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THE MANAGEMENT OF DERING WOOD, SMARDEN, SINCE THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD: ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

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In the Autumn of 1999 the Woodland Trust commissioned an archaeological assessment of Dering Wood which had been purchased in 1997 by public subscription and with Heritage Lottery funds. It is a popular place for quiet recreation and dog walking. Part of a horse toll ride route runs around its edge. An understanding of the history and archaeology of the site was required for a twenty-year conservation management plan being produced by the Trust.

Dering Wood has probably had continuous woodland cover since at least the early-medieval period and preserved within it are archaeological features pertaining to that long period of woodland management. Archaeological studies of Wealden Woods have been few and this assessment provided an opportunity to look at a large area in some detail.

Totalling over 124ha (307 acres), Dering Wood forms part of a much larger complex of woodland which straddles the parish boundaries of Smarden, Pluckley and Egerton. The adjacent pattern of fields strongly indicates that these were assarted (cleared for cultivation) from a once much larger wooded area. The land where Dering Wood is situated is low-lying and bisected by several small streams. The soils, developed on Weald Clay, vary from slightly more acidic in the drier southern part of the wood to more calcareous in the northern part.¹ Dering Wood is bounded to the north by the Pluckley-Smarden Bell road (an old drove way) and to the south by the Charing Cross-Ashford railway line.

The botanical structure of the woods is dominated by hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*) which has grown into mature coppice with standards of Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*) and inter-planted with plantations of Sweet Chestnut coppice (*Castanea sativa*) on the drier

ground. In the nineteenth century Turkey Oak (*Quercus cerris*) was planted amongst the coppice. There is a varied shrub layer with a number of mature Wild Service trees (*Sorbus torminalis*). Along the main NW-SE access track, formerly the old carriageway laid out by Sir Edward Dering, there is also evidence of nineteenth-century amenity planting. Dering Wood is a Kent Wildlife Trust 'Site of Nature Conservation Interest' and is on English Nature's 'Ancient Woodland Inventory'. It contains over 30 ancient woodland indicator species including yellow archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon*), broad helleborines (*Epipactis helleborine*) and wood millet (*Milium effusum*) plus over 50 species of bryophytes.² At the southern end of the wood, former assarted arable fields were planted in the late nineteenth century with chestnut and oak.

The method adopted for the study comprised a desk-based assessment of archive material relating to the site concentrating on manuscript maps and documents detailing the history of ownership and management of Dering Wood and the immediate area. Sketch-plotting is the most cost-effective method of initially recording archaeological features in woodland. The assessment highlights those areas where more detailed surveying is needed. The archaeological features within Dering Wood were recorded in a three-week period over New Year 2000 and the results are shown on **Fig. 1**.

Dering Wood is exceptional in its density and quality of linear earthworks and drainage systems. This richness reflects both the wet nature of the land and the complex history of its ownership. Differences in form of the ditches and banks suggest that there have been several phases of management activity dating from the late medieval period to the twentieth century.

The History of Dering Wood

The origins of Dering Wood probably go back to the Jutish herdsmen of c. AD 500. The present wood lay within the area of Wealden common belonging to the Lathe of Wye (Wi-wera-lit – lathe of the men of Wye). The area which is now occupied in part by Dering Wood is defined in an Anglo-Saxon charter by the locations of dens belonging to the manor of Little Chart. In AD 843 Aethelwulf, King of Wessex and Kent, granted to Aethelmod, his minister, land at Chart in Kent with woodland called *snad* and *bean eccer* and its swine pastures.³ The location of these dens has been discussed elsewhere.⁴ They apparently formed a ring around what is now Dering Wood, suggesting that most of the wood was probably still unclaimed common grazing. The woodland in the charter is probably Beanacre

Wood at Hurst Hill and an area called 'The Forest', north of Snoadhill. The naming of wood in the charter is of particular interest. It strongly suggests that these woods were already well known land marks, and that they were defined and enclosed from the surrounding land. 'Snad' means a 'piece cut off' and its origin predates the creation of the dens. It implies an area separated from the Wealden common.⁵ These enclosed areas are thought to have been wood pasture separated from the common pasture for the particular use of the king. The action of enclosing an area of woodland means that its resources are being actively managed and conserved with the necessity for protecting young coppice shoots from grazing animals. The name 'Beanacre' meaning 'land where beans are grown', suggests that this area was settled and in part cultivated. It corresponds with the area identified by Witney as broken forest on the fringes of the Weald.⁶

The charter of AD 843 is reflecting the breakup of the Wealden common of the Lathe of Wye into individual dens or swine pastures and the granting away of land from the king to favoured ministers.⁷ The dens of the manor of Little Chart included Aetingden, Mereden, Uddenhom and Hilgaringdenn and have been identified in the locality of Smarden.⁸ Aetingden is identified as Iddenden lying within Pluckley and Smarden at the north end of Dering Wood. Its name is derived from a Jutish 'folk' name, i.e. the den belonging to the people of Aeting.⁹ The name has survived in several post-medieval documents. The manor rolls for Little Chart of 1698 refer to the Free School of Romney having land in Iddenden at a rent of 2d. School Wood lies to the north-west of Dering Wood (TQ 8850 4440). Sale particulars for Perrin Farm (now Oaklands TQ 8890 4420) refer to a field opposite School Wood as belonging to Romney School. Ward refers to other tenancies in Iddenden (in Pluckley) but does not give their references. However, Iddenden Corner is identified in a deed of 1573-4 which refers to a piece of woodland of 10 acres lying close to it (TQ 8988 4470).¹⁰ This is where the Smarden-Pluckley parish boundary changes direction and the wood is identified as Horman's Wood, which now lies within Dering Wood.¹¹

Meredenn is identified as Little Biddenden Green (TQ 890 430) which once formed part of a much larger den of the manor of Chilham. According to a 1680 rental of this manor the den had a holding of 100 acres in Burnt Wood (now part of Dering).¹² Mereden, originally of Little Chart must have been sold or exchanged with Chilham between AD 843 and 1680.

Holdgaringden is Hilgarden near Maltman's Hill (TQ 905 430). Ward identifies this den as adjoining Iddenden on the north in the

vicinity of Dering Wood and extending south along the Smarden-Pluckley border into Bethersden. The Little Chart manor rolls refer to lands east of a common called the 'Heath', close to Maltman's Hill (TQ 904 430). Today, on the slightly more acidic soils at the southern end of Dering Wood, patches of heather still grow and bracken dominates the ground flora. The Smarden Tithe Map refers to Hill Garden close to the parish boundary.¹³

Thus from the location of the Little Chart dens, Dering Wood lies on the boundaries not only of several Jutish swine pastures, but also straddles the later medieval parish boundaries of Pluckley, Smarden and Pivington (now incorporated into Pluckley and Little Chart). The area has apparently always been regarded as marginal land: only suited to common grazing and/or timber production. This is probably due to its low-lying and wet nature, combined with pockets of acid soils. However at some point in the medieval period the manor of Little Chart laid claim to the area and the woods were divided up and enclosed, probably as part of the sub-infeudation of the manor into individual farms.¹⁴ At the time of Domesday the manor of Little Chart formed part of the hands belonging to the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury. The manor had been granted to them by Archbishop Ceolnoth who had purchased it from a Saxon prince called Halethe.¹⁵ The monks in 1223-4 granted the manor and lands to Peter de Bending, who apparently ran up large debts with Jewish moneylenders. On reclaiming their manor the monks then passed it to Thomas de Brockhull of Saltwood, who was also enfeoffed of the nearby manor of Calehill from the de Frene family in 1349-50. Eventually the two manors descended in ownership to the Darells of Calehill, a prominent Kentish family.¹⁶

Gradual assarting of the wood, creating the small farms of Giles, Berry Court (the Farm in the Wood) and Maltman's, etc., has produced the irregular outline of the woodland seen today. The pattern of the possible medieval enclosure within Dering Wood can be seen on the Tithe Maps for Smarden and Pluckley which show the area of woodland subdivided into several ownership compartments of varying sizes (Fig. 2). The largest of these is Fagotter's Wood, followed closely by Burnt Wood to the south, and Birch Wood on the more acidic soils.

The earliest reference found for part of Dering Wood itself is a grant made in 1540 for a wood called 'ffagotter's' plus three pieces of land adjacent to the wood, totalling 60 acres.¹⁷ The deed also describes the bounds of 'Bourned' (Burnt) Wood to the west, the lands and wood of William Kirby to east and south and the king's highway to the north. The land was in the occupation of John Baker,

THE MANAGEMENT OF DERING WOOD, SMARDEN, SINCE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Source : Smarden Tithe Map (CKS IR 30/17/332)
Pluckley Tithe Map (CKS IR 30/17/293)

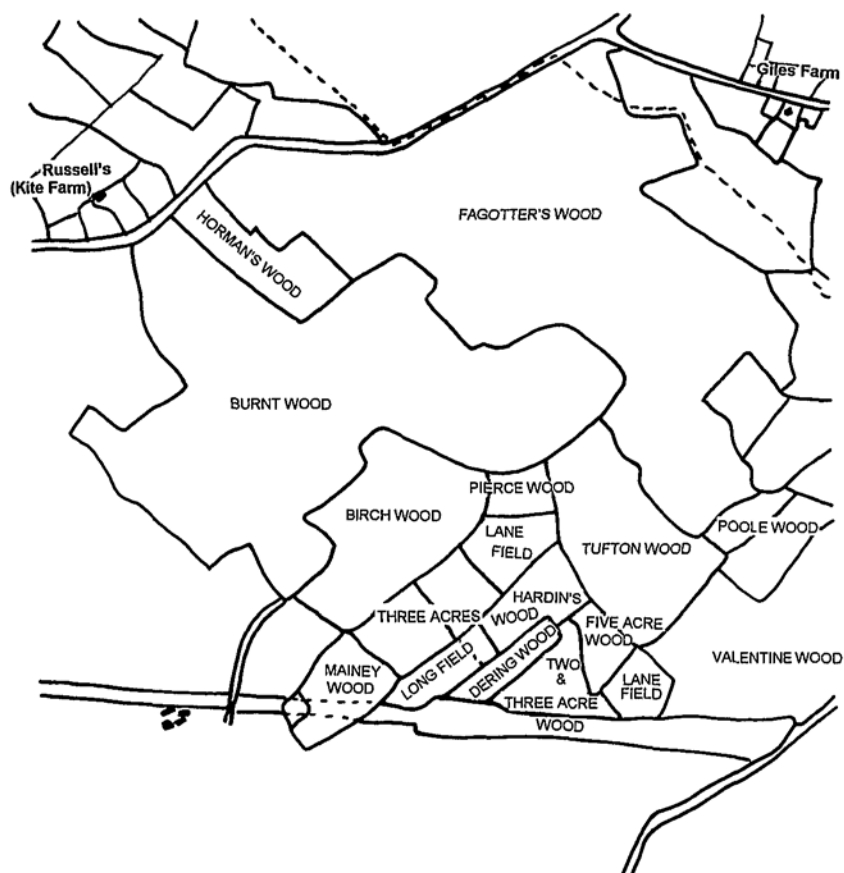


Fig. 2 Dering Wood in 1838. (Source: Tithe Maps – see note 11).
Parish boundary with Pluckley shown by pecked line.

a widower. However, it appears that the three pieces of land (totalling 9 acres) was subsequently re-let by Richard Dering (son of John) to one Henry Bateman of Lynstead.¹⁸ From the bounds given in the grant, this is probably the farm of Giles once known as Giles Green. In the eighteenth century Fagotter's Wood extended right up to the road by Giles Farm.¹⁹ In 1609 George Darell regranted to Richard

Dering the remaining 50 acres of woodland and pasture called 'ffagettere' in Pluckley, Smarden and Pivington.²⁰ In 1634 Edward Dering (son of Richard) had drawn up a particular of his property in Smarden which had once been partly in Pivington. Here Fagotters is referred to as 'Fagotherst'.²¹ In 1729 Sir Edward Dering gives in a volume of accounts for his woods '*Faggotters 58 acres, 1 rood and 13 and half perches*'. This is just over half the size of the wood called 'Faggotters' on the Tithe Map.²²

Burnt Wood, first mentioned in 1540 as bounding Fagotters Wood belonged in the eighteenth century to the Witherden Family of Wisenden, Bethersden. The 108 acres were purchased by Sir Edward Dering from a descendent, F. W. Curteis in 1865.²³ Birch Wood, to the south of Burnt Wood, was purchased by the Derings in 1729 from a Mr Cousins.²⁴ The remaining smaller areas of wood shown on the Tithe maps remained in various ownerships until after c. 1850 when Sir Edward Dering gradually bought them all up prior to laying out his network of drives and avenues. Sir Edward also owned Frith Wood which lies on the north side of the Pluckley-Smarden Bell road. Interestingly, in the late eighteenth century the whole of the area of Dering Wood was called Burnt Wood.²⁵

The Archaeological Features within Dering Wood

The linear features within Dering Wood can be grouped according to their morphological structure. There are the wood banks – boundaries demarcating the ownership of the different woods and which probably date back to the medieval period. The low-lying position of Dering Wood combined with the heavy intractable Wealden Clay soils means that there is an extensive network of drainage ditches. There are drainage ditches within associated banks, drainage 'grips' without obvious banks and low rounded banks without any apparent ditches. These are described below and shown on Fig. 1.

Wood banks: tend to be sinuous in outline, winding their way through the woods or forming parts of the outer boundaries of Dering Wood. The bank profile is asymmetrical with a long back-slope and steeper dip slope into a ditch, which is usually on the non-woodland side of the boundary (Fig. 3). Where the boundary runs through woodland the ditch tends to be on the outer edge of the ownership boundary. The banks can be over 3.5m wide and over 0.75m high in places, with a ditch 1.0m wide and 0.5m deep. The latter has probably silted up considerably since it was dug out. The shape of the bank suggests that regular cleaning of the ditch has taken place with the soil thrown up

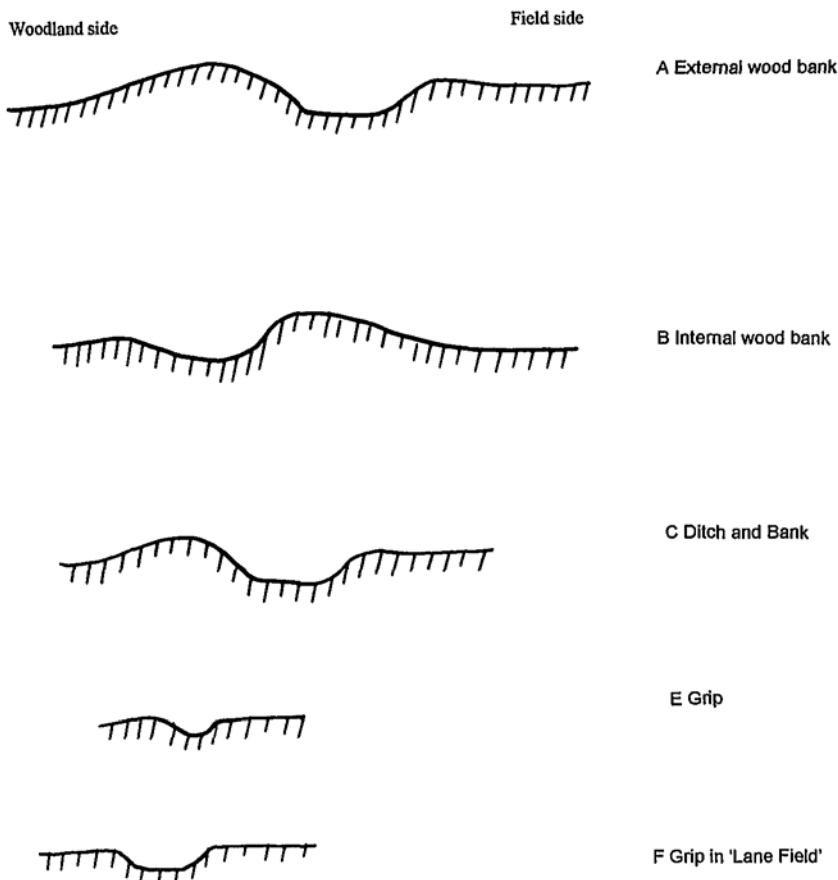


Fig. 3 Sketch sections through linear earthworks (scale 1:100).

on to the bank. A characteristic feature of the old wood banks are stubbed hornbeam trees and, less commonly, oaks and ash stubs. These are individual trees which have been regularly cut back to about 1.0m above ground level in order to mark the boundary. The trees are at least 200-300 years old, with particularly fine specimens marking the boundary between Fagotters and Tufton Woods, and Burnt Wood with Pierce Wood. Two parallel wood banks occur on the northern boundary of Fagotters by the Smarden Bell road. The first bank and ditch lies about 30m in from the wood edge, whilst the second lies close to it. This is repeated in part on the opposite side of



Boundary wood bank at TQ 899 900, looking north-east

the road in Frith Wood. The internal boundary is the older one, and indicates the former edge of the wood when the road was unmetalled. Hasted frequently refers to the appalling state of the Wealden roads: quagmires in winter and rock hard with deep ruts in summer.²⁶ A clue to the width of the road and its braided character can be seen on Hasted's map of the Hundred of Calehill which shows three 'islands' in the road way.²⁷ Once the road was metalled, and its width fixed, which from the map evidence appears to have been undertaken at the turn of the nineteenth century, woodland owners redrew their boundaries by digging new banks and ditches along the edge of the road.

Drainage Ditches with associated Banks: Running through many of the larger woods are sinuous banks and ditches which on the plan (Fig. 1) form part of the extensive drainage system throughout Dering

Wood. Here rounded banks of 30cm height and 1.5m width are the remains of spoil dug from the ditches. Along some ditches banks of spoil occur on both sides of the ditch. The earliest phase of drainage in the wood was probably a modification of the natural drainage in certain areas where small streams were channelled. This phase may coincide with the period of woodland enclosure and management before the Conquest. Burnt Wood derives its name from the OE *bourne*, meaning stream, indicating the presence of such features in the wood. It is likely that many of these are medieval drainage ditches which have been incorporated into later systems by woodland owners and then completely overhauled by Sir Edward Dering when laying out his network of rides and ditches.

Drainage Grips: Medieval woodland owners needed to dig and clear ditches regularly – as, for example, the records of Norwich Cathedral Priory describe. One entry mentions the digging of a ‘grope’ or grip.²⁸ The term ‘grip’ here is used for shallow drainage ditches, either straight or sinuous, which form a network, or in some cases a herring-bone pattern.²⁹ Straight grips suggest that they were dug after a period of clear fell to aid the establishment of new planting; while the sinuous ones were dug around existing trees. Evidently the main era for laying out new drainage systems ahead of replanting in woodland dated from 1845 when experience was gained from large scale afforestation in Scotland.³⁰ This period happens to coincide with the beginning of Dering ownership of the whole wood and the gradual rationalisation of the drainage system. In Dering Wood many grips terminate deep within the woods whilst others only extend for short stretches. The grips are generally 0.5m wide and less than 0.25m deep (a spade’s width and depth). Some of the more recent grips are very sinuous winding there way around individual trees. A ditching spade was found discarded in one of the ditches in Birch Wood, still with its wooden handle. A drainage network of particular interest is that in the former nineteenth-century field called ‘Lane Field’. Prior to the planting of this former arable field, it was laid out with a network of straight drainage ditches which fed into the ditch of the wood bank dividing it from Tufton Wood. This system must have been dug at the same time as Sir Edward Dering laid out his network of rides, as one runs parallel to the ditches on the southern side.

Banks without apparent ditches: A group of linear features which do not appear on the map evidence are the low rounded banks without any apparent ditches. These are often less than 0.25m high and over 2.0m wide and are cut across by the ditch network. Only short



Laid hornbeam studs at TQ 904 907

stretches survive, and more may be located in the areas of dense undergrowth. At present it is only possible to postulate their age and origin, but the relationship of the banks with the drainage ditches suggest that they predate them. In some instances the wood banks appear to be aligned to them. Rackham has identified similar such features in woods in south-east Essex.³¹ Further survey and field investigation is required in order ascertain their age and original function.

The nineteenth-century rides: Overlying the network of boundaries and drains is the straight, regular system of rides laid out by Sir Edward Dering some time after 1865, and before 1871.³² Not all the rides were completed by 1871. The area of the former assarts was still unwooded at this time. Lane Field, etc., was probably planted up before 1898 as shown by the OS map evidence. The main ride is the old carriage avenue which runs SE-NW, the length of Dering Woods. Where the avenue terminates, at either end Sir Edward Dering had two lodges built. The one at the south end (on the Smarden road),

built before 1871, is still standing and has the characteristic arched 'Dering' window frames (TQ 9079 5351). The 'North' Lodge was located at Iddenden Corner on the Smarden Bell road. It was built after 1871 and before 1898. All that remains today is brickwork in the dense undergrowth.

The avenue itself is wide (30m) and the central cambered trackway is bounded on either side by deep drainage ditches. It appears to have been metalled in places. Ten metres on either side of the avenue are two further parallel drainage ditches. The area in between was planted with more exotic trees including Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*), Sweet Chestnut (*Castanea sativa*), Turkey Oak (*Quercus cerris*), Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*) with the understorey planted with rhododendron (*Rhododendron panticum*). (The latter has vigorously invaded the surrounding woodland, to the detriment of the native ground flora. The Woodland Trust has embarked on a programme of control.) The avenue forms the central point from which the other rides radiate. They are much narrower in width (10m) and are bounded by smaller ditches and grips. Where they cross main ditches, brick-lined culverts were constructed, many of which have either silted up or collapsed.

Other features: For such a low-lying wet woodland where holes rapidly fill with water, the identification of two possible saw pits was a surprise. Saw pits were dug in order to cut tree trunks into manageable planks before hauling them out of the wood. These pits may have been dug for use in the summer months. One pit was located in Hardin's Wood (TQ 9020 4373), whilst the other lay in Burnt Wood (TQ 8973 4420). Both were sited close to former access tracks and on slightly higher, and therefore, drier land. The pits were elliptical in shape, approximately 4 x 2m and 45cm deep (though originally it would have been much more than this). They had not been back-filled as the mounds of spoil were still visible on one side. Excavation of a saw pit in Gloucestershire revealed sawn oak planks in the bottom of the pit on which the under sawyer (or under-dog) stood. Covering this was a thick layer of organic material identified as saw dust and on top of which were squirrel- and mouse-chewed hazel shells suggesting that the pit had remained open and left to silt up naturally.³³ It is not known when the pits at Dering were dug or for how long they were in use. Artefacts from the excavated saw pit in Gloucestershire dated it to the mid-to-late eighteenth century.³⁴

Associated with the drainage network in Burnt Wood was a 'sump' pond (TQ 8950 4420).³⁵ It is a four-armed depression through which one of the main drainage ditches runs. These ponds provided a

reservoir for water to collect during heavy rain in order to reduce pressure on the brick culverts and to keep the rides dry. Such ponds and depressions tend to occur towards the outer edge of the wood, where the volume of water would be at its greatest at the point of exit into the local streams. Some may also be former mineral diggings. The pond in Burnt Wood may also have provided water for horses used in hauling timber and wood products.

Another large pond lies at the north-east corner of 'Lane Field', abutting the adjacent wood banks and collecting the water from their ditches before discharging it unto the main ditch bounding Fagotter's and Tufton Woods (TQ 9019 4392). Its origin is obscure but it may have been dug for marl, a calcareous clay, which was frequently spread on fields in this part of the Weald in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Further areas of diggings occur close to the Avenue (at TQ 8985 4440) and on the north-east edge of Fagotter's (at TQ 9063 4434).

Dering Wood has preserved within it a high density of linear and other features associated with its past ownership and management. It is hoped that further such studies of Wealden woods will take place leading to a greater understanding of their past management and role within the wider landscape.

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