

# Landscape and Nature for All



## Coppicing in the Kent Downs AONB

### Coppicing

Put simply, coppicing is the cutting down of a tree or shrub where the stump is left to grow again, to form new growth that can be cut down and the stump left to grow again etc.

Most (but not all) broadleaved trees will coppice and produce a periodic supply of materials.

### History

It is undoubtedly an ancient woodland management technique, probably dating back thousands of years and most ancient woodlands in Kent show signs of a history of coppice management. Woodland was of immense importance to the Romans and they managed the woods by coppicing. It is likely they found it better to haul a short distance to the user. A frequent cycle of coppice suited this better than clear felling and the longer period before the next timber harvest. It is thought they also introduced sweet chestnut. In Kent, Canterbury Cathedral's early records indicate that by 1200 there were large areas of chestnut coppice in the county. Although there were increasing needs for food, wood was essential for forges, building, fuel and many other daily needs. This meant they were valued and so were protected from grazing animals, at least until the coppice growth was out of danger from browsing. Over the centuries, the products the coppice wood was needed for have changed but the demand has remained present throughout and so most woods were actively managed as coppice. This has changed only recently in Kent, with the loss of markets for hop poles and pulp, and has resulted in a decline in the area of woodland being coppiced.

### Description

Coppice is a fairly simple, robust system of management. Trees are cut down just above ground level, the stumps grow new shoots, and in 3 to 30 years (depending on species and the product being made) a new crop of poles is ready to cut again.

The simplest system is pure coppice where an area of woodland contains only trees of coppice origin. This is very productive and allows a lot of light in for the new shoots to grow rapidly, perhaps 2 metres in a year.

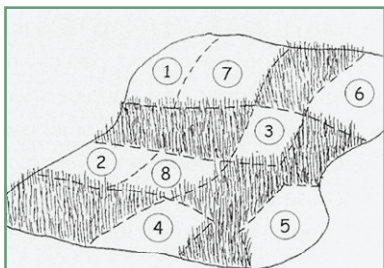


Pure coppice

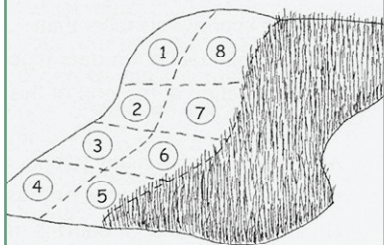
The most common system is coppice with standards. The coppiced trees form a layer under larger single stemmed trees, or standards, usually of oak or ash. Getting a good balance between timber producing standards and coppice underwood is important. Too many standards will reduce the number of coppice stools and the shade will substantially reduce the speed of coppice regrowth. A canopy of standards covering a fifth of the area is common. There should also be new young trees being recruited as new standards to replace older trees when they are felled or die.



Coppice with standards



Eight years of coppice cutting spread through the wood: species like dormice can still move between suitable sites without descending from the trees



Eight years of coppice cutting in neighbouring areas: better for species like fritillary butterflies with poor colonising ability

### The coppice cycle and coupe size

Managing an area of coppice can be simply a matter of choosing the number of years between each time it is cut (cycle); the size of the coupe (or cant or panel) and knowing the total area of coppice. A typical cycle for sweet chestnut might be 15 years.

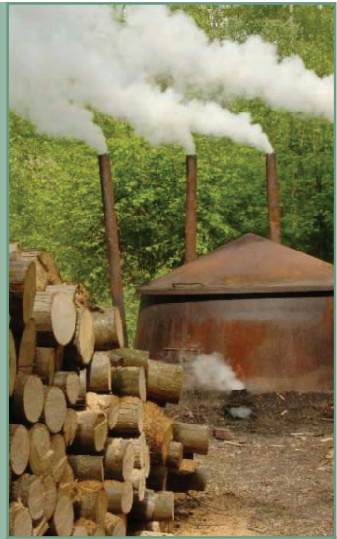
If there are 10 hectares of sweet chestnut coppice, then 0.66ha of coppice a year would be a sustainable coppice programme. If there is only a small area of coppice, only cut every few years. If there is a large area of coppice that hasn't been cut for a long time (overstood), cut more quickly than the desired rotation suggests. If this isn't done, the final coupes will be too old to be sure of reliable regrowth of the stools.

The size of coupe is important. Too small and not enough light gets to the stools to allow vigorous growth, and can result in a nice safe salad bowl for deer to browse. Too big and the landscape can be compromised and tracks excessively damaged during timber extraction. A coupe of between 0.25 and 1 ha is usually about right. In a larger wood this could mean cutting several coupes each year in order to achieve a sustainable rotation.

### Restoring coppice

Areas of coppice that haven't been cut for a while are often described as overstood. There isn't a precise point at which this occurs. It depends on species and rotation length for the products that will be derived from the coppice. Hazel is often cut after 5 to 8 years and the size at which it is useful is quite specific, so 15 year old hazel would be overstood. On the other hand, hornbeam is slow growing and reaches a useable size after 25 years or more and the normal products, firewood

and charcoal, can be cut from a range of tree sizes so at 50 years it may still not be regarded as overstood. The reliability of regrowth from the stumps tends to decrease the longer it is since the last time it was cut. The age at which regrowth will start to become unreliable varies with species and other site factors such as browsing pressure, aspect, age of coppice stools. Oak coppice can be reluctant to regrow if the last cut was 40 years ago, sweet chestnut will usually coppice vigorously after 60 years since the last cut. It can be as well to cut a test area on the edge of the wood or a ride to see how the coppice will respond before cutting a large area of overstood coppice. If coppice hasn't been cut for a considerable time, 60 years or more, there should also be serious consideration given to whether restoring a coppice cycle is the best approach. Alternative systems, such as thinning to form high forest, might be a better option.



Charcoal making

## Wildlife

There is a long history of coppice in many of our woodland. Much of the wildlife associated with woodlands in Kent is suited to the cycles of coppice management. Declines in the areas being coppiced have resulted in declines in the species found in ancient woodland. Woods can be compared with us; Interesting when we are young, and when we are old, but in the middle we are perhaps a bit dull. For woodland, getting to the old period takes many years, and so it is usually felt that the greatest wildlife benefit is derived from maintaining or restoring the coppice cycle and the associated range of habitats that ensue. Of course leaving some areas in a wood to become old and interesting would be a good approach.

## Products

Kent is so rich in ancient woodland as the products from the woods were important and in demand and so woods were kept and managed. Many of the products are still needed, but not to the same extent. There are also new markets available and increasing demand for fuel wood from coppice.

Traditional markets still available include hurdles and thatching spars, wired spile fencing and post and rail fencing, hop poles, charcoal, firewood, and walking sticks.

There are many others, and they are usually quite local markets. New markets include woodchip and pellets for fuel, finger jointed chestnut.

Finding markets is often a case of seeking out local suppliers, trawling the internet and talking to other woodland owners that have been coppicing their woods recently.



Coppice products

# Further information on Coppicing

