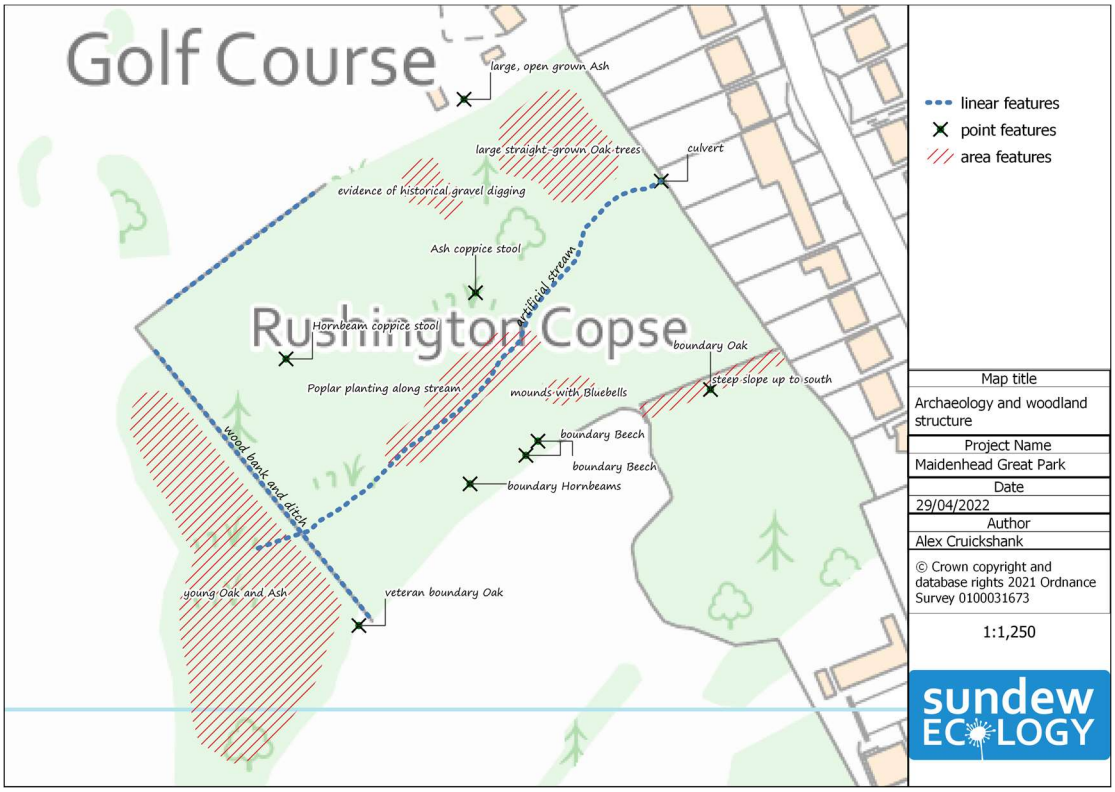


4. Bray Tithe Map 1840, shows Rushington Copse in its existing shape.

“Landowner	Charles Grenfell
Occupier	Charles Grenfell
Parish	Bray
County	Berkshire
Original Date	20th January 1843
Description of Land	Wood
Quantities In Statute Measure	4,2,4 (=c1.83ha)
Plot	509”

5. All subsequent OS maps show the presence of Rushington Copse in its existing shape.

4.2 Woodland structure and archaeology



Rushington Copse is a broadleaved woodland, dominated by native species characteristic of the local area.

Most of the canopy trees within the woodland are large, well-spaced, straight-grown Oak standards (right), indicative of having grown within a closed canopy, and potentially having undergone thinning operations.

There are occasional trees which show signs of having been coppiced, including Hornbeam (below) and Ash.

There are occasional large trees on the boundary of the woodland which have a more open-grown form, especially a huge (5.25m girth) Oak at the very southwest corner of the copse (left).

Most of the understorey is made up of Holly and derelict Hazel coppice (below)

There has been significant tree planting within the woodland, notably Scot's Pine, Poplar, and Larch along the route of the stream.

Cherry Laurel, Bamboo and Rhododendron are locally abundant non-native invasive species.

The archaeology of Rushington Copse is difficult to interpret because there appears to have been recent digging and piling of spoil within the wood, obscuring potential features. The small size of the wood means that there is unlikely to have been much industry within it, and there is less likelihood for undisturbed archaeology away from the edges.

The one feature of note is the woodbank along the entirety of the southwest edge and part of the northwest edge. This feature consists of a shallow c2m wide ditch outside a gently sloping bank into the wood.

Gravel mounds to the south have Bluebells growing on top, indicating that they have been in place for some time.

4.3 Ground flora surveys

41 vascular plant species were identified during the survey. Of these, twelve are Ancient Woodland Indicator species for the southern region of England (Rose, 1999). (See appendix for a full species list)

5 Discussion

The author considers that Rushington Copse should be treated as an Ancient Woodland.

Smaller woods are harder to interpret because they retain less evidence than larger woodlands, especially on a site with as much pressure at Maidenhead Golf Course, where waste has been dumped in the wood over many years and public activity is high.

Evidence should be used in combination to determine a site's antiquity.

Documentary evidence demonstrates that the area has been continuously wooded since at least 1840.

Although straight-edged woodlands are usually 18th century or later (Rackham, 1999), Rushington Copse may have been part of a larger woodland which has subsequently been cleared to give it its current shape.

The presence of a woodbank, originally part of a structure to keep deer and livestock out of the wood, on its southwestern edge is a good indicator that the wood is old, although woodbanks were created up until at least 1857. This example is small, suggesting a later construction (Rackham 1999).

The veteran Oak on the southwest corner and other tree forms suggest significant age. A tree with a girth of 5.25m may be as old as 350 years (1670s). The presence of Hornbeam, Ash and Hazel coppice all indicate a woodland of considerable age. The more recent planting of Poplar, Larch and Scot's Pine, and the presence of non-native invasive plant species do not reduce the likelihood that Rushington Copse is ancient, but do decrease its value for wildlife, because these plants are less able to support a wide variety of species.

Because of the small size of the woodland and its public location, the ground flora of Rushington Copse is likely to have been significantly degraded, with many species lost. However, 41 plant species is not significantly lower than expected. Wigley Copse, a confirmed ancient woodland and Site of Special Scientific Interest in Berkshire, has 51 species identified from a similar sized woodland (Baker & Southon, 2007). The number of ancient woodland indicator species is also equivalent (12, compared with 14 at Wigley Copse).

To achieve certainty that Rushington Copse is considered 'ancient', ie it has been woodland since at least 1600, earlier documentary evidence is required. However, on balance, with the archaeology, woodland structure, and ground flora, it is likely that Rushington Copse has been present since at least 1600.

6 About the author

Alex Cruickshank BSc (Hons) MSc MCIEEM is a fully qualified practicing Ecological Consultant with over 20 years' experience who has an expert knowledge of an extensive range of habitats and species and a practical understanding of factors affecting ecology.

As a full member of the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (MCIEEM), Alex adheres to the Institute's Code of Professional Conduct and professional ethics and maintains a standard of knowledge and experience in accordance with the CIEEM Continuing Professional Development Policy.

7 References

Baker, A. Southon, G (2007) Moor Copse extension Site Flora, BSBI

Glaves, P. Rotherham, I. Wright, B. Handley, C. & Birbeck J (2009) Field Surveys for Ancient Woodlands: Issues and Approaches, Woodland Trust

Rackham, O (2006) New Naturalist Woodlands, Collins

Rackham, O (1999) The History of the Countryside, Phoenix Giant

Rose, F (1991) The Wildflower Key, Warne.

Rose, F (1999) Indicators of ancient woodland, The use of vascular plants in evaluating ancient woods for nature conservation, British Wildlife 10.4: 241-251.

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (2021) The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) Biodiversity Report for Maidenhead Golf Course, dated 10 May 2021, ref TVERC/21/093

8 Appendix: flora species list

Common name	Latin name	Abundance in Rushington Copse (DAFOR)	Ancient Woodland indicator for central southern England. (Rose, 1999)
Hedge Garlic	*Alliaria etiolate*	F	
Alder	*Alnus glutinosa*		
Wood Anemone	*Anemone nemorosa*	O	Yes
Wild Arum	*Arum maculatum*	F	
Harts-tongue Fern	*Asplenium scolopendrium*	R	
Wood Sedge	*Carex sylvatica*	R	Yes
Hornbeam	*Carpinus betulus*		Yes
Hazel	*Corylus avellana*		
Hawthorn	*Crataegus monogyna*	O	
Spurge-laurel	*Daphne laureola*	R	Yes
Foxglove	*Digitalis purpurea*	R	
Lesser Celandine	*Ficaria verna*	O	
Ash	*Fraxinus excelsior*		
Cleavers	*Galium aparine*	O	
Herb Robert	*Geranium robertianum*	R	
Ground Ivy	*Glechoma hederacea*	F	
Ivy	*Hedera helix*	F	
Bluebell	*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*	A	Yes
Holly	*Ilex aquifolium*		Yes
Yellow Iris	*Iris pseudacorus*	Locally A	
Larch	*Larix sp*		
Honeysuckle	*Lonicera periclymenum*	R	
Wood Forget-me-not	*Myosotis sylvatica*	R	Yes
Cultivated Daffodil	*Narcissus*	R	
Wild Cherry	*Prunus avium*		Yes

Common name	Latin name	Abundance in Rushington Copse (DAFOR)	Ancient Woodland indicator for central southern England. (Rose, 1999)
Cherry Plum	*Prunus cerasifera*	O	
Sessile Oak	*Quercus petraea*		Yes
Greater Stitchwort	*Rabelera holostea*	R	
Creeping Buttercup	*Ranunculus repens*	R	
Red Current	*Ribes sylvestre*	O	Yes
Bramble	*Rubus fruticosus*	R	
Broad-leaved Dock	*Rumex obtusifolius*	R	
Sanicle	*Sanicula europaea*	O	Yes
Ragwort	*Senecio jacobaea*	R	
Rowan	*Sorbus aucuparia*	R	
Hedge Woundwort	*Stachys sylvatica*	O	
Dandelion	*Taraxacum officinale*	R	
Yew	*Taxus baccata*		
Stinging Nettle	*Urtica dioica*	R	
Sweet Violet	*Viola odorata*	O	
Early Dog-violet	*Viola reichenbachiana*	F	Yes