

PUTNOE WOOD

By A. W. GUPPY

The demolition of Putnoe Farm in 1968 ended a continuous period of over nine hundred years during which the site had been occupied by a succession of farm buildings at the centre of a manorial estate. Of the original Saxon settler, Putta, who gave his name to the 'hoh', or spur of land, on which the farm stood beside the Roman way called Putnoe Street, we know nothing; at the time of the Norman Conquest the manor was held, with many others in north Bedfordshire, by Anschil or Asketill, a royal thane whose name shows him to have been of Scandinavian origin.

Twenty-one years later, in 1087, the entries in Domesday Book show that all his property, Putnoe included, had been forfeited to Hugh de Beauchamp, first baron of Bedford and the foremost Norman landowner in the county. The extent of Putnoe woodlands was then assessed, in the customary way, by the number of swine which could be maintained — in this instance, one hundred. The actual area at this period can only be indirectly inferred, but in order to support so many animals it must have been far greater than its present twenty-six acres, perhaps as much as ten or twelve times.

Before the end of the 12th century the manor of Putnoe was given by the de Beauchamp family as an endowment to the Cistercian Abbey of Warden, and it remained in the possession of that monastery until the Dissolution in 1537. Great damage was done to the wood during the siege of Bedford Castle in 1224, the royal forces of Henry III doubtless using it as a convenient source of timber. Warden Abbey demanded, and received, annual compensation for their ravaged woodlands during the remainder of the king's lifetime, and the grant was renewed in 1304 for a further twenty years, that is, until a full century after the siege.

In 1539 the estate passed to the Gostwick family of Willington and they retained it for nearly two hundred years; later owners included the Dukes of Bedford, one of whom was Lord of the Manor of Putnoe as late as 1871.

Until 1934 the manor and its wood had always lain in Goldington parish, but when Goldington village was absorbed into Bedford in that year, the wood and much of the farm were transferred to Ravensden. Further boundary extensions in 1966 brought the wood within the borough, and it now forms part of the Corporation's Mowsbury Park which is at present being laid out and which is due for completion in 1972.

Reference to the earliest sheets of the Ordnance Survey shows that the wood has not changed in size over the past century and a half, that is, since the days of Charles Abbot, the schoolmaster-parson-botanist, in whose 'Flora Bedfordiensis', published in 1798, the first botanical records from the wood appear. Herein is recorded the wood's most notable rarity, the Water Aven, *Geum rivale*, in its only station in the north of the county, and here it continued throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th; it has not been seen for many years now, but there is always the hope that more intensive search will find it once again.

The wood lies along the bottom of a shallow valley at an altitude of little more than 100 feet above sea-level, and this situation, together with the Boulder Clay subsoil, produces very wet conditions, especially in winter and early spring. Those who visited the wood in the early months of 1969 can testify to this, the centre ride resembling a chain of ponds which did not dry out completely, even during the subsequent warm summer. In consequence there has always been a considerable sedge flora; three species were particularly noted by Abbot, *Carex strigosa*,

C. pallescens and *C. divulsa*. The latter was re-discovered by McLaren in the mid-nineteenth century, but all three lack modern records.

For the most part, the flora is typical of our damp Boulder Clay woods of north Bedfordshire, with plenty of anemones, bluebells and primroses in the spring and a few of the commoner orchids. None of the mature timber is of great age; it includes a higher proportion of Ash than usual, and there is some Elm at the western end. A large part of the wood is old hazel coppice, but this has not been cleared for many years, and the same applies to the brambles, roses and shrubs. Nevertheless, despite neglect, the wood has so far been found to contain nearly one hundred and twenty species of flowering plants, thus demonstrating a sustained high level of natural history interest.

This is also borne out by an equally wide variety in the Lepidoptera; no less than ten species of butterflies and ninety-four of moths have been recorded — a remarkable total for such a limited area. One moth species, the Mocha, *Cosymbia annulata*, constitutes a new county record; in view of the frequent occurrence of its food-plant in the wood (maple) we can look forward to its continuance as an established species.

The wood provides breeding habitat for some thirty-four species of birds, all of which are typical of almost any woodland in northern Bedfordshire. A further two species, namely Lesser Whitethroat, *Sylvia curruca*, and Corn Bunting, *Emberiza calandra*, include the edge of the wood in their territories but actually breed in an adjacent hedgerow and corn-field respectively. Non-breeding species recorded in the wood total at least twelve.

In view of the continuing northward expansion of Bedford, and the establishment of Mowsbury Park, the wood is becoming increasingly accessible, and will have to withstand more intensive public use. During 1969 the Society's Council felt that it was a matter of urgency to draw the attention of the Borough Council to the dangers, as well as to the potentialities, of having such an interesting woodland actually within the town's boundaries, and to seek reassurances concerning the Council's future intentions towards it. Our approach to the authorities met with an immediate and sympathetic response, and it is gratifying to be able to report that, as a result of several meetings with the Society's representatives, the Borough Council has accepted a number of important proposals; the principal one concerns the preparation of a Management Plan for the wood, to be drawn up by the Nature Conservancy, and to be carried out under the joint control of the Borough Council and the Society. This plan will include the re-establishment of the former coppicing cycle, and will remedy the many past years of neglect in other ways, thus taking the necessary steps to restore the most favourable conditions for the species now present there.

The Society's official interest and participation in the scheme is really only just beginning, for, in addition to acting in future as advisers to the Corporation, it will be an obligation for the Society to carry out surveys of the wood and its contents, year by year, in order to assess the effects of all that has been done, and to record any changes brought about. Furthermore, many branches of natural history are at present unrepresented in the survey, such as fungi and diptera, and provide opportunities to those in search of a fresh line of enquiry.

This is the first time that the Society has found itself in the position of using its specialised knowledge to advise a local authority in this way, but we are sure that members will be pleased to learn of a development which can do nothing but good to the Society's future reputation and status.