

## The Last Forest

Though Essex is one of the less-wooded counties – around 6%, but increasing – relics of four great forests remain. Epping we all know about, and Hainault is close at hand; Writtle is the forgotten one; but in many ways it is Hatfield that is the great survivor.

Why such a claim? As Wren members, we all know of the great struggles of the nineteenth century against enclosure and for access that secured the ‘open aspect’ of Epping Forest in perpetuity. But time to quote the great recorder of English forests, Oliver Rackham, in *Trees and woodland in the British landscape* (1976):

“Hatfield is the only place where one can step back into the Middle Ages to see, with only a small effort of imagination, what a Forest looked like in use.”

It is only in Hatfield, he states, that one can see “*all* the elements of a medieval Forest” (his emphasis), in terms of factors such as tree-life, habitat and livestock. And so, having set the claim, he proceeded to prove it, in a 1989 work devoted to Hatfield, *The last forest*.

Note the capital F in the quote above. A Forest, to Rackham, is not a forest. In other words, it does not have the contemporary meaning of a place with a lot of trees. There are a lot of trees in Hatfield Forest, but that’s not why it’s there. It’s there because it provided royal sport for the Normans and the successors, in the hunting of deer and other game. Indeed, those who walk in upland Britain will travel mile after mile in Forests denuded of trees since the Iron Age, but formerly (and often still) of great importance for deer-stalking.

Let’s look back at that quote again. It ends with the phrase ‘in use’. If the capital F immediately accords the meaning of ‘use by Royals’ (or, as Rackham makes clear, for Royals; kings were busy people who tended to get others hunting for them), that is merely one social layer. Indeed the supply of deer to palaces was “a relatively minor use of the land,” says Rackham: “the main users were local countryfolk and their lords”. Take one example, pannage: the large number of stout oaks in the Forest produced many acorns, on which the pigs of local farmers flourished in good years. And coppicing and sheep-grazing, as in Epping, would have been important too.

Another use is shown by the former road that passes through the open ground of the Forest; and since the 18th century, the lake created by damming Shermore brook has sustained both fishing and other leisure, first for the owners, but since acquisition by the National Trust in 1924, the public.

And you can still buy venison from the Forest. Try it, if you’re a carnivore; lean and delicious.

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