

Lea Bailey - a history

by John Manning

Lea Bailey is the most northerly area of woodland in the ancient Forest of Dean. The earliest record I found dates from 1282 when the crown carried out one of its regular inspections of the royal forest so as to raise tax from people who had illegally encroached on crown land. It was recorded in the Bailiwick of Lea.

Geographically, Lea Bailey comprises two parts - Lea Bailey Inclosure to the west and Lower Lea Bailey to the east. On the map, it is almost detached from the main body of the Forest. In fact, although the Forest has traditionally been wholly within Gloucestershire, Lea Bailey Inclosure was set adrift in 1974 to become part of Herefordshire.

Its separateness has been recognised over the centuries. The woods at Lea Bailey have probably been less disturbed by the Forest's other traditional enterprise of coal and iron ore mining and its steeply sided slopes would have provided some protection from grazing by commoners animals. It was often noted as being the source of some of the best oak in the whole Forest and even when the crown granted rights for the use of forest resources, Lea Bailey was often specifically excluded so that the crown retained the timber for its own use.

Samuel Pepys and Lea Bailey from the 17th century

It is evening on Friday 20 June 1662 and Samuel Pepys, the great 17th century diarist and official of the King's Navy, has had a busy week. After a walk to the pub with his wife, he settles down to write his diary for the day. He had been preparing agreements for the King about the Royal Forest of Dean but admits that he does not really know much about the area *"That done, I turned to the Forest of Dean, in Speed's Maps and there he showed me how it lies; and the Lea-Bayly... and many other things worth my knowing; and I do perceive that I am very short in my business by not knowing many times the geographical part of my business"*.

Earlier that year on 18 February, there had been a great winter storm. It caused havoc in the Dean woods with over 3,000 trees blown down. A report noted that *"500 [oaks] together with the young beechen timber lately blown down in the Lea Bayley"*. Still, it's literally an ill wind and the report went on to observe that the fallen trees would provide fuel for the King's iron works that were being restored after their neglect in the civil war.

Over the years, Pepys evidently improved his knowledge of the Forest. He was Secretary to the Admiralty and the Dean was a major source of timber for the King's warships. In 1671, Pepys and others carried out a three day survey of the Forest. He did not think highly of the quality of Dean's oak because of its over-maturity, its heart-rot and stem-rot and the shakes within it, probably from lack of shelter. He found no trees suitable for the Navy except in the Lea Bailey, about half beeches and half oaks. He also misjudged the potential of the younger oak and beech in Lea Bailey which were growing slowly but surely.

A 1678 a commission report found that Lea Bailey contained *"10,984 trees of oak and beech which are generally old and decaying and very fit to be cut having little or no timber in them useful for shipping"*.

Two years later another survey at Lea Bailey found a *"hopeful spring [young growth from natural seedlings] of underwood...which are out of the reach of the dropping trees...and there are still remaining in the said Lea Bayleywicke 10,400 trees of oak and beech ...which are generally windshaken and decayed...and which we fear will be found very little timber serviceable for shipping or worth the charge of carriage...to his Majesty's yards"*. Nevertheless, in 1681, 327 oaks and 128 beeches in Lea Bailey had been marked to make 4-inch planks reserved for frigates being built at Portsmouth.

In 1692, Lea Bailey was described as having *"a spring of oak and beech of 4,5 and 6 years growth but much cropped and spoiled by cattle, by the inclosures made for the preservation thereof being*

in the night several times pulled down and destroyed by persons unknown". They also noted that several fires had started among the thickest of the young trees.

By 1787, Drivers Survey found Lea Bailey to be *"thick with oak and beech, some large and a great quantity of saplings and underwood which require thinning"* and in an oak survey of 1808 Lea Bailey, with 5,068 oaks, was by far the largest oak wood in the whole Forest.

Those parts of the Forest belonging to the crown were often inclosed by fencing or banks to keep out trespassers and animals. In 1818, Edward Machen, deputy surveyor, observed the earthen banks surrounding the plantations *"to succeed very well, and the furze on the top...grows luxuriantly"*. He added *"The Lea Bailey Copse (north) consists of young copse wood well stored with oaks, growing on their own butts, the Lea Bailey Copse (south) has more large timber in it. The fencing consists of a large ditch and bank, and a dead hedge on top, with hawthorn-quick planted within. The hedge having stood three years is decayed, and another will be required this year which it is expected will last until the quick becomes a fence"*. There is still evidence of those ancient banks in Lea Bailey as revealed in a 2003 archaeological survey and on the boundary beyond Newtown where the old stone wall is still visible.

Fast forward to the twentieth first century. Samuel Pepys may have questioned the potential of Lea Bailey to produce oaks back in the 1600s but today at Dancing Green is the living proof of his misjudgement. Two ancient oaks stand majestically at the top of Palmers Hill. They are probably 350-400 years old; Pepys may even have paused beneath them as young trees. In 1992, local residents expressed their concern about poor workmanship when the Forestry Commission lopped branches from one of the trees. Under the headline *"FURY OVER OAK MUTILATED IN BLUNDER"*, the Ross Gazette reported the lament of local Councillor Eunice Saunders, who lived nearby *"It was such a graceful tree. The branches they have lopped off looked just like a beautiful swan"*.

The Dancing Green oaks are now recorded as 'ancient' oak trees by Forestry England. They have weathered storms over hundreds of years, seen eighteen monarchs come and go, witnessed the birth of the Industrial Revolution, the rise and fall of the British Empire and now live on into the era of advanced technology and space exploration.

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