

Stoneleigh and Forestry



Oak Tree, Stoneleigh Park 1851 Thomas Baker

Forest of Arden

The Forest of Arden was unusual in that it was never a Royal Forest governed by royal forest laws. Thorkell of Arden was one of a few Anglo-Saxon landowners to retain his property after the Norman Conquest. The Arden family remained the principal landowners in the area controlling much of the woodland. Mary Arden, William Shakespeare's mother was a descendant of the family. Management was essential to provide fuel, timber for building and grazing for animals. Techniques such as coppicing and pollarding ensured a steady supply of wood without giving up land.

Timber in Stoneleigh

Stoneleigh has a significant number of timber framed buildings dating back to the mid-15th century. Builders used green oak from local woods and forests as transporting timber over medieval tracks and roads would have been extremely difficult.



Phoenix Cottage in Stoneleigh Village - showing Cruck Construction

Six Cruck houses have survived in the area using curved oak trees split down the middle to form each side of an inverted 'V' shape. These curved pairs were called cruck blades, and the addition of a cross piece formed an 'A' frame.

There are around twenty other timber framed properties in the area featuring box frames.

These use straight vertical and horizontal timbers locked together with pegged mortice and tenon joints.



Church Meadow Cottage built in 17th Century featuring two bay wood frames

During the 17th Century brick infill started to replace wattle and daub and some buildings were extended or had chimneys and upper floors added.

The 18th Century saw brick and red sandstone become the favoured materials for building new domestic properties.

Importance of Woodland

The Stoneleigh estate dedicated specific areas for processing timber during the 18th century. Woodland management generated significant income from the sale of timber. Estate accounts show that profits from sales increased rapidly during this period. Much of this material helped to support the development and growth of Coventry.

Some examples of wood usage at the time: -

Oak	Houses and building structures, ships, split oak fencing rails, animal harness accessories, wagons and farm tools, plus acorns as pig fodder, household heating, timber shoring e.g. WW1 trenches, pit props for mining, oak bark used in the tanning process.
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Ash	Paddles, bats, wood tools, shafts and handles, cart and carriage wheels, furniture veneer.
Beech	Furniture, mallets, lamp oil and forage nuts for forest grazed pigs.
Birch	Charcoal, pitch and sap for wine making.
Blackthorn	Farm implements e.g. rake teeth. Sloe berries for gin.
Elm	Chair seats, cabinetry, coffins, keels for boats.
Hazel	Hurdles, baskets, building material for wattle and daub, hedging.
Sweet Chestnut	Beer barrels, fencing posts, rails and bark for dye.
Scots Pine	Furniture, fencing, charcoal, railway sleepers, turpentine, tar and general heating.
Sycamore	Furniture, veneers, household utensils and musical instruments.

The Nineteenth Century

	Acres
Bericote Wood	45.0
Grove Wood	45.0
Weatherly Wood	45.0
Thickthorne Wood	30.0
Black Waste Wood	21.0
North Waste Wood	15.0
Echills	15.0
Hashbat Wood	14.0
Tile Hill Wood	12.0
Pig Wood	11.0
Gilmore Wood	11.0
Broadmore Wood	11.0
Browns Rough	11.0
TOTAL AREA	286 acres

By the 19th century Stoneleigh Abbey Estate controlled 286 acres of woodland. Felled timber was being advertised for sale via public notices: -

VALUABLE OAK TIMBER.

To be SOLD by AUCTION,

BY

MARGETTS & SON,

On FRIDAY next, the 8th Day of JUNE, 1827, at the CRAVEN
ARMS INN, COVENTRY;

THE following LOTS of superior OAK TIMBER,
now felled in various Woods, situate in the under-
mentioned Parishes, in the County of Warwick; the Pro-
perty of CHANDOS LEIGH, Esq. viz.

LOT

- 1.—Thirty-One Trees, in *Thick Thorn Wood*, Ashow.
- 2.—Thirty-one ditto in ditto ditto Ashow.
- 1.—Seventeen ditto in *Berricote Wood*, ditto.
- 1.—Twenty-one ditto in *Wainbody Wood*, Stoneleigh.
- 1.—Twenty-one ditto in *Wetheley Wood*, ditto.
- 2.—Twenty-one ditto in ditto ditto, ditto.
- 1.—Thirty-five ditto in *Plant's Hill Wood*, ditto.
- 2.—Thirty five ditto in ditto ditto, ditto.
- 1.—Thirty-two ditto in *Great Matmaker's Wood*,
Stoneleigh.
- 2.—Thirty-two ditto in ditto ditto, Stoneleigh.
- 3.—Thirty-one ditto in ditto ditto, ditto.
- 1.—Thirty-five ditto in *Tile-hill Wood*, ditto.
- 2.—Thirty-five ditto in ditto ditto, ditto.
- 3.—Thirty-five ditto in ditto ditto, ditto.

The above Timber lies close to good Roads, at a short distance from the Canals; it is of long lengths, large dimensions, and excellent quality; and is well adapted for naval or other purposes where a first-rate article is required.

WILLIAM BAYLIS, of Cubbington, will shew the Timber in Wetheley Wood, and the Woods in Ashow; and JAMES DOWELL, of Canley Hill, Westwood Heath, will shew the remainder.

Any further information may be had by applying to Mr. GEORGE JONES.

Sale to begin at Three o'Clock precisely.

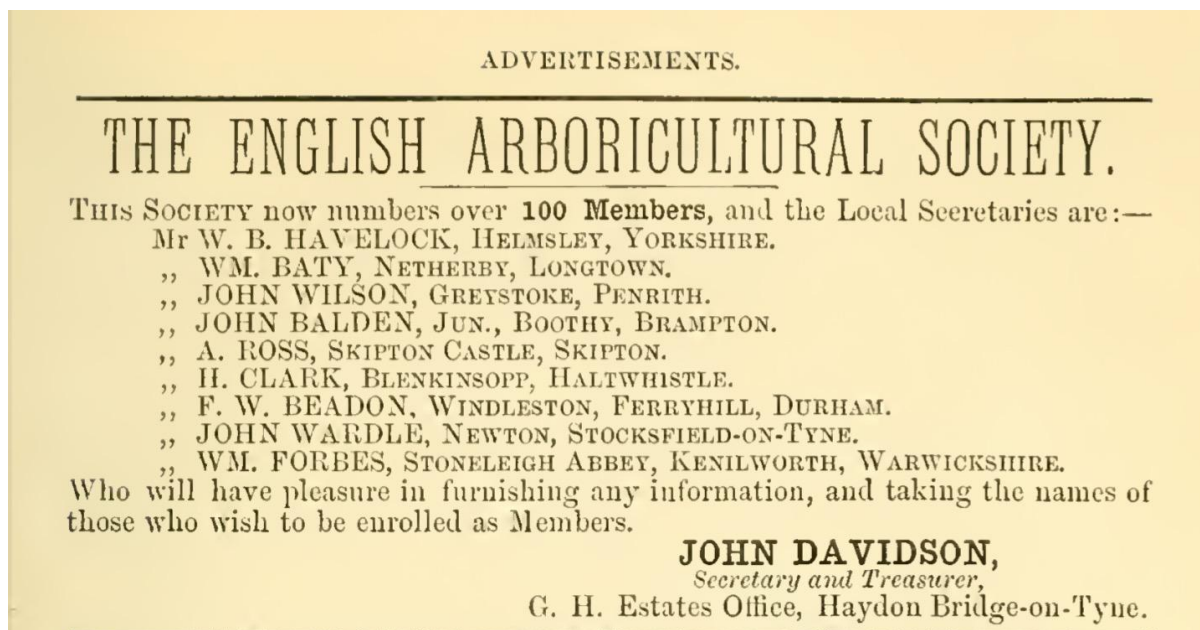
Stoneleigh Abbey, 21st May, 1827.

The estate's woodlands operations during this period were overseen by several different foresters, one of whom gained national recognition.

A Notable Forester

William Forbes became head forester at Stoneleigh Abbey in the late 1870s.

The English Arboricultural Society was established on 10th January 1882 at the home of John Robson a nurseryman and forester Henry Clark. Soon after in 1883 William Forbes was elected as a local secretary based in Warwickshire.

A vintage-style advertisement for The English Arboricultural Society. The text is centered and uses a mix of bold and regular fonts. At the top, 'ADVERTISEMENTS.' is written in a small, all-caps font. Below it, the society's name is prominently displayed in a large, serif font. The main body of the text lists the society's membership count and local secretaries, followed by a list of names and their locations. The advertisement concludes with a call to action and the name of the secretary and treasurer, John Davidson, along with his office location.

ADVERTISEMENTS.

THE ENGLISH ARBORICULTURAL SOCIETY.

THIS SOCIETY now numbers over **100 Members**, and the Local Secretaries are:—

Mr W. B. HAVELOCK, HELMSLEY, YORKSHIRE.

„ WM. BATY, NETHERBY, LONGTOWN.

„ JOHN WILSON, GREYSTOKE, PENRITH.

„ JOHN BALDEN, JUN., BOOTHY, BRAMPTON.

„ A. ROSS, SKIPTON CASTLE, SKIPTON.

„ H. CLARK, BLENKINSOPP, HALTWHISTLE.

„ F. W. BEADON, WINDLESTON, FERRYHILL, DURHAM.

„ JOHN WARDLE, NEWTON, STOCKSFIELD-ON-TYNE.

„ WM. FORBES, STONELEIGH ABBEY, KENILWORTH, WARWICKSHIRE.

Who will have pleasure in furnishing any information, and taking the names of those who wish to be enrolled as Members.

JOHN DAVIDSON,
Secretary and Treasurer,
G. H. Estates Office, Haydon Bridge-on-Tyne.

Dendrometers were patented as early as 1768 by John Duncombe and Thomas Whittell but being made of brass were heavy and bulky. In contrast the model designed by William Forbes in the late 19th century was lightweight and portable. It enabled foresters and estate managers to calculate the height and volume of trees on rural estates. The invention was "commended" by the Scottish Arboricultural Society at the International Forestry Exhibition opened on 1st July 1884 at the Donaldson Hospital Grounds in Edinburgh.

In the late 1880s William moved to Shotwick Park, Saughall in Cheshire where he was described as a professional forester, estate manager and examiner. There was a devastating fire in 1907 which affected the house and surrounding area. The existing estate management structure was dissolved so William left after being there for over twenty years.

There appears to be no conclusive or verified records of where he went next.

Collection and transport

Contracts were signed at auctions setting out conditions which would include collection.

A deadline was usually specified between six months and two years depending on the scale of the purchase. Heavy penalties were imposed for failure to comply. Buyers could be charged storage fees or even forfeit the timber in question.



A typical forestry scene from the late 19th Century

Hauling heavy oak logs from dense woodlands was labour intensive employing teams of four to twelve horses. Green oak trees could weigh between four and ten tons. Movement was quite often restricted to certain months when the ground was dry or frozen avoiding heavy wagons being trapped in thick mud. Canals and railways were employed when shipping timber over greater distances. In the nineteenth century horse drawn narrow boats and open deck barges were used to ship trees and bulky timber on canals. Wharfs for loading and unloading timber, with special equipment for handling and storing raw wood developed between 1800 and 1870 in England. Steam powered sawmills had started to appear at canal wharfs as early as 1820 to process timber unloaded directly from barges.

Pole wagons were flatbed trucks used to transport timber on the railways from the mid nineteenth century. The chassis was about seven feet long using a sturdy oak or pine wooden construction. The deck carried a bolster with vertical

wood or metal stanchions which stopped the logs falling off. As the wagons were short they were often connected in pairs or triples.



London North Western Railway - Pole Wagons

Twentieth Century

When war broke out in 1914 large numbers of hardwoods were cut down at Stoneleigh, sawn into planks then used as roadways and in trenches in France and Belgium. This forced the government to act and introduce a mandatory scheme of replanting by passing the Forestry Act of 1919. It followed a report by the Acland Committee in 1918 which claimed Britain's woodland cover had been reduced to just 5%.



A Survivor - "The Shakespeare Oak" in the grounds of Stoneleigh Abbey

On the Abbey Estate three wooded areas at Bericote, Grove and Waverley were harvested after the Second World War in 1947 and 1948 but were replanted immediately.

"The Shakespeare Oak" in the Abbey grounds, believed to be the last remaining tree from Echills Wood was left untouched. During an assessment in 2009 the planting year was estimated at 1017 AD. The girth is now 9.2 metres (about 30 feet) but the height is not recorded as the upper branches of ancient trees die back over the centuries in a process known as retrenchment. These trees become shorter and stouter. In 2016 the tree became protected by The Tree Preservation Order 509 - Stoneleigh Abbey Kenilworth CV8 2LF.

Estate Sales

To pay off death duties large areas of the Stoneleigh Estate were sold during the 1920s. Uses for timber had changed but its importance and value had not. By the 1950s the estate was still large enough to employ a head forester with a team of ten staff. One employee lived in Kenilworth, but the others all lived in estate properties.

Further sales of parts of the estate continued culminating in Stoneleigh Abbey becoming a charitable trust in 1996.



The "Shakespeare Oak" still flourishing today – Photo courtesy of Derek Robinson

By Pete James 2026

Stoneleigh History Society