

- Tree planting on Ashdown Forest

The term 'Forest' causes a great deal of confusion; it was originally a Norman French term meaning an area where it was illegal to hunt the King's deer and had nothing at all to do with the presence or absence of trees. In fact, if you were the King and you were hunting deer on horseback, trees were probably the last thing you wanted. All the famous Forests of Britain – Sherwood, Ashdown, the New Forest – would have been more open space than woodland and would have been like that for probably 900 years.

Ashdown, like many of the other Forests, would have been maintained as open heathland by the activities of Commoners; residents of the surrounding villages who had ancient rights to take things from the Common – bracken, gorse, turf, firewood – and to manage it by grazing and burning. Commoners still exist, but few of them now exercise their rights, so it is down to us as the Conservators of Ashdown Forest to carry out the activities that historically maintained the open heath.

The justification for this management – preventing the Forest from reverting to woodland – is that lowland heathland is rarer than tropical rainforest on a global scale, whereas woodland – at least in the south-east of England – is relatively widespread. Whilst it might be true that some areas are short of trees – the uplands of northern Britain, for instance – the Weald of Sussex and Kent is the most densely wooded part of the British Isles. So, we have not only a moral but a legal obligation to prevent the loss of heathland; it is protected under EU law as one of a list of the rarest habitats in Europe. It is also home to a group of plant and animal species that rely totally on heathland as their home. This includes internationally protected species such as the Nightjar and Dartford warbler.