

Landscape and Nature for All



Ancient Woodland Restoration in the Kent Downs AONB

The Kent Downs AONB has a significant area of Ancient woodland amounting to some 3,700 hectares

What is ancient woodland?

Ancient woodland is defined as land that has been continually wooded since at least 1600AD. Ancient woods are the jewel in our woodland crown. They are our richest sites for wildlife and are full of cultural heritage. Their unique value stems from the long period of time over which they have been wooded, resulting in a complex ecosystem which is scarce and irreplaceable.

There are two broad types of ancient woodland - Ancient Semi-Natural woodland (ASNW) and Planted Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS). PAWS are often in need of urgent attention and the government is committed to encouraging their conservation and restoration.

What is the concern with PAWS?

PAWS can be planted with various tree species but non-native conifer plantations can have a particularly negative impact on the ecology of ancient woods - firstly through the process of establishing them and subsequently from the effects of the dense shade they cast. Evergreen conifers suppress the growth of other plants, preventing flowering and seed setting whilst the leaf litter is acidic and can change the soil chemistry. Further, the species of conifer and the success with which it has been established vary considerably, with lighter canopied pines and larches being generally less damaging than spruces and firs. The conservation potential of these plantations often remains hidden. However the window of opportunity for repairing them is limited - most of the conifers on these sites are ready to be harvested now.

These woods although damaged are not written off.



A typically dark PAWS

What survives?

Nearly all PAWS have elements of the previous native woodland ecosystem surviving. Remnant ancient-woodland features like old native broadleaved trees, woodland specialist flora like bluebells and dog's mercury and important habitat like deadwood are the most obvious. The unseen but very complex systems operating in the soil of these woods are also a vital element of the habitat.

Ancient woodland features to look for



Pre plantation trees



Woodland plants



Dead wood

How to manage and restore your PAWS

The watch word is "Gently does it" Research has shown that restoration needs, in nearly all cases to be gradual, particularly when starting the process. Work with the remnants that survive by the gradual removal of conifers to increase the light levels rather than rapidly removing them in one go. This allows the ancient woodland features such as trees and specialist plants, which have been stressed and suppressed by the effects of the conifers to be strengthened and made more robust. Suddenly exposing weakened features to high light levels can be very damaging.

In some situations because of the constraints of a site removing conifers in one go (clear felling) at an early stage in the process of making features more robust, may be unavoidable. Here doing what one can to make features as strong as possible before felling is important. So a pre clear felling thinning will almost certainly help.

If you are going to clear fell, make sure you either have or are planning for a successor canopy, leaving sites open to become dominated by bracken or bramble is storing up problems for the future.

Dark to light



Dark



Getting lighter



Nearly there

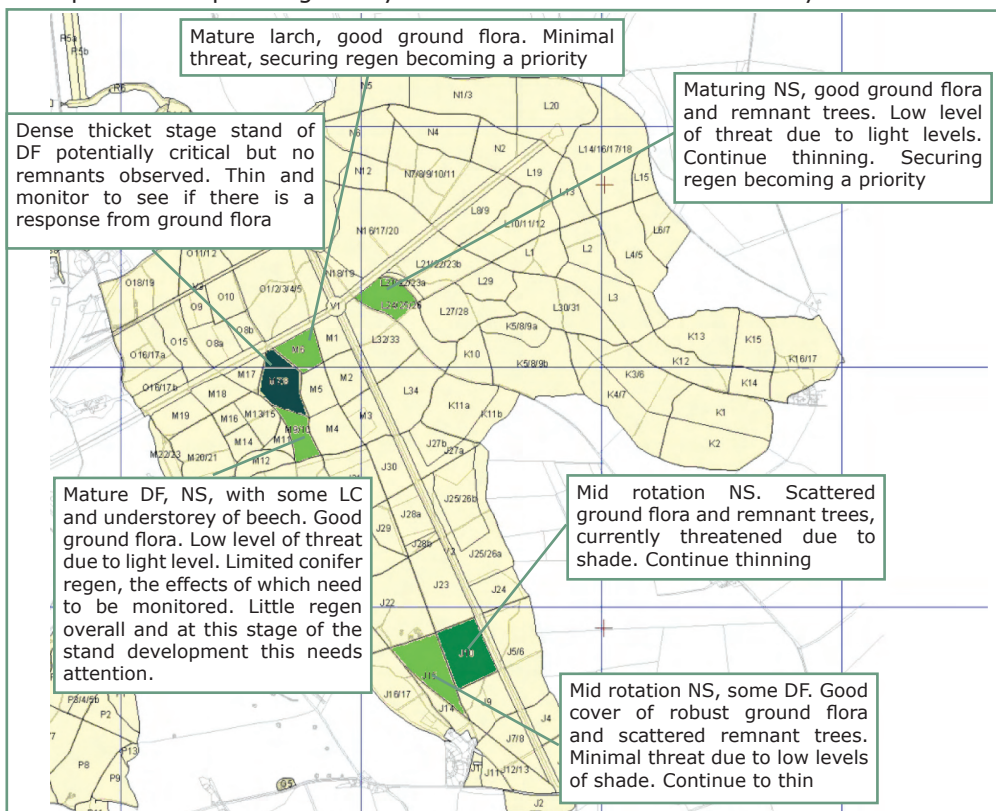
The process

The first step in restoring PAWS is identifying what remnants remain and prioritising action in terms of urgency. The darkest stands of trees with struggling remnants are the places to start. All PAWS are different and although the process is the same owners and managers should tailor any work to match their sites and carefully observe how the elements of the habitat change with increased light levels and adjust what they are doing accordingly. Bramble and bracken can be particularly problematic for recovering woodland plants if they dominate.

Remember to concentrate on the conservation of ancient woodland features rather than the conversion to native woodland. The approach is not anti conifer it is about managing woodland conditions, particularly light levels rather than being purist about canopy species. Making sure stands are thinned regularly is critical to this. It can be urgent to start work but there should be no rush to finish.

More detailed advice on how to assess your site and carry out the appropriate work is referenced at the end of this leaflet.

A simple annotated plan is a good way to set out what survives and what action you need to take.



Full restoration is not for me so what can I do?

Not all private landowners are willing or able to completely restore their PAWS in these situations maintaining and enhancing remaining ancient woodland features within a PAWS is a really valuable contribution they can make in looking after these important ancient woodland sites. With care it is possible to continue to grow conifers and look after ancient woodland features by adopting selective continuous cover forestry (CCF) techniques.

Further information on PAWS:

The Forestry Commission , the following web pages contain their latest information: [Restoration of lowland plantations on ancient woodland sites \(PAWS\)](#)

The Woodland Trust web page on Restoring woods <http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/en/why-woods-matter/restoring/Pages/restoring.aspx>

Further Reading:

- Forestry Commission England (2010) Managing Ancient and Native Woodland in England. Forestry Commission Practice Guide 201. Forestry Commission, Bristol.
- Woodland Trust (2005) The Conservation and Restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites. Woodland Trust, Grantham.
- The Woodland Trust 2009 Ancient Woods: A guide for woodland owners and managers. www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/publications

