Forestry around Buriton

Under the dense canopy of trees that cover much of the forested hills of War Down, Head Down and Holt Down above the village, little now remains of the short turf that once carpeted the rolling landscape.

History has turned full circle. Before man settled in this area beech, ash and yew trees would have grown on the thin chalk soils, dominating the landscape. Prehistoric farmers then cleared the woods, first with primitive stone tools but eventually with more sophisticated implements of bronze and iron. Only the beech woods on the steep northern, 'hanger' slopes – too steep for cultivation – survived.

The downs then remained unchanged for centuries. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, villagers and travellers on the London - Portsmouth road would have viewed War Down and Holt Down as open areas of chalky grassland, perhaps with just a sprinkling of yew and whitebeam.

Things were to change from 1927 when much of the land around Buriton was up for sale following the death of the local 'squire', Lothian Bonham Carter. The next few months were to see changes to this once sheep-dominated countryside. The downs were once again set to be green with trees, bringing one of the biggest changes seen in the parish in the last 100 years.

The need for trees

The origins of the Forestry Commission (which became 'Forestry England' in 2019) are rooted in the First World War, when Britain had difficulties meeting wartime demands for timber. No longer able to rely on imports, a Government Committee was set up in July 1916 to look at the best ways of developing woodland resources.

A new state organisation was proposed: to coordinate a new afforestation plan and the Forestry Act of 1919 duly set up the Forestry Commission to oversee the production of timber needs.

Through the 1920s and 1930s the Commission's estates increased quite rapidly. A lot of its land was acquired through death duties with landowners yielding hillsides rather than better agricultural land. The Buriton Forest plantation was one such area with local gamekeeper George Legg noting in his diary on 15 July 1927: "Hears rumour of Forestry people buying up hill ground."

The Buriton Forest was started by the Commission in 1928 and further land, bringing the total area to 1,732 acres, was acquired in 1935 – thus beginning a process that was to drastically alter the appearance of the downs.

Although trees and scrub had flourished here centuries before, the re-afforestation task faced by the Forestry Commission was not an easy one but, over a period of years, newly planted trees were to show their heads above the turf to face a decade of struggle against a hostile environment before their establishment was assured.

Initial problems faced by the foresters in 1928 included: the eradication of vermin, particularly rabbits; the choice of species; and deciding the best means of raising the selected species. In addition, with the sea being only ten miles away, certain parts of the forest receive salt-bearing winds and this was another of the most difficult problems.

The first men responsible for grappling with these challenges were Mr A Rickard who was the very first Foreman (1928-29) and Mr S E Phelps who was the Chief Forester from 1929-1941. George Legg, who worked on the Bonham Carter's Buriton Manor Estate, noted on 18 March 1928: "Met Rickard, Forestry Foreman, for first time at Dean Barn today. He is coming there to live." Within a couple of weeks he was noting that two of his brothers were changing their jobs and leaving the estate: on 24 March "Harry starts for Forestry" and on 31 March: "Percy's last day with us, going for Forestry people at day work (five shillings a day), cutting bushes."

It seems that not everyone was hoping that the forest would be a success: Mary Piggott (nee Smith), who would have been a teenager in the village when the planting started, recalled that some of the children were praying in school assembly that the trees would not grow because they did not want their lovely smooth green hills spoilt!

A few yew trees and some thorn and juniper scrub had been the only trees growing on War Down before the forestry planting but by 1930 young trees were visible in rows across the slopes and within a decade their spreading branches had formed a canopy, suppressing the ungrazed grass beneath. Buriton Forest was soon a reality although, even today, some large yew trees can still be found growing amongst the beech and odd clumps of juniper can be found in more open areas.

Rabbits and squirrels

Before planting, much of the land had been open downland, used for sheep grazing and as a home for a large population of rabbits. Now, with plantations of young trees to protect, large areas were fenced and the enclosures cleared of rabbits which could otherwise chew through large areas of new trees overnight.

The hills of War Down and Holt Down had long been the domain of Jack and Percy Legg who, together with their father, were employed by the Bonham Carter family as gamekeepers. Many were the hours that they had spent on these downs protecting rabbits for the Squire and his guests to shoot. Jack Legg was soon to be employed as a Forestry Commission warrener, keeping down the rabbits that he had once bred for the shooting parties.

As the new trees grew in the 1930s, grey squirrels arrived and their annual bark-stripping activity began to pose a serious challenge for the foresters. The damage became so serious that the Forestry Commission began an intensive research programme into squirrel control methods. Much of this research was done at Buriton and, in 1950, Jack Legg developed a cage trap which was conspicuously successful and which still bears his name to this day.

In an interview for a local newspaper in 1963 Mr Legg had explained: "Squirrels are our biggest enemy – they strip the bark off trees just as if it were done with a penknife."

Arthur Spiers had also worked for the Forestry Commission between the wars and one of his jobs was to clear rabbits and squirrels. He was paid by the number of squirrels' tails he could show to his bosses. But they made the mistake of not taking the tails from him – and he soon learnt that if he put the cut end of a tail into a potato it would keep it in good condition: and he would be paid again!

A living research area

The hills above Buriton have been a living research area with a series of nationally important experiments being conducted in the forest from its creation in 1928-29, up until the Second World War and on into the 1960s and beyond.

There was a comprehensive series of experimental plots laid out by the Forestry Commission's Research Branch as well as normal forest operations. In a record of the Buriton Forest, written in 1951, the Commission noted that the scope of the experiments "must be almost unequalled in any forest area."

Trials investigated a range of issues and techniques, including the preparation of sites, methods of planting, uses of fertlisers and the best seasons for planting as well as exploring the most suitable trees to plant on the challenging chalky downland.

From the outset the foresters were generally aiming to establish beech woodland as it was known that it would be one of the few trees that would be able to tolerate the dry, chalky soils. But they were also interested in other species to plant either as nurses or pioneers for the beech, or to associate with it in longer term mixtures.

This was an era when many exotic trees were available from North America and trial plots of a range of trees, planted when the forest was young, have left some remnants with tremendous diversity chequering the crests of War Down and Holt Down.

Some fifty-two different kinds of trees were planted in trials in the period up to 1960 and one of the studies, Experiment No 7 of 1932, compared eleven different pioneer crops for the later introduction of beech. Several of the species showed themselves to be of little value for the purpose but the Austrian and Scots pines proved most effective. Initially European larch had been thought to be suitable and it was introduced on quite a large scale, but it performed erratically and its use was soon abandoned. Similar conclusions were reached with grey alder. Experiments also showed that planting losses were much lower when beech was introduced in pioneer stands rather than planted in the open; that early growth of beech was much faster when introduced into a suitable nurse crop than when planted in the open; and that the form of the stems of beech introduced under cover was superior to that of beech planted in the open. Some shrubs were also tried as nurses for the beech with broom being used in experiments on War Down in 1939 and 1940. There was also an experiment to plant beech in a dense thicket of gorse (which had been sown for game cover in the 1920s) by cutting and clearing strips through the thickets. The development of the beech in the gorse was far superior to that planted on adjacent open ground.

With hardwoods being relatively slow to mature, many trials were undertaken in the Buriton Forest to see if some of the faster growing conifers from America and Europe would survive on the downs. Western Red Cedar proved to be successful, even on the shallow (6-inch) soils on War Down whilst on Holt Down, with its deeper soil of acid clays overlying the chalk, the change in soil properties allowed two other conifers to be grown as well: Norway Spruce (our common Christmas tree) and Western Hemlock another native of North America. In due course large areas of the previously planted beech trees were replaced here with these three species.

After these conifer plantings of the 1960s, however, Government policy changed with the planting of native hardwoods being encouraged in southern England, recognising the important role of broadleaved woodland in the landscape.

At least seventeen different experiments were carried out to find the best planting techniques for the beech trees. In general it was found that simply notching young trees into an undisturbed grass surface compared badly with planting into areas where the vegetation had been removed – but the experiments revealed that sometimes the adverse effects were not noticeable until a few years had passed. Removing and controlling the downland grass was found to be important so as to reduce competition, principally for moisture, and other experiments assessed the sizes of the cleared ('screefed') patches that might be best for each tree. Another study found that inverting turves in the 18-inch square holes from which they had been cut and notching the new tree plants through them was a particularly successful method. In a later experiment, in 1947, a series of changes to the composition of the soil was made, comparing six treatments with different variations of litter and mulch. Incorporating beech litter throughout the cultivated volume was found to be most effective, helping with rooting conditions and moisture retention. This meant that more care was taken thereafter to try to minimise the removal of organic matter when planting young trees.

There were also experiments with different sources of seeds and nursery techniques, with spacing distances within plantations, with weeding regimes, with mechanical cultivation and with chemical methods of controlling weeds and grasses.

The seriousness of competition from grasses and weeds was found to be a special feature of the chalk downland plantations and so weeding operations would be particularly important whilst the new forest was established. Experiments found that the best time of year to concentrate on weeding was the second half of August.

There were also some experiments with the planting stock and it appears that bringing transplanted seedlings from the forest's own Nursery was a much better approach than just planting seedlings directly into the forest without the Nursery phase.

Seeds and nurseries

Aubrey Bicknell, a Buriton man who worked for the Forestry Commission for about five years from 1947, recalled that "forestry workers would travel to woodlands all around the district (as far as Alresford and beyond) to collect beech seeds off the ground. They would rake away all the rubbish and then sweep up the finer material which was then put through a hand-driven winnowing machine. This would sort the seeds from the rest of the material."

Steve Neal, who worked for the Commission for over 40 years from 1966, explained that at one time the organisation had told the local community that they wanted to buy beech seeds "and so lots of villagers would visit some of the vast beech trees growing in some of the open fields and sweep up all the beech mast underneath to sell to the Commission. But beech seedlings always grow into a plant that reflects its parents and lots of the early ones in the Buriton plantations were ugly things with branches all over the place. The Commission learned over the years to be more selective as to where they got their seeds from."

Experiments about the sources of beech seeds intensified after the Second World War and careful selection from a restricted number of stands with good forms of growth was found to produce plantations with a much higher proportion of well-formed stems. Other trials with the planting stock indicated that bringing transplanted seedlings from the forest's own nurseries was a much better approach than just planting seedlings directly into the forest without the nursery phase.

There were about eleven acres of nursery beds in Buriton, mainly at Dean Barn although Aubrey Bicknell also recalled nurseries at Faggs Farm. He explained that "seeds would be sown in the spring, in beds roughly 5 feet wide by about a chain long. Long, neat rows were all planted by hand and thereafter they would have to be weeded manually, by hoeing, regularly. This was all hard work – and the workers were paid on a piecework basis. The beds would be covered with matting to protect the very young trees from frost." A Forestry Commission record of the Buriton Forest, written in 1951, noted that "it is intended to abandon these nurseries in the near future."

Aubrey Bicknell also explained that "the small trees were lifted after 1-2 years and could be taken to many Forestry Commission places, not just to the local forests. Planting out was also hard work and then any competing growth would have to be regularly cut away (known as 'trimming' or 'weeding') for several years to ensure that the new trees would grow up straight and tall."

Generally speaking, the planting at Buriton involved extensive areas of beech with conifer nurses. The latter, mostly Larch and the Scots Pine, were planted in lines beside the rows of beech so as to provide the less hardy young beech trees with shelter from the elements and to help them grow up straight. The conifers would always grow more quickly and would be removed at 'first thinning' stage after 18 to 25 years to just leave the beech.

Hard work and hand tools

Aubrey Bicknell recalled his time 'on the forestry' with affection. "We used to see so many butterflies and wild flowers. Bee orchids were much more common then and we often saw adders too."

But it was undoubtedly hard work – and the piecework method of payment meant that life could be precarious.

John 'Paddy' Cronin, who started work in the Buriton Forest in 1931, recalled that "if it rained too much for work we would be stood off and because funds were not so plentiful we would have to go and find other work. I lived on one of the homesteads and did a bit of beef farming. I used to keep pigs as well at one time." Other workers also kept animals after they came home from work, to earn a bit more income.

Other men believed to have been working in the forest during the 1930s-40s, a time when the main market for timber was for pit props for the coal mines that were supplying fast-growing heavy industries, include Reg Francis, Bob Barrow, Brian Barrow, Chris Rutter, George Powell and Percy Legg. They would recall that if it was frosty they were not allowed to work until the frost had come off – which reduced the hours for which they were paid.

Graham Beer recalls that his father, Ted Beer, worked in the Buriton Forest from 1946 and that "a full working week for the Forestry Commission would have probably been 44 hours and include a Saturday morning. I can believe that it would have been particularly hard work as much was carried out on steep slopes and with hand tools. Felling would mostly have been with an axe and bushman handsaw, although I know that crosscut saws would have been used for large trees."

Owen Roberts was another man who moved, with his young family, to Buriton soon after the Second World War seeking a simpler life as a forest worker. They lived at Gravel Hill and, amongst other

things, Mr Roberts recorded the effort and skill required to fell trees: “It is difficult enough to drop a tree within a few feet of a predetermined line of fall. Add to this the condition that we are expected to fell trees of sometimes sixty feet or more in height along a lane only four and a half feet wide, together with the uncomfortable axing stances caused by the steepness of the sloping ground, and you will begin to appreciate what is required.”

Aubrey Bicknell recalled how “the big larch trees in amongst the beech had to be cut down and then sawn up, in situ, to make manageable lengths to get out between all the other trees. They were subsequently sawn into lengths and sent away for pit props.

“Workers would also have the job of keeping all the tracks and paths through the forests clear. They would earn one shilling and ninepence for every chain of these ‘rides’ that they trimmed.”

Toni Barrow, who joined the Forestry Commission straight from school in 1961 and worked for them for almost exactly 45 years, explained that these ‘rides’ could be important as fire breaks – especially in amongst pine trees where dry needles in the summer months were a fire risk.

Another part of Arthur Spiers’ job had been to plough the ‘rides’ between the trees close to the main road so that no vegetation grew. At that time there was a risk of fire from traffic on the main road as there were many steam traction engines travelling along the road, transporting goods.

Interviewed for a local newspaper in 1963, Buriton man Reg Francis reminisced about the days when the first planting was done: “In those days we had to cut the grass on the rides with a scythe. We did not have the machines we have today to do this work.”

Lawrie Tee, interviewed by Val Porter in the 1990s, had joined the Forestry Commission at Buriton in 1944 when he was 16 “doing all and sundry in the way of forest work” and stayed for four years before being transferred elsewhere. He recalled that “one of the wet weather jobs was to make fire beating brooms which were stacked at fire beating stands all over the forest ready for use. But locals began to pinch them so they created a new type of broom: they cut the rubber belting off pit conveyor belts and attached the pieces to handles. They also collected old water tanks and placed them strategically for fighting forest fires.”

He also recalled going “brashing with billhooks in the larch and pine plantations, snicking off all the lower growth on the trees up to 6 feet on every third row so that the foresters could walk along underneath easily for marking.”

For felling trees he explained that “the men were using seven-pound axes and two-man cross-cut saws, employing the four-man rope technique for the largest trees. They also felled quite a lot for firewood, mainly large and bushy beech trees. But the trees became too hard to saw down and so they drilled holes at the base and blasted them down with a heck of a big bang.

“Extracting the timber was quite a problem as the land was sloping. They had a horse, but many places were so steep that the logs would have tumbled onto the poor animal on its descent. Instead, the men often pulled the bigger timber down the hill manually, with ropes, and then had to load it on to their single flat-bed lorry by sliding it up poles with a rope, rolling or pushing or lifting it up – preferably parking the lorry close to a roadside bank so that the task was easier.

“The hillside was striped by big rides and screefed passages. A screefer has a spike on one end and a blade on the other; you used it for planting. You used the spike to break the soil and then you took out an L-shaped turf and then planted the tree. The big rides were twenty yards wide and on the steepest parts you had to screef them. Otherwise they were ploughed, with a piece ploughed or screefed at either side to keep it free from grass down to bare chalk: it showed up for miles as white lines. Going up that hill on a tractor, someone had to sit on a pole lashed to the front, to keep the front down, and going down the hill they sat on a pole at the back to stop the thing from toppling down the slope. It was an old Fordson tractor – just about the only mechanised thing we had.”

Fire patrols and war-time

During the young life of any forest, fire is a devastating enemy and staff in the Buriton Forest had special fire-watching duties. A look-out tower was constructed on a mound at the top of War Down in 1932 with breath-taking views of the whole forest area and beyond to the Solent and the Isle of Wight.

Lawrie Tee recalled that “men received extra wages for fire patrol. It was a precarious job, though. They had to clamber up a wooden tower 60 feet high, scrambling up an open ladder between four uprights, and then push up a trapdoor at the top and scrabble through it with all their gear, to the lookout platform where they peered across the forest through little windows. The link with the forester, who lived over at Dean Barn, was by field telephone and on the way to the tower they would first pick up a long ash pole and walk from his house, separating the wind-ravelled telephone wires as they went, right up to the top of War Down and then into the tower. You sat there looking for smoke. If you saw smoke, you wound a handle on the telephone and called the forester. If he didn’t answer, you had to get down from the tower and run to get someone to take a message to him, wherever he might be.”

Aubrey Bicknell explained that these fire-watching duties in the summer months continued well into the evenings and that other workers would have ‘patrol’ duties – warning people about the risks of starting fires.

The 1951 Forestry Commission record of the Buriton Forest noted that “the forest, being on the South Downs, has always been popular with walkers and much use is made of several recognised rights of way across it. The fire record, however, shows no outbreak due to walking parties within the forest and the two main possible sources of fire have been and are the Portsmouth railway line between Ditcham and Head Down and the Petersfield-Portsmouth road on the western boundary. Both have been the origins of fires and cultivated fire-lines are maintained alongside them. In recent years, with increasing canopy formation, this danger has been decreasing, but patrols and fire-tower watching are still necessary during dry periods.” Fortunately, there are no recollections of any big fires in any of the Buriton Forest areas.

During the Second World War the tower doubled as an ARP look-out post during the many enemy air raids on Portsmouth. As it was wartime, there was the extra danger of fires during the night and so there were often two people on night duty up the tower. Lawrie Tee recalled that “war made the whole thing much more exciting. We would have German bombers chased by Spitfires flying below us in the cutting. Our telephone was better then and we’d report to the police, perhaps to say where we thought a bomb had been dropped without going off – you could hear them plopping down – and telling them about any planes that came down. We’d see planes on fire going over, and then

they would disappear to lower ground out of sight. At the time Butser Hill was a narrow cutting and you could often sit up there for hours and never see another person or a vehicle."

German and Italian Prisoners of War worked in the forest during the war, arriving in lorries to help clear up after larch trees had been felled, burning the lop-and-top and carrying timber (which was to be used as pit props) out to a road where it could be collected and taken away.

The fire tower was taken down after a number of years, taking care not to disturb the mound upon which it had been built. When the post-holes for the base of the tower had been dug it was realised that they were on a Bronze Age barrow when the workman in charge, a Mr Pretty, saw a group of human bones which were immediately re-buried. A few years later, in 1938, Paddy Cronin was digging a narrow trench from the post towards the edge of the mound to take the earth of a lightening conductor. He came upon an iron spearhead which was subsequently given to Portsmouth City Museum.

In his interviews with Val Porter, Lawrie Tee recalled some other memories from the Second World War: "The majority of staff during the war were old men and gamekeepers from the Bonham Carter estate – the choice was either to go into service or into forestry to be exempt and, anyway, Mr Bonham Carter wanted to keep his shoots going, war or no war. Although we were on a 'reserve' job we still had to go beating for him every so often and stooking the sheaves when his corn was cut. All the staff had to do that. He had retained the shooting rights in the forest and his own keepers were being paid by the Forestry Commission while they worked for him! Among those keepers were the Leggs, including warrener Jack Legg, inventor of the squirrel trap that bears his name. He and other keepers helped with forest work, cutting the big timber on the downs, especially ash, which was cut into short lengths for making (they believed) mosquito aircraft: the wood could be steamed and bent to shape."

After his four years at Buriton, Lawrie Tee's work with the Forestry Commission led to him becoming a research forester and so his work regularly brought him back to the parish.

The 1950s, the Coronation and the re-naming of Buriton Forest

After the war, the Forest continued to draw most of its labour from local men – with over twenty being employed on a full-time basis. Tom Hendrie had been the Forester from 1941 to 1944 at which time Jim Davy took over, remaining in charge until 1949. Amongst the names that Aubrey Bicknell could remember from this period were Percy Legg, Denis Tussler, Reg Francis, Rod Francis, Albert (Darkie) Hill, Peter Albuery, his own brother Bernard Bicknell, Arthur Spiers, Paddy Cronin, Walter (Alan) Leyfield and Ted Beer. "Bert Trodd was a foreman and Bill Woodley a 'ganger'; Jack Legg was the warrener whose job was to control the rabbit population which could otherwise have eaten all the saplings."

The 1951 Forestry Commission record of the Buriton Forest recorded that "at present the Forester, Mr H Laney, has a foreman and twenty-five workers at his command."

By 1953 Buriton Forest was well established and to commemorate the Coronation it was renamed in a special ceremony attended by a number of dignitaries. Flagpoles were erected at the entrance at Gravel Hill and, on 15 October, the Duke of Wellington (Lord Lieutenant of the County) unveiled a plaque and planted a beech tree to mark the event. The forest became the Queen Elizabeth Forest, the only British forest to carry her Majesty's name.

At the same ceremony, Lord Radnor (Chairman of the Forestry Commission) cut a tape to mark the opening of a three-mile ride through the forest to be known as the Queen's Drive, a second beech tree was planted by Major CM Floyd (Vice President of the Royal Forestry Society) and a vote of thanks was proposed by Major Sir Richard Cotterell (Chairman of the Forestry Commission's National Committee for England).

The Buriton Forest had been singled out by the Forestry Commission to commemorate the Coronation because of its position on the main London to Portsmouth Road and because it was felt that it would be a fine scenic forest. It was noted that, although it currently contained mixed conifers and hardwoods, the aim was to develop the area into a pure beech forest. It was hoped that in years to come people would become justifiably proud of the Queen Elizabeth Forest, that they would enjoy the woodlands and the views and that, in so doing, they would remember the Coronation.

By this time the woodlands were a familiar part of the local scenery. Larches and pines, their work of nursing the tender beech seedlings finished, were being felled with their timber being converted into pit props for the Kent and South Wales coal mines. Before opening the Queen's Drive, Lord Radnor recalled that the drive had been known as the Lady's Mile.

Another part of the Coronation celebrations saw the planting of about 2,000 trees at the Hundry, overlooking the village, up Kiln Lane. On 7 April 1953 the first fifty trees were planted by fifty local schoolchildren. Each child, assisted by a forest worker and guided by head forester Mr Laney, planted a copper beech tree labelled with their name. A week or so later about forty adults, many of them pensioners, gathered for another ceremonial planting at the same place – the trees this time being mainly limes, Canadian red oaks and wild cherry. Villagers and local forestry staff subsequently planted the remaining trees.

Changes from the 1960s

By the 1960s, some of the trees were coming into the 'production stage'. As Peter Albuery explained in 1963: "There is now a steady annual programme of planting to restock derelict areas. Some of the stock is now coming into the production stage with the thinning of the crops planted in 1928 for the first time. Another important part of the work is building the stock of seedlings in the forest nurseries for planting in the forest at about three years of age. The first thinnings will be sold for pulpwood, hardboard and other uses."

Toni Barrow recalled some of the changes from when he started his 45 years with the Forestry Commission in 1961. "Back in the 1960s there had been nothing mechanical, just manual cross-cut saws with a man each side of the tree. Chain saws came in the late 60s and early 1970s. It was quite a skilled job to bring a tree down exactly where you wanted it, without injuring other men working in your group."

Peter Albuery, who had come to the Queen Elizabeth Forest in the late 1950s with about twenty years' experience elsewhere, stressed the same point: "Although the change from hand sawing to mechanisation has made felling quicker it has not, at the same time, made it any easier; it merely means that you cut twice as many trees as you did before. Great skill is still necessary as you have to know how to direct a tree the way you want it to go."

Other tools in Toni Barrow's early days included a range of 'sharp edge' tools (to weed in amongst trees), bow saws, slashers and post-hole borers (sometimes used to create the hole to plant young trees into). "Axes and bow-saws were used when clearing areas ('prepping') for re-planting later on

– or creating forestry roads through woodland. Tools changed over the years: brush-cutter machines (like a present-day strimmer but with a circular blade on the end) replaced hand-weeding between the lines of trees but you had to be careful not to knock the top off the young trees."

Toni also explained that as the years passed, "more machines were used to cut trees down and do all the processing – reducing chain saw work and reducing the numbers of men. When I started working the trees were planted about 5 feet apart but later, as there was more machinery and as the machinery got bigger, this went out to 6 and 7 feet apart."

Although by this time wages were fixed to the agricultural wage rates (plus extra rates for required skills) there was still piecework pay for some tasks – including the planting-out of seedlings. But Steve Neal, who started working for the Forestry Commission in 1966, recalled that on one occasion this had led to some problems when lots of seedling trees went missing. It seems that some workers may have deliberately put them onto fires so as to compensate for the low piecework rates that they were being paid. But managers soon realised because they knew how many trees had been delivered and how many acres had been planted.

Originally men had been taken out from the Commission's offices at Faggs Farm by lorry but in later years, with less men being employed, many had a van each. When the Faggs Farm office closed, Toni Barrow had to report to Alice Holt every day and was involved in a new aspect of the Commission's work: creating facilities for the public and play areas for children as a greater emphasis on recreation was introduced.

Other men believed to have been working in the forest during the 1960s include Jim Davey, Horace Hale (a ganger), Mick Davis, Jeff Francis, Chris Gaylard, Sydney Gaylard, Bob Hayter, Harry Richards, Chris Rutter, Bob Slatter, Dick Woods and Roy Woods. Steve Neal, who later became a Forester, started in 1966 and Warrener Jack Legg retired in August 1969 after almost thirty years in the role.

A working plan for the Queen Elizabeth Forest, written in 1967, indicates that there were then twenty forest workers working with the Head Forester and two Foresters but, with the planting programme due to be completed by about 1975 it was anticipated that the staffing levels could gradually be reduced by about 45%. The planting programme was being linked to the demands of the weeding programme: limiting the weeding required to 360 acres per year enabled about 60 acres to be planted each year.

At that time there was a temptation to plant more conifers because of their relative profitability but the amenity role of the forest was increasingly being realised. As the 1967 plan notes: "The forest lies within easy reach of Portsmouth, Southampton and Winchester. Already it is used by the public extensively and this is likely to increase as the regional population expands. The reaction of those using the forest is one of satisfaction with its appearance and facilities for recreation. Three car parks have been provided, giving a capacity for 47 cars. As 2,296 of the 2,525 acres are at present hardwoods, or hardwoods in temporary mixture with conifers, it is not surprising that public criticism of the appearance of the forest is negligible. How far the proportion of conifer could be increased without permanent unfavourable public reaction is uncertain. Provisions for preserving the amenities, allowing access to the public on foot, and providing for nature trails, visits of inspection and field studies are being made. Amenity is one of the most important considerations of management and planting of decorative species along roadsides and on conspicuous features will continue to be the normal routine. Vistas, picnic sites and car parks will also be made as and when required."

By the time of the creation of the Queen Elizabeth Country Park in 1976, the Head Forester was Alan Catchpole supported by Foresters Gordon Cale and Byron Ballard. Two Forest Rangers were David Jacobs (deer control) and Jack Istead (general pest control) and forest staff included Sydney Gaylard who lived in Bottom Cottage, brothers Tom and John Massey, Jim Adams, Toni Barrow and Steve Neal. Tim Laker was the Forestry Commission representative on the steering group which led to the formation of the Country Park and was the Park Manager from 1978 to 1985. There was great pride amongst all involved when the Queen visited the site on 2 August 1976.

The future

Almost 100 years since the plantings started, today's forest is a recognised part of the local landscape and the trees have gradually changed the environment around them. Woodland wildlife abounds and some of the specialised beech wood plants that usually only occur in older settings are gradually appearing.

But the economics of the forestry operations have changed quite significantly. Beech used to go to a pulp mill in Sudbrook, South Wales, which specialised in producing paper and packaging for the fruit and vegetable industry. But this closed in 2006 and most of the timber now goes to one of the large saw mills in the region, destined for a range of uses depending on species and quality. The low end is used for biomass, chip and firewood with the higher end destined for structural timber and bespoke joinery. An active firewood market means there is usually a ready market for most sizes of trees.

Thinning and felling in the forests now takes place less frequently, but in larger patches, and re-planting is less likely. Forestry Commission plans aim to remove conifers and to allow natural regeneration in many areas which may see more birch and ash as well as beech.

Most of the forest is due to be managed as native broadleaved woodland with some areas containing a mixture of native and non-native tree species. All areas should see an appropriate thinning system, favouring the best trees and focussing on the production of quality timber and species diversity.

But, a century after its creation, the Forestry Commission is grappling with responses to climate change which are predicted to see increases in both winter and summer temperatures alongside increases in winter precipitation but reductions in summer rainfall. Beech may not be so suited to the changing conditions whilst other species, currently less common in British woodlands, may be better adapted to the future.

And the changing climate may also affect the resilience of the forests to pests and diseases. Already swathes of young ash trees have had to be cleared from the eastern flanks of War Down and Head Down (where they had re-generated after the devastation caused by the big storm of October 1987) because of risks posed by Ash dieback. Increasing stress on woodlands from climate change is likely to make them more vulnerable to existing challenges – and changes in conditions will also make the UK climate more amenable to a range of new pests and diseases.

There will be challenges ahead which could see significant changes to the landscapes once again.