

Savernake Forest

Savernake Forest covers 905 hectares and most is a Site of Special Scientific interest (SSSI) largely on the grounds of exceptional biological diversity. It has a unique history having been in the same family since soon after the Norman Conquest. Richard Esturmy was the first warden and he is the ancestor of the Earl of Cardigan the current owner and 31st hereditary Warden of the Forest

In medieval times Savernake was a Royal Forest, an area of land usually belonging to the King set apart for hunting wild beasts and game and having special laws of its own. It comprised small woodlands and coppices with areas of rough grass, heath, fern and scrub. The Forest fluctuated in size reaching its maximum in the twelfth century. In 1427 it passed through the female line to the Seymours. In 1547 Edward Seymour became Duke of Somerset, Protector of the Realm and the owner of the forest. In the early 18th century the Forest was in a bad and unprofitable state, deer were destroying the coppices and the old oaks were becoming more picturesque and worthless. Improvements started in 1745 when Charles Bruce the Earl of Ailsbury planted a clump of trees near to where the column now stands and beech along the Grand Avenue. The next warden Thomas Brudnell Bruce laid the foundation of the forest we know today with tree-lined rides meeting at Eight walks.

Coppice girth 14m



Systematic forestry with trees being cut and new trees planted in rotation was not practised for several hundred years and by the mid-nineteenth century an agent reported “most of the oaks are nearly a hundred years old with the old oaks being four hundred years old and useless for timber.

Savernake is well known for its ancient trees. the Big Belly Oak on the Burbage road is thought to be around 1000 years old. Its coppice girth is 14 m in circumference.. It now has a strong girder to stop it falling into the road. There are around another dozen trees thought to be around 700 years old.

There are two Roman Roads that cross the Forest. They were used until Elizabethan times but became less used once people began to travel by coach rather than on horseback.

The forest lies on a plateau of Upper Chalk covered by clay-with-flints and dissected by dry valleys. Eighteenth and early nineteenth century plantations of beech and oak have now assumed a semi-natural structure but the forest now consists mainly of twentieth century beech or oak plantations supplemented with silver birch, ash, downy birch, rowan and willows.

