

# The history of Ashdown Forest

The Ashdown Forest encompasses 7,000 acres of rare lowland heath and woodland. The stunning scenery can be explored from the many paths and there are numerous spots for picnics and relaxing. From high points, there are lovely views across the Sussex countryside.

The forest is part of the High Weald AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and is also an SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and an SPA (Special Protected Area). It is one of the few remaining 'wild' areas in the South East and has become a refuge for increasingly threatened wildlife.



Shrublands is located in the St Johns District of Crowborough, just to the east of the forest. Please use the map in the cottage that covers the forest area.

## Early development of the forest

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130 million years ago the area that is now Ashdown Forest was covered by numerous rivers. These crossed a vast flood plain.

The sediments that the rivers deposited consisted of sand, silt, siltstones and sandstones. They were called the Ashdown Beds.

In the years that followed these sediments were covered with up to 70m of clay and other deposits. A further layer of chalk was deposited around 65 million years ago which reared up to form a massive dome around 1000m high.

This chalk dome was then eroded gradually until the Ashdown Beds were revealed and gave rise to the soils of today's Ashdown Forest. The edges of the great chalk dome still remain as the North and South Downs.

Deciduous woodland developed where the soil was rich in humus and well drained. The Heathland area of the forest developed where the soil was acidic and grey.

## Man's early occupation

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The earliest evidence of man in the forest dates back to around 50,000 years. A flint axe head has been found that dates back to this time.

In the Bronze Age people used the area for hunting and to graze their animals. They cleared small areas of forest so that they could control their livestock. Flint arrowheads and other tools have been found. The arrowheads would have been made from the nearby chalk Downs.



During the Iron Age the area was mined extensively for the deposits of ironstone that found in the layers below the chalk.

The Romans built many roads across the forest and further developed the iron industry. After the Roman Empire collapsed the forest reverted back to a wild and inaccessible place.

## The Wealden Iron Industry

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The early method of extracting iron involved using a small furnace or bloomery. The furnace was fuelled by the plentiful local charcoal and blown by hand bellows. The process produced a lump of malleable but impure iron for shaping.

At the end of the Middle Ages larger furnaces were introduced into the area and it became possible to pour liquid iron into moulds or casts. Water power was needed to drive the huge bellows and this led to many of the rivers being dammed to harness the water.

The first cannon was cast in the Weald in 1543 and, as conflict with Spain grew, so did the reputation for Wealden cannons. Boringwood Farm, near Nutley, gets its name from the process of boring a cannon's barrel. It is even claimed that both opposing fleets were armed with Wealden cannons.



The landscape of Ashdown Forest was completely different in those days. It was described by a local man as:

*"Full of iron mines it is in sundry places, where for the making and fining whereof there be furnaces on every side, and huge deal of wood is yearly spent".*

## A Royal Forest

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In 1296 a large part of the Forest was enclosed and became Lancaster Great Park. This was used as a royal hunting ground.

The people who lived around the edge grazed their animals on the forest and collected wood, bracken, heather and turf for their own use.



During the Seventeenth Century, the Forest was granted to the Earls of Bristol and Dukes of Dorset. Significant areas were enclosed and parcels of land were taken for small-holdings. The local people, who then depended on the Forest for their livelihoods, became alarmed and a petition was sent to Parliament.

This led to the first Ashdown Forest Act, passed in 1885. The Act defined the forest borders and they have remained largely unchanged to this day.

The De La Warr family, descendants of the Dorsets remained freehold owners until 1988 when the forest was purchased by East Sussex County Council. Today the forest is managed by the Board of Conservators.

### Ashdown Forest Information Centre

The Information Centre exhibition has a display of wildlife, artefacts and a variety of sources of information about the history, management, flora and fauna of the Forest.

There is a garden with picnic tables and the Centre has the only public lavatories in the Forest.

The Centre is situated approximately one mile east of Wych Cross on the Hartfield road. Access to the exhibition barn is free. Opening times are 11am to 5pm at weekends and Bank Holidays & 2pm to 5pm during summer weekdays. Tel: 01342 823583.