



Traditional Forest Occupations



Kevin Tillet

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Introduction

In October 2015 the Ashdown Forest Research Group held its first exhibition at the Ashdown Forest Research Centre, Wych Cross.

The topics covered by the exhibition reflected the diverse nature of the group's interests: local families affected by the Great War; the barns of the Ashdown Forest Centre, their use, history and construction; traditional forest occupations; the development of turnpike roads around Ashdown Forest; and houses on the forest edge.

We have now taken the exhibits (photographs and accompanying text) that were put on display for each topic and compiled them into booklets.

The present booklet, about traditional Ashdown Forest occupations, has been written by Kevin Tillett. We gratefully acknowledge the kind help of Nutley Historical Society in providing the photographs that accompany the text.



Frank Divall, Mower

Mowing

The photograph, dated 1898, shows Frank Divall, who was one of several professional mowers who worked on Ashdown Forest in the late nineteenth century.

Mowers cut different crops such as wheat, corn and hay, depending on the season. This included the cutting of litter. Litter was the general term for products such as bracken, fern, gorse, broom and coarse grass, usually cut (mown) in autumn for local use. Litter was very valuable to local farmers and smallholders as a cheaper alternative to expensive straw.

Before the development of mechanical reaping machines mowing was mainly carried out with the use of scythes. Mowers often worked in teams, scything in a staggered line, swinging the blade around their body, with the cut material falling to one side.

As can be seen in the photograph the handles on the scythe were adjustable, usually fixed in place with wooden wedges, to suit the arm length of each individual mower. The scythe shaft, or sned, was often curved by steaming and bending to allow easy movement around the mower's body. The sned in the photograph does however seem quite straight. Tool shapes varied depending on the locality because scythes and blades were usually produced by a local blacksmith. The blade had to be kept very sharp and was easily blunted. As can be seen mowers carried a sharpening stone and would have to stop frequently to restore a sharp edge to the blade.

Mowing was physically very hard work. It was often regarded as work for men with women and children possibly following behind raking, gathering, turning and binding material.



**Jethro Senior and one of his sons
harvesting on the Pippingford Estate**

Harvesting

Jethro Senior and one of his sons are shown here harvesting on the Pippingford Estate in the late nineteenth century. This was a time of rapid advances being made by agricultural engineers to produce complex machines that, in time, would replace manual labour.

They are seen reaping, using a sail binder. This was an early mechanical form of reaping crops invented around 1880. Previously, cutting the crop was done by hand with a sickle or scythe. This was very hard work, often requiring a large labour force involving men, women and children.

The sails, or paddles, of the binder kept the cut crop clear of the track of the cutting bar. The paddles pushed the crop towards the cutting bar, took up each bundle of cut material, bound the sheaves and deposited them for stacking. The lines of cut crop can be seen on the field and Jethro stands with a bound sheaf.

The machine would be pulled by horses and later by a tractor. This greatly speeded up the reaping process. This was very important as it enabled the cut crop to be gathered quickly before bad weather threatened to damage the crop.



Aaron Scott, Turf Cutter

Turf Cutting

Aaron Scott, a turf cutter on Ashdown Forest in the late nineteenth century, is seen in this photograph using a breast plough or breast spade for cutting turf and peat. This type of tool was of ancient origin, was sometimes called a turf lifter and was still used up to the twentieth century.

Shapes vary because the tool was usually made by a local carpenter or blacksmith. The spade head made of iron was pushed forward against the turf by the thighs and lower waist in a series of thrusts by the force of the body. This left the arms free to guide the spade. Pushing was not done by the chest or breast as might be supposed. It is thought that the word "breast", as in "breast spade", might be an ancient dialect word for a slice or cut of turf. As can be seen in the photograph the thighs were often protected by extra wooden supports.

Turf cutting could be used to clear surface land but mainly it was used to produce turf and peat for domestic fuel. Turf was cut to about a spade depth, stacked and dried before being carted away. Cutting by hand was normally completed in summer when the turf or peat weighed less, having lost some water by drying out. Some turf and peat was sold on as a garden horticultural product to local estates and it might also be used as a building material for poorer people on the Forest.



Charcoal Burners

Charcoal Burning

Producing charcoal on the Forest was an ancient, very skilful, but often lonely occupation. Traditionally, charcoal was made by burning dried wood under controlled conditions in conical stacks, or clamps. The clamp was covered with bracken, straw or grass, and sealed with earth or wet sand to keep out air. The burning process, often on traditional forest sites, took several days and needed constant attention to make sure the smouldering fire in the clamp did not die out or break out. Charcoal burners would therefore live and sleep around the site while the burn took place.

In the photograph charcoal burners are building the clamp with a large supply of prepared material. Very little on the forest was wasted and the forest provided ample resources for charcoal making. Dried wood was normally burnt for charcoal between March and October.

An interesting collection of agricultural hand tools can be seen in the photograph including a scythe, an unusual rake, a sieve or riddle and an assortment of different shaped spades.

Charcoal was used for many different purposes. It was an important fuel, widely used in forges and by blacksmiths. It was vital in the production of iron products. It could be used as a domestic fuel for ovens and was a component part of gunpowder and explosives.



A litter cutter at work on the Forest

Litter Cutting

Litter here refers to forest material, a mix of different species of vegetation, mainly bracken (brake), heather, gorse and grasses, growing on common land. Litter was sometimes said to be vegetation that could be cut with a scythe. Litter was usually cut in autumn although some green bracken was cut earlier with a sickle.

Litter had various uses. It was valuable as an alternative to straw, for laying down in barns, as bedding for stock, as a source of fertiliser and as a green manure on fields. It was sometimes used as a roofing material and was also used by charcoal burners for sealing the charcoal furnace during a burn.

Historically, local people with commoners' rights on the forest were entitled to cut and collect litter when they needed it. This was therefore a very important resource for the many, often poor, local farmers and smallholders. An annual supply of litter was in many cases vital to the survival of these people. However, by the late nineteenth century this traditional way of life was threatened by the seventh Earl de la Warr, an important local landowner and Lord of the Manor, who decided to challenge the right of commoners to collect litter from the forest. The ensuing legal dispute in the 1870s and 1880s became known as the 'Great Ashdown Forest Case', whose resolution led to the setting up of the Board of Conservators in 1885 and helped to preserve commoners' rights.

In the photograph above litter is being cut with a scythe, the tool being used with the handle and blade held at a different angle from when the scythe was used for mowing. Litter was cut leaving a few inches standing. Litter can be seen stacked up ready for being carted away. Litter cutting was often a family affair with the men scything, the women and girls raking up and stacking and boys loading the cart. All of this was very hard work.



An Ashdown Forest hoop maker at work

Hoop Making

Hoop making was a traditional forest craft producing wooden hoops for wooden barrels. Increasing exports to the expanding British Empire in the nineteenth century required huge quantities of barrels that were transported all over the world. Barrels of many different sizes contained both dry goods such as flour and wet goods such as beer, and the precious cargo was tightly secured by wooden hoops.

The hoop yard at Chapel Meadow, Highgate, Forest Row was the local centre for hoop making. Craftsmen split, or cleaved, various woods, often coppice grown hazel, chestnut and ash sourced from the forest and processed into rods in local sawpits. Some lengths of rod were sent straight to the barrel makers, the coopers, while other rods were worked on in the Hoopyard. The wood was normally cut in spring and, after soaking and steaming, hoops were made. They were then grouped into barrel size sets. Different barrel sizes needed different numbers and sizes of hoops.

In the photograph above hoop makers can be seen in a typical outdoor shelter processing material for the hoops. Ample supplies of wood from the forest have been organised ready for use. The hoop maker is working with a typical hooper's brake, or clamp, allowing him to trim along the length of a long, whippy rod. The clamp was controlled by the legs and knees of the worker. Rods were cleaved into different lengths depending on the size of the barrel.



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The Ashdown Forest Centre
Wych Cross
Forest Row
East Sussex
RH18 5JP

Website: <http://www.ashdownforest.org/enjoy/history/AshdownResearchGroup.php>

Email: ashdownforestresearchgroup@yahoo.com

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