



Neo-nemeton?

I am part Scottish and part Irish by decent and therefore like to consider that I have Celtic blood in my veins.

The Celts were one of the main tribes to inhabit the British Isles prior to the invasion of the Romans. They were an agrarian people who lived close to land. They believed that certain trees were sacred and they often worshiped in sacred woods called *nemeton*.¹

“The Druids ...chose oak-woods for their sacred groves”²



Firstly under the Romans and later with the introduction of Christianity all such pagan beliefs, like the worship of trees, were suppressed...but perhaps not entirely forgotten.

There were no trees in Britain prior to about 11,000 BC because much of it lay under deep ice sheets. As these retreated a bare landscape was revealed which allowed plants and animals to recolonise from the south.

For thousands of years Britain was covered with a continuous forest called the "wildwood." It is estimated that this occupied some 75% of the land area. Research suggests that only around 4000BC did Neolithic peoples begin destruction of the wildwood. Clearance was undertaken for agriculture and by browsing by domesticated animals. This process continued up to the early Iron Age. “*Half of England had ceased to be wildwood by 500BC.*”³

The Domesday Book was the first real survey of England. Undertaken by the Normans this shows that in 1086 only some 15% of the land was wooded.³ Over the following centuries the destruction of woodland continued and many woods were grubbed up by landowners for agriculture.

By 1900 the woodland of England had been reduced to just 5%.⁴

Tragically about half of this remaining original woodland was destroyed during the Twentieth Century. Most was due to afforestation with conifer plantations, followed by agriculture, then much smaller areas for quarrying, housing, roads and industry.³

The few areas that still survive are known as ancient woodland. These now only cover some 2% of the United Kingdom.⁵ The majority are small, isolated fragments within the dominant agricultural landscape.⁶

“England’s ancient woodlands...are our richest wildlife habitat”⁵



Ancient woodlands have high ecological value because they have the highest levels of biological diversity. They support over 40% of the species within the UK.⁶ For example Bradfield Woods in Suffolk boasts 350 types of plants, including 42 native trees and shrubs. It is also noted for a wide range of mammals, birds, insects and fungi.³

Such ancient woodlands are unique and irreplaceable and we need to protect the fragments that still survive.

A recent example of people's passion for trees was the protests which reversed government policy to sell off the nation's woodland. The English Public Forest Estate comprises of over one thousand woods covering some 258,000 hectares.

It represents 18% of all the woodland and some 44% of accessible woodland in England. Significantly some 24% of the Estate is designated as ancient woodland.⁷

In October 2010 the UK Government announced its intention to sell-off large areas of the Public Forest Estate to assist in Governmental budget savings. The result was widespread public opposition. The normally silent majority across middle England gave voice to their concerns and a desire to protect "their" woodlands. A YouGov poll found that 75% of respondents were opposed to the sale.⁸ A vigorous public campaign included half a million people signing an online petition against the proposed sell off.⁹ In February 2011 as a result of this widespread criticism the Government suspended the sale of the land.



An Independent Panel on Forestry was established to review the matter and its final report of July 2012 recommended that the Public Forest Estate "should remain in public ownership."⁷ As a result the Government rescinded its proposed policy of selling of England's woodlands and confirmed that all would remain in secured public ownership and be held in trust for the nation.⁴ The government also announced new policies to protect the nation's trees and woodlands, improve their resilience and expand the area of woodland cover to 12% by 2060.⁴ The UK Government was forced to recognise how deeply the British people care about woodlands...or in their own words:

"People love trees"⁴

The UK Government faced a passionate and unanticipated outcry in protection of the nation's woodlands. It had failed to understand the deep feelings of the British public hold for "their" woods... or that just maybe:

"Sacred groves become sacred again."¹⁰

1. Powell. T (1958)
The Celts
Thames and Hudson. London (Reprinted 1995)
2. Pliny (77)
Naturalis Historia
3. Rackham O (1976)
Trees and woodland in the British landscape
Phoenix Press New York USA (2001 Edition)
4. DEFRA (2013)
Government forestry and woodland policy statement: Incorporating the Governments response to the Independent Panel on Forestry's final report.
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. UK
5. DEFRA (2005)
Keepers of Time
A statement of policy for England's ancient and natural woodlands.
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. UK
6. Watts K (2006)
British forest landscapes: The legacy of woodland fragmentation.
Quarterly Journal of Forestry. Vol: 2006 p.273-279
7. Bennett O & Hirst D (2014)
The Forestry Commission and the sale of public forests in England
The House of Commons Library (Ref SN/SC/5734) UK
8. Bagehot (2011)
The revealing fuss about forests
The Economist 03/02/2011
9. BBC (2013)
No sell off for public forests
BBC 31/01/2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>
10. Maathai W (1989)
Replenishing the Earth
Doubleday Religion New York USA

DSM