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RE:LEAF
TREES FOR A GREENER LONDON

BARNET
LONDON BOROUGH

Cover: Charcoal drawings of Big Wood by Sally Lewis, who has lived in the Suburb for most of her life and Chris Gregory, who was born in the Suburb.

LOCATION MAP

Bus routes 82, 102, 260 and H2

HISTORY

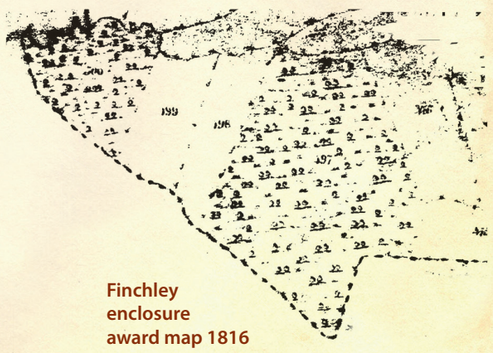
Entering Big Wood from the Temple Fortune Hill Memorial Gate, one crosses an ancient boundary that runs along Big Wood's western edge and on through the rest of the Suburb where it is now partly obscured. This line almost certainly dates back to the Anglo-Saxon period. Historians have suggested it was part of a boundary between the hundreds of Ossulstone and Gore both described in the Domesday Book of 1086. Later it became a boundary between the manor of Finchley and the earlier manor of Hendon. At the time of the Norman conquest the wood was likely to have been part of a much larger woodland area, gradually reduced as new fields were made. Later the line served as, a parish a parliamentary and an urban district boundary.

The land to the west of the line was called Wyldes. It was owned by Eton College from the fifteenth century. Before this it was owned by Westminster Abbey who granted it in the 13th century to the Leper Hospital of St James. (where St James palace now stands). The Abbey lost control of the hospital and estate to the Crown in a dispute in the 14th century. King Henry VI founded Eton College and a few years later, in 1449, granted it both the hospital and estate. In the next century Henry VIII took the hospital but confirmed Eton College's ownership of the estate. At the beginning of the 20th century, the college sold much of the land to the early Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust for building the original part of the Suburb.

The wood itself lay in Bibwell, on the eastern side of the line, an area which was probably part of the Fulham estates. These estates had been acquired by the Bishop of London from the Bishop of Hereford documented in a charter circa 704-9 A.D. However the earliest mention of Bibwell found so far is in a document of 1434 confirming a 40 year lease between the bishop and a John Sanny for "*a certain close in Fynchley called Bybwell*". Many different tenants leased Bibwell through the centuries. The leases show they were expected, amongst other things, to maintain the woods. A lease of 1588 to John Kerrie for 21 years requires him to protect the young re-growth "*that are nowe growinge and that hereafter after every fall of the woods thereupon growinge or so growe during the said term*". This suggests that tenants or their workers might cut/coppice wood fairly regularly in small sections at a time and not cut new growth until it was well established.

They probably used the wood for firewood, hurdle making for sheep folds or for fencing and may have sold some as well. (See illustrations after the 14th century Luttrell Psalter). However leases show that from 1810 the bishop no longer allowed tenants to cut wood and reserved all timber rights for himself. It appears that around this time much of the coppice woodland was felled and replanted with an oak timber crop as most of the current oaks (now standing) date from the 19th century. See early maps of the area showing the shape of the wood then. Gradually in the 20th century the smaller trees and bushes regenerated from seed and the old root system to form the present understory. In 1911 the HGS Trust took a 999 year lease on the area to extend the original Suburb. The freehold of Big Wood was taken over from the ecclesiastical commissioners (who had taken over the administration of the Bishop's estates in 1855) by Finchley district council in 1933 and remains with the local authority – Barnet.

Roque's map 1746



Finchley enclosure award map 1816

GENERAL INFORMATION

Big Wood is an ancient woodland site, designated as a nature reserve by English Nature in 1999 largely due to the unusually large numbers of Wild Service trees of various ages. Barnet council now owns the wood and manages it together with the Big Wood management Group of volunteers which is a sub group of the Trees and Open Spaces Committee of the RA (Residents Association). There are currently over 50 Volunteers who help in the wood on Big Wood working days following an agreed management plan. Information on Big Wood can be found on the Sylva My Forest web site, which will continue to be updated throughout the duration of the management plan.

The Dollis Valley Greenwalk a 10 mile waymarked trail passes through the site. Leaflets for this walk, and other self guided walks are available from libraries.

Location

The Big Wood nature trail starts at the Temple Fortune Hill entrance. It can be reached on foot via Hampstead Way from Finchley Road (A598) NW11. Buses 82, 102 and 260 all travel along the Finchley Road. From Golders Green station, the H2 bus stops near the wood in Willifield Way.

Byelaws

Big Wood is subject to the London Borough of Barnet byelaws relating to pleasure grounds.

Barnet Parks & Open Spaces 020 8359 7824

Big Wood Volunteer Group 020 8455 9840

HGS Trust 020 8455 1066

Big Wood NATURE TRAIL

Enter Big Wood at the Temple Fortune Hill Memorial Gate Entrance crossing the ancient boundary line which later became a boundary between Hendon and Finchley. In 1574 the Lord of the Manor of Hendon called on certain tenants to confirm the outbounds of the Parish. Part of the boundary ran across the Suburb past Big Wood which is mentioned in the description: "*First Mordins Brooke leadeth unto Bibwell, the Weildes boundeth against Bibwell to Wildswoode (Big Wood) by a ditch to Harnsey Park corner and so by Weildswoode(of which Turners Wood is a remnant) against Hampstead Heath and over the heathe to Hodford Wood corner...*"

1 **Wild Service trees** are unusually abundant (over 80) in Big Wood. They are characteristic of ancient woods. They like dappled shade, growing here under oak and hazel. They are often found in areas of woodland which have been left undisturbed for a long time as in most of Big Wood. The Big Wood plan envisages leaving at least two of the seven compartments in the wood undisturbed. Wild Service trees spread mainly by sprouting from the root of parent trees, as seeds germinate poorly in Britain. Look for flowers in late spring and, in autumn, brilliant coloured coral brown-red and gold leaves. Clusters of russet-brown berries, called chequers, later darken and soften. Tangy and sweet, the berries used to be used to flavour alcoholic drinks and eaten as sweets.

Wild service tree >

2 **English Bluebells** The native variety are sweet scented, with narrower, darker "blue bells" and with a more drooping flowerhead than the garden variety. Nearby grows wood anemone with golden centres and white petals, another ancient woodland indicator species. Its seeds are rarely fertile and it spreads slowly by the roots. A new glade has been made here to encourage further wild flowers. So far Solomons Seal has sprouted up. More flowers will encourage the diversity of insects in the wood.

3 **Lichen** Notice creamy or rusty brown patches of lichen on the hazel by the path. There is a selection of species in the wood. Lichen are a combination of fungi and algae. They offer food and shelter to tiny invertebrates at the bottom of the food chain. Small birds like long tailed tits camouflage their nests with lichen. Leaving the old hazel uncut in parts of the wood provides continuity for lichen. *Old Hazel* also provides a variety of valuable habitats. Mature branches give a good crop of catkins and nuts as well as providing many holes and crannies. These can be used for storing food like nuts and berries, drinking holes, roosting places or even where soil has built up, a home for a worm. Being relatively short lived, the branches give a ready supply of dead wood- habitat for fungi, lichen and different wood-boring beetles.

Large hollowed out base stems offer shelter for mice and other small creatures. Lastly the old hazel provides dappled shade for wild service trees to sprout and encourages a damper micro climate which in turn promotes more moss and lichen. Most woodland flowers are adapted to the shade or come to life before the leaf canopy develops on the trees.

< Tawny Owl

4 **True Wild Crab Apple** is uncommon but characteristic of ancient woods. Notice the thick spiny growth on the trunk. True crabs are spinier than more common 'wildings' (trees sprung up from discarded apple cores). In Big Wood there are many true crabs (one of which is over 100 years old). In May the flowers attract insects. The small red/yellow fruits provide food for birds and mammals in autumn. Nearby there is a *Guelder Rose* a shrub or small tree.

5 Standing *dead oak* is left in situ as it is an important habitat for invertebrates and fungi, and provides valuable feeding and nesting sites for woodpeckers. Watch out for *great spotted* and *green woodpeckers*. Notice two nest holes near the top of the trunk. Listen for woodpeckers drumming. As well as being territorial, drumming serves to attract a mate in spring. Woodpeckers drum on hollow branches to make the sound travel. Their skulls are adapted in one or two ways to protect their brains from the hammer blows. Often the first clue to a green woodpecker's presence is a loud ringing laugh. Look out for its green wings, red crown and bright yellow at the top of the tail feathers.

Great Spotted Woodpecker >

< Green Woodpecker

6 *Oak* regenerates poorly in Big Wood. Woodlands need trees of diverse age. So six new glades were cleared by volunteers in 2011 and 2012. Hazel has been coppiced (almost to ground level) in these six glades to increase light reaching the woodland floor which encourages acorns to germinate. Jays and squirrels help by forgetting where they bury acorns. To boost the process root trainers from British stock have been planted here and in another glade where the canopy is open. Young oaks that have sprouted naturally in darker spots are being transplanted to lighter areas. In addition wild flowers from local gardens and hedgerows are being planted in the glades including primrose, hedge woundwort, wild strawberry, woodruff, violet and foxgloves. Speckled wood butterflies are common but it is hoped to attract more butterfly species with this planting. A nestbox has been put up here and five more in other parts of the wood to encourage nesting by indigenous small birds.

7 **Ivy** is growing using oak as a support. Ivy is valuable for wildlife. providing cover and winter roost sites for wrens and robins. *Treecreepers* nest in crevices between ivy stems and oak bark. The lower ivy leaves are the juvenile shape. The higher leaves on the ivy are oval. These stems produce flowers, providing a late nectar source for insects. Berries, green over winter, turn black from January and are eaten by birds but are poisonous to humans. The second crop of holly blue butterfly eggs are laid on ivy and when the caterpillars hatch they eat the berries.

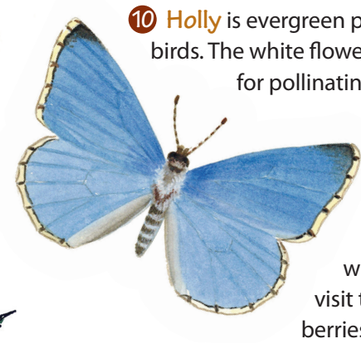
< Treecreeper

Legend

- Main path
- 3 Nature trail and points of interest
- Historic line (edge of Bishop of London's estate)
- Woodland glades – area of coppice management
- Informal unsurfaced path
- Area excluded from local nature reserve

Nuthatch >

9 Old woodpecker holes are used by birds like Blue Tits and *Nuthatches*. Notice holes in the oaks to the left. As holes rot and enlarge, larger birds like starlings and owls move in. In Big Wood one hole was used by a swarm of bees. You may be lucky enough to see a Nuthatch collecting mud from a ditch to plaster onto the rim of a hole to make the size suitable for his use. A tap tap sound may be one excavating under the bark for invertebrates or hammering at a nut he has wedged in a crevice in the oak bark.



Holly Blue>

10 **Holly** is evergreen providing winter shelter for birds. The white flowers are a rich nectar source for pollinating bees. Only female trees produce berries, a good food source for birds. Thrushes will guard a berry covered tree all day. Flocks of Redwing, winter migrants, sometimes visit the woods to feed on berries. The *Holly Blue butterfly* lays the first crop of eggs in spring at the flower bud base. When these caterpillars hatch, they eat the flower.

8 There over 80 *Wild Cherry* trees in the wood. Many have grown as high as the oaks. The trees produce masses of white blossom in April and May and attract insects. Later a crop of cherries provides food for birds and small mammals.

Yellow Archangel >

Look out for *Yellow Archangel*, another woodland plant loved by bees and *Witches' Broom* or *Cradle* in old hazel trees. The broom is thought to be a fungal distortion of branch growth.

Witches' Broom >