**The History of the Countryside**.

*A summary of an illustrated talk by popular Kent-based naturalist Martin Newcombe, presented in the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, Lynsted, at the time of the Annual General Meeting of the Park Farm Community Cherry Orchard Group, Lynsted, on 22nd February, 2023.*

Martin felt that his audience would be generally aware of its surrounding countryside, so he wanted to add some ‘small things’ to the overall picture.

The renowned woodland historian Oliver Rackham has described how, in mediaeval times, trade in woodland products was closely controlled. Each trade: bakers, brewers etc. were allotted a curtain ration of timber. All woodland products were covered. One record stated that a man was fined for not selling his agreed quantity of ‘forest litter’! It was the Normans, who ‘industrialised’ forestry. They introduced the rotational method of ‘coppicing’, still going strong today. It is thought, however, that the Romans introduced one of the best species for coppicing, the sweet chestnut, to Britain. The cutting back of a sweet chestnut tree during the coppicing process, causes regrowth of new shoots from the stump, or ‘stool’. Such shoots are juvenile, and repeated cutting back at regular intervals keeps the plant ‘young’. Consequently, some stumps can grow to a great width and can be hundreds of years old.

Some of our woodland is described as ‘ancient’: this land has supported trees since at least 1600AD. Such woodland is especially valuable for wildlife. It contains certain specific plants: ancient woodland indicators (AWIs ). These include primrose, wood anemone, butchers’ broom and helleborine. Other plants typical of Kent include the rare lady orchid. The wild service tree is also present in Kent woodland. Its berries, or ‘chequers’, can be fermented to produce a type of ale. It gave its name to numerous pubs: they are not named after the chequer board game! In wetter areas marshmallow plants are indicators of ancient marshy heath, and the grassland cowslip gets its name from ‘cowslop’ – a description of the cowpats around which it thrives. Snakes’ head fritillary was once sought as a source of antidote for snakebite, the traditional idea being that making a preparation from something that looks like the cause of the trouble – the leaves are forked, like a snake’s tongue – would alleviate the symptoms.

Badgers often colonise old woods, their underground ‘setts’ have often been established for many decades. They have a habit of placing any bits they find during their excavations, bones, coins, etc., on top of their sets.

The Saxons are credited with creating many of the traditional hedges that are so common in southern Britain today. They were forest clearers, aiming to grow food crops in place of trees. The easiest place to put the felled wood was around the edges of the cleared areas. Some twigs and branches would take root. The resulting hedge no doubt proved useful as a means of keeping animals, wild and domesticated, in their place.

In later times, hedges were ‘laid’. This involved clearing most of the vegetation away, but leaving some shrubs to have their stems partly cut though, bent at an angle, and woven between uprights driven into the ground at intervals. The resulting regrowth of shoots would form an effective barrier to stock. The main implement for laying was the billhook. This was held in one hand and could have one, or two, blades. These tools were made by the local blacksmith, so there are many regional styles. ‘Hedging and ditching’ was the major winter occupation of farm workers for many centuries, but in recent times, such men have headed for the cities, and modern, less taxing, occupations.

Hawthorn is a favourite in hedges because it is so prickly and difficult to penetrate. The name derives from the fact that, in some years, it can become clothed in white fungus, giving it a ‘hoary’ appearance. Bramble is often found in hedgerows. It hybridises freely, resulting in a variable genetic makeup: there are 450 subspecies in Europe. Each subspecies has its preferred growing conditions, and one in particular likes being near a gate. It is therefore useful to the rural historian, by indicating were a missing gate once was.

Hedges can be used to divide land, as can earth banks and drystone walls. Some of the last can be 900 years old. A famous surviving property-divider in Kent is the Radwall, that runs north-south through the woodland north of Canterbury. Established by Richard II, and consisting of an earth bank with trees planted on top, it divided the king;’s land from that belonging to the Church.

The wild arum (lords and ladies, cuckoo pint, priest-in-the -pulpit) has 5,000 names across Europe. This reflects its magical powers and uses. A young woman straying too close to the plant could become pregnant, but on the other hand, an infusion of its leaves could aid abortion. The swollen root could produce an edible starch – useful in the ‘starvation years’ that were frequent in the middle ages. The plant was also used in the preparation of bird lime, a sticky glue used to trap perching birds.

The existence of yew trees in churchyards is common knowledge, but not all know that the female yews tend to be at the eastern end of the site. This probably reflects a pre-Christian use of the area and the belief that the female was the source of life and should be nearer the rising sun, where each day begins.

The rural scene we see today may be very different from the original. In the Industrial Revolution (1720 to 1830) great landowners were in the habit of re-landscaping their estates. The likes of Capability Brown would be called in, and land was moved around to create a more fashionable vista. Sometimes whole villages had to be removed. Elimination of such eyesores could result in extreme deprivation. In County Durham, the Prince Bishops, were responsible for deforesting the uplands in order to raise sheep – creating the present treeless moorland.

Martin covered much ground in his beautifully illustrated and wide-ranging survey of the plants, animals and customs of our countryside. There was much truth in his claim that, after his presentation, we will be looking at our rural surroundings in a very different way!

**Bob Baxter**

1st March, 2023.

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