

Hempstead Wood.

This large ancient wood is completely surrounded by a wood-bank but appears on superficial inspection to have few internal banks. A number of streams flow out of the wood from the watershed between the Stour and Chelmer river catchments. There are a number of level areas within the wood which are extremely wet, though towards the margins, except in the north west, the land falls away and the drainage is somewhat better. All of the wood except in the replanted parts and the belt of standards on the southern margin was maintained as coppice until 20-50 years ago. 40-50 years ago it appears that all the standards were taken out of the coppice area, and virtually none remain.

Of the shrub and tree species, willow is co-dominant or sub-dominant everywhere. Generally in the south eastern third, ash is dominant or co-dominant with hazel, maple and willow, and in the northwestern two thirds, hornbeam is dominant or co-dominant with hazel maple and willow. A closer study might reveal an extremely interesting transitional zone. Many of the ash and hornbeam stools are of immense size, and, presumably, age.

Of the other shrub and tree species, oak is uncommon either as coppice or standard; elm (*U. glabra* hybrids) is locally abundant and even dominant as both coppice and standards; privet, aspen, spindle, hawthorn (both species), dogwood, wayfaring tree, blackthorn, elder, rose species and crab apple are all locally frequent or rare. All three of the woody climbers are present: honeysuckle, old man's beard and ivy. About three acres of elm, ash and oak standards occur on the southern margin of the wood.

The ground flora was not prominent at the time of the visit: however the rides looked interesting and the species found in the coppiced areas include cowslip, oxlip and its hybrid with primrose, water figwort, bluebell, at least two St. John'sworts, water avens and purple small reed. The dominant ground flora visible ranged from dog's mercury to bramble and ground ivy. Altogether about 60 herb species were noted in the linear survey. Of the non-flowering plants, fungi were prominent, particularly the rhizomorph of honey fungus in both live and dead wood.

Deer, fox, hare and rabbit are known to frequent the wood and woodcock, nightingale, green woodpecker, grasshopper warbler were reported among prominent breeding species. The wood is intensively managed for game. Nothing is known of the amphibians or invertebrates.

The chief reasons for retaining the remainder of the deciduous woodland are:

1. The size of the wood. Woods of this order ~~are~~ of size are extremely scarce in mid Essex: only the Coggeshall Woods, East End Wood and Hatfield Forest exceed 100 acres.
2. The age of the wood: this has all the appearance of being at least part of the very large (360 acre) wood in the parish of Hempstead recorded in the 14th century. There is no reason to doubt that it is a primary wood, and thus has populations of plants and animals which are at least in part descendants of the original forest flora and fauna.
3. The past management as coppice-with-standards has probably retained a wide range of plant and animal species.
4. The very wet state of much of the wood and the populations of plants and animals dependant upon wet ground, particularly alkaline ground water, are important features in a county where drainage of land has recently destroyed the majority of the former wet sites.
5. The wood appears to represent the best example known so far of the transition between ash-hazel-maple woodland, common to the North of Essex and Suffolk, and the hornbeam-oak woodland dominant in South Essex. It will afford an opportunity to define the relationship between these two types.
6. This wood may be useful for studies on the behaviour of hornbeam as a woodland species. Its history as a planted and invasive species is little known.
7. The existence of elm species and hybrids gives an opportunity to study elm invasion of ash-hazel coppices.
8. Hempstead Wood is the biggest reservoir of wild life in this predominantly arable area, and it is probably big enough to be a self contained habitat for many species.