

# Coppicing around the Fal estuary

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*The author was born in the house he still lives in on the banks of the Fal at Coombe. His maternal family the Gunns was involved in the traditional occupations of Coombe including oyster fishing, the Kea plum orchards and coppicing the oak woods, and he witnessed the slow decline of these industries. The author was inspired by Oliver Rackham's study of the coppice woodlands of the Helford River to look at the rich historical and ecological tradition of coppicing around the Fal estuary and its links with local industries such as tin smelting, tanning and fishing. The cyclical harvesting of oak for charcoal, bark, and timber shaped the landscape for centuries. Despite the decline of these practices in the late twentieth century, the ancient woodlands and their cultural heritage remain an essential part of Cornwall's natural and historical identity.*

The north coast of Cornwall and the central spine tend to be largely devoid of trees but the south coast river valleys, notably the Fal, the Fowey and the Helford, as well as the deep south-eastern valleys of the Rivers Tamar, Lynher and Seaton and the Looe Rivers are well wooded. The hanging oak woods of these valleys are one of the delights of Cornwall. Oliver Rackham wrote the following appreciation in 1987 of the Helford, but it could be equally applied to the Fal and most of the other estuarine woods of Cornwall.

The Helford River is a place of wonder and delight: one of the very few places in England where ancient woodland meets the sea. This is oak country, and the oaks have that astonishing variety of size and shape that only Cornwall and Devon can offer. Smooth wooded hillsides, subtly mottled with the different greens or browns of individual oak-trees, sweep down to high-water mark. The last trees hang down over the low cliffs, or, in the pills and little creeks, they grow out horizontally for forty feet over the water. To the few people who set foot in the woods are revealed hillsides of bluebells, jungles of holly, sudden headlong ravines, and bottomless swamps of golden saxifrage. Polypody fern grows far overhead in the crowns of giant corkscrew oaks ninety feet high. A few yards away, on the other side of a ridge, the oaks

are so dwarf that a tall man looks out over their tops. Ribbons of woodland, dark and complicated and often impenetrable, run from the side creeks up the valleys and far into the hills.

The apparently timeless qualities of this landscape are rightly celebrated by Daphne du Maurier in 'Frenchman's Creek'. In spring or winter, in places where the estuary is wooded on both sides, where seaweed catches in the boughs of living trees at high water, and where layers of great oaks lie on top of each other where they fell into the mud of the pills, one can imagine that just so did the Helford River look when Mesolithic men paddled upon it (Rackham 1987; 2019, 1–2).

There is some uncertainty about how wooded ancient Cornwall was. Rackham (2019, 32) commented, 'When I first drafted this book in 1986 it was assumed that... the proverbial squirrel could have leapt from tree-top to tree-top from Land's End at least as far as Inverness. I am not so sure now'. He concluded from Anglo-Saxon charters for Cornwall that 'it was then not a very wooded land', and from Domesday Book, where only 3.2 per cent of the county was recorded as wooded, that 'Cornwall was the least wooded English county outside the Fens' (*ibid*, 36–7).

The Ancient Woodland Inventory ([www.data.gov.uk](http://www.data.gov.uk) > dataset > ancient-woodlands-england) identifies 52,000 ancient woodland sites in England categorised into Ancient and Semi-Natural Woodland and Ancient Replanted Woodland. In Cornwall, one of the largest areas of Ancient and Semi-Natural Woodland is found on the Fal estuary. Much of the existing woodland is indeed ancient woodland, but woodland which has been managed and worked. These quiet, peaceful woods would once have reeked of charcoal burning. At any one-time, huge areas of ‘woodland’ would have been bare, the wood having recently been coppiced and perhaps 30 years might pass before it was again a wood as we would recognise it. Thus, today there may be more standing woodland in these valleys than there has been in the last several centuries.

Ancient woods in England are primarily coppices. When oak and other native trees are cut down, they typically sprout from the stump, forming a permanent base known as a stool that can be repeatedly cut to produce successive crops of poles. Over centuries, this process results in large stools, sometimes over 10 feet (3m) across. Traditionally, these woods were self-renewing and yielded timber and underwood. Each year, or every few years, sections were cut for underwood, coppice, or sucker poles, which served various purposes, mainly as fuel. In some areas, underwood was harvested at intervals of about 30 years. Woods also included timber or standard trees, particularly oaks, which were allowed to mature through several cycles before being felled for beams and planks. Coppicing dates back to the Neolithic period and was established in Cornwall by the time of early medieval records (Rackham 1987, 3).

## The Fal estuary woods

Most of the woods in the Fal estuary are private and best seen by boat but there is some public access. A public footpath runs through Cowlands Wood (SW 8315 4109), previously known as Lanner Wood, a typical oak coppice wood, and the Calenick to Porth Kea road skirts the boundary of Calenick Wood (SW 8249 4293), another coppice oak wood. As well as the coppice oak wood there are also areas of predominantly oak woodland which have not been coppiced for many centuries and consist of mature trees grown for timber. Kea

Wood (SW 8460 4243), which can be accessed on the public footpath which runs north from Old Kea, is a good example. From the River Fal can be seen another such wood, Polgerran Wood (SW 8481 4008), which runs north from *Smuggler's Cottage* (or Tolverne). The Fal estuary is also the site of two major houses, Tregothnan and Trelissick, and both these have estate woodland, some of which is ornamental and the home of non-native trees. The Trelissick estate's (National Trust) riverside walk passes through ornamental woodland but affords good views across the river to coppice oak woods on the far bank, and this was the last area locally to be coppiced. The grounds of Tregothnan contain much ornamental woodland and the main southern viewpoint of the house was a part of Humphrey Repton's Red Book scheme of 1809; this area of water is referred to by Tregothnan estate as the ‘Repton Pool’ (Pett 1998, 99)

The oak tree of the coppice oak woods is the sessile oak, *Quercus petraea*, and these woods often have an undergrowth of hazel on more fertile soils or holly on less fertile.

## Wood as fuel

Many fuels were available in Cornwall. Furze and broom were abundant, and furze was probably the main domestic fuel; the author has met people who remembered it being used to heat cloam ovens for baking. Furze grounds or ‘brakes’ were common; around Coombe there were ‘furze brakes’ above Weir Point (SW 8401 4034) and near Lower Lanner farm (SW 8349 4130). Peat (locally ‘turf’) was an important fuel but not widely available except in moorland areas (*cf* Herring 2008).

Medieval tin smelting used both wood and peat charcoal but, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, Rackham suggests, wood charcoal was the primary fuel for the industry (Gerrard 2000, 130–32; Rackham 2019, 49). The advent of the reverberatory furnace for smelting around 1700, enabling coal to be used for smelting, meant that demand for charcoal declined, although it continued to be used for stream tin (Barton 1968, 144–5; 1969, 20n; *cf* Kirkham 2021, 162). At least one St Austell blowing house was still using charcoal into the 1860s (Barton 1971, 82).

The blowing houses used water power to pump the bellows, so they were generally sited near streams, but most were some distance away

from woods (*ibid*, 18). Richard Carew in his 1602 *Survey of Cornwall* wrote:

I have already told you how great charge the tinner undergoeth before he can bring his ore to this last mill [the blowing house], whereto if you add his care and cost in buying the wood for this service, in felling, framing, and piling it to be burned, in fetching the same when it is coaled, through such far, foul, and cumbersome ways to the blowing house, together with the blowers' two or three months extreme and increasing labour, sweltering heat, danger of scalding their bodies, burning their houses... (Carew 1602, 95).

Clearly Carew had much sympathy for those involved in the arduous work.

Rackham (2019, 50) argues that the peak of the charcoal tin industry in the Helford River woods was probably in the seventeenth century and had largely ceased by 1750. He quotes figures published by William Pryce of Redruth in 1778 on the quantities of fuel required to smelt stream tin (by this date coal was being used for smelting mined tin ore): a batch of ore would yield 8–12 hundredweight of tin by means of 18–24 packs of charcoal, each of 60 gallons.

Let us suppose that a gallon of charcoal was made from 2 gallons of stacked logs – about one third of a cubic foot – which would contain about 1/4 cubic foot of solid wood, weighing roughly 8 pounds. On this basis a ton of tin, 20 hundredweight, should have consumed on average 42 packs, that is 2500 gallons of charcoal, representing 20,000 pounds, or 10 tons, of wood. Cornish woods probably grew at the rate of about 1 ton of wood per acre per year; this is a low estimate but takes account of the unusual exposure to wind (Rackham 2019, 50–1).

Limekilns were another user of charcoal until it was superseded by coal (*ibid*, 52)

Kresen Kernow (KK) holds more than 200 contracts involving coppice woods. The oldest is for a wood at Carminow in Mawgan-in-Meneage is dated 1499 (KK AR/4/832) and the most recent from 1950; the bulk of them date from 1700 to 1800 and then from 1850 to 1900.

An agreement from 1540 has many of the characteristics of later examples. It was between John Arundell of Lanheron (Lanherne) and Laurence Helman of Lanleuery (Lanlivery), who was a tin merchant, and concerned a wood at Lanivet. It allowed the tin merchant a full four and

a half years in which to clear the wood. It specified that he would 'cutt, fyll, rende and carye awaye' and was permitted to dig coal pits and cut turves for 'colyng' the wood (KK AR/4/1503).

A similar lease (KK CY/378) dated 28 September 1683 stated that for £60 Richard Symons and John Lanyon, both described as yeomen of Kea, bought Lanner Wood (SW 8315 4109) and Lambe Wood (SW 8358 4191) 'in Kea, part of the manor of Landegay'. It was stated that they had two years from the following 25 December 'for the Rynding, Felling, Cutting Down, Coaling [turning into charcoal], Working upp and Faggoting' these coppice woods 'and at any time before and until Five and Twentieth day of March next after the Ridding, cleansing and carrying away of the same'. Lanner Wood has been called Cowlands Wood for many years.

A lease of 1767 added further detail in that the takers, a tanner from Bodmin and another from Wadebridge, had to 'dig and make coal pits, and to gather fern and moss for covering the pits'. Also 'timber trees and young trees reserved, and 144 best young oaks now growing' (KK AR/4/1153).

To make charcoal, the cut logs were built into a conical heap (a charcoal kiln or pile) around posts, a fire shaft was made using brushwood and wood chips and then sealed with an airtight layer of grass, fern and moss. The pile was lit inside the fire shaft and, at a temperature of 300–350°C, the carbonization process began. The process took six to eight days, during which time the charcoal burner had to control the draught (by piercing small holes and resealing them), being careful neither to allow the pile to go out nor let it go up in flames. By observing the smoke exiting the kiln, the charcoal burner could assess the state of the carbonization process. If the smoke was thick and grey, the wood was still raw; thin, blue smoke indicated good carbonization (Rackham 2019, 65; Felbridge and District History Group 2025).

LiDAR and ground surveys of coppice oak woods often reveal charcoal platforms scattered through them (*cf* Kirkham 2021, 161). Rackham refers to these platforms as 'charcoal hearths', characterised by a distinctive flat area often about 30 feet (9m) in diameter (Rackham 2019, 65). A survey of Ethy Wood, St Winnow, found that charcoal burning platforms there were rather smaller, ovoid, typically 5m to 6m along the contour and 3m to 4m across, and cut to around 0.5m deep up slope with the material used to create

a corresponding platform downslope. Twenty definite and five ‘possible’ platforms were recorded at Ethy, each rarely closer than 20m to its nearest neighbours. Most were placed conveniently close to a network of woodsmen’s tracks (Herring 1998, 239–41, fig 88) (Fig 18).

The leases or contracts often lasted for two or three years and frequently specified ‘Wood to be cut each year before 29 May’ (KK CY/3098), as this was the end of the period when the sap was rising up the trees and when it was easiest to split off the bark. Similarly, it was often stated that the period when the wood was being cleared would end on Lady Day, 25 March, to ensure the coppice would be available for the ‘*rinding*’ season to start (below). Under a statute of 1543 those carrying out the coppicing had also to preserve 12 timber trees, or ‘*standels*’, per acre. Rackham (2019, 53, 79) notes that ‘in Cornwall it was usual to concentrate these timber trees in one part of the wood instead of scattering them through the whole wood’, and on the Helford ‘it was evidently the practice to grow timber trees all together in a sheltered ravine’. This practice was also followed on the Fal: Cowlands Wood is of coppice oak but on its eastern fringe has very large oak standels in a more sheltered ravine. Standels were also left on hedgerows to grow into mature trees. These standels were frequently indicated with paint by the landlord’s agent or steward. The leases sometimes covered how the wood was to be looked after once all the coppice had been cleared. Some contracts stipulated that the wood must be weeded, often for a period of

eight years, after that time cattle were allowed to graze the wood, as after that period the young trees would be sufficiently mature to survive cattle nibbling at their shoots, although the occasional lease stated that any cattle grazed in such a wood had to be muzzled, for example at Kelliowham Wood, St Neot (KK CY/5882).

## Other products of coppicing

Coppice trees had several major markets: branches and lesser stems provided charcoal for the tin industry, the bark produced tannin used for tanning leather, preserving nets and sails, the smaller branches also provided faggots for maintaining watercourses. Once the demand for charcoal declined, the main stems provided domestic fuel. Many of the leases for coppice woods were taken by tin merchants, tanners, ‘barkers’ (those who did the coppicing and may have been taking the contract on their own behalf) and sometimes by timber merchants. As coal began to be used for smelting tin so the main use for the bark was for tanning leather and for the wood providing domestic fuel. Rackham (2019, 53) notes that much of the value was in the bark rather than the wood, with oak bark for tanning forming a major by-product and later sometimes the main product of woodland (below).

In Cornwall coppice wood would normally have been left for perhaps 30 years before being coppiced again (*ibid*, 27). Woods were sometimes coppiced



*Fig 1 Various lines of faggots are still visible in the Carnon Creek....they were used for constructing “training banks” that directed the river flow to better scour the navigable channel (Nicholas Johnson, pers comm, 2024). (Photograph: Nicholas Johnson.)*

more frequently when the coppice was younger. This produced poles, which had many uses, and faggots which were often used in reclaiming land from a river or in keeping a river channel clear. In 1853 the Tregothnan estate advertised an auction for oak poles at Cove Wood in St Michael Penkivel (*Cornwall Gazette*, 1 September 1853). In a lease of 1839 for a coppice wood at Calenick where the trees had 23- or 24-years growth it was specified that 'a great many faggots would be required for the reservoir and quay at Devoran' (KK CL/5/417/18).

The stretch of Truro River between Truro and Malpas was a constant source of concern for Truro Corporation and faggots were used to keep the mud from silting the main channels leading up to the quays in Truro. Members of the Gunn family in Coombe were much involved in the supply of these faggots. For example, in the minutes of the River Committee of Truro Corporation in July 1893 three tenders for the supply of 1,000 faggots were received, one from William Henry Gunn of Kea who agreed to supply them for £5.10s.0d, and others from two competitors who offered them at the same price. The committee attempted to keep everyone happy by agreeing to buy a total of 1500 faggots, 500 from each party. In May 1895 John Tank Gunn from Coombe tendered to supply faggots at 10s 9d per 100, and poles at a rate of 11s per ton, but James Stephens of Idless secured the tender at a lower price (KK BTRU/132/2).

Faggots were labour-intensive to make but were an economical way of using twigs and boughs. The faggots were bound using 'binds', twistable rods of hazel, and as hazel is often found in the understory of oak woods it may have been to hand, but if not, the binds would have had to be carried into the wood.

Rackham looked at how productive the Helford woods were, and the Fal woods operated on a similar model. 'In 1825 the Calamansack wood-sale took the form of 10 tons of "Poles... for fire Wood", value £8 10s (less £1 5s for "Cutting and Carrying to the Water" and £1 5s for "Boat and Men's labour carrying [*sic*] to different places") This indicates that the retail price of wood was about 17s. per ton. A hundred faggots, which sold at 8s. or 10s., would have weighed roughly half a ton, allowing for the extra cost of labour in making them. In an average year (1821–1825) Calamansack Wood produced 10,000 faggots, that is 50 tons from 32 acres of woodland' (Rackham 2019, 55).

In April each year the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* carried advertisements inviting tenders for coppice

oak woods. The age of the trees was generally stated, varying from 23 to 34 years old, and whether the wood was close to a river. Interested parties were invited to inspect the wood (Fig 2).

**CORNWALL.**

**COPPIC WOODS.**

**F**OR SALE, on **TUESDAY** the 16th day of March next, at Three o'Clock in the Afternoon, at **Mopus**, in the Parish of St. Michael Penkevil, in three Lots, the **SHRED** of all that **COPPIC WOOD**, called the

**CHAPLE WOOD;**

*Situate on Tolverne, in the Parish of Philligh :*  
Containing about 27 acres, customary measure, of 34 years' growth.

ALSO.

Free of Tithe, the **SHRED** of a Piece of

**COPPIC,**

*Part of DEEP WOOD, situate on Penkevil, in the said Parish of St. Michael Penkevil;*  
Containing about 8 acres of 32 years' growth.  
These Woods are conveniently situate for water carriage, being on the margin of the river Fal.

For viewing the above and further particulars, apply at Tregothnan House, near Truro.

Also, the **SHRED** of a Piece of

**COPPIC.**

*On TREVEALE, in the Parish of Ladock ;*  
Containing about half an acre.  
A Deposit of £20 per Cent. will be expected at the time of Sale.  
*Dated February 25, 1824.*

Fig 2 An advertisement placed by the Tregothnan estate for the 'shred' of three coppice woods (*Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 13 March 1824, p1) provides additional insight into the management of coppice woods. As the trees grew, they produced side branches and it was usual to remove these before the main trunks were cut back to their stool. Shredding was 'cutting the side-boughs off a tree and leaving a tuft at the top' (Rackham 2019, 54). The shred would produce both bark and wood which may have been turned into charcoal or used for domestic firewood. It was a valuable additional product of the coppicing management.

### Bark for tanning leather

Coppicing was one of the main seasonal occupations of Coombe men throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The main market during this period was the demand from local tanyards for oak bark. Writing of Britain as a whole, Rackham has pointed out:

The [bark] trade went on quietly until 1780, when there was a sudden boom in leather which followed the same course as the contemporary boom in shipping. From 1780 to 1850 the tanyards were no mere users-up of by-products but a gigantic industry, a much bigger consumer of oak-trees than the naval

dockyards and almost certainly a bigger consumer than the merchant shipyards...Thousands of acres were maintained as oak underwood, in which timber production was sacrificed for a greater yield of bark (Rackham 2006, 92).

Truro had tanyards but the longest-lasting was Croggons tannery at Grampond, which was founded in 1712 and closed in 2002. There were several processes involved in turning cattle hides into leather. Many of them were foul smelling, involving soaking the hides in urine and later pounding them with dog or pigeon dung. But it was oak bark which was the essential ingredient in the process. The English word tanning comes



*Fig 3 Bennett Tannery Grampond. (Photograph: courtesy of Grampond with Creed Heritage Project.)*



*Fig 4 Croggons Tannery workers c 1910. (Photograph: courtesy of Grampond with Creed Heritage Project.)*

from the medieval Latin *tannare* and *tannum* (oak bark). One of the final stages of the tanning was to stretch the hides on frames and then immerse them for several weeks in vats containing an increasing concentration of tannin. This made the hides more flexible and resistant to bacterial attack. The tannin was made by grinding up oak bark and mixing it with water (Bane and Oliver 1988, 62–8; Jenkins 1976, 109–16).

### Barking nets and sails

Although the leather industry was the main market for bark, it was also used in the manufacture and maintenance of fishing nets and sails. Before artificial substances such as polypropylene were introduced, nets and sails were made of natural fibres such as cotton which were prone to rot. Nets and sails would be boiled in water to which bark had been added to lengthen their life.

Many pilchard cellars maintained barking troughs in which nets would be regularly treated. The Historic England List description for pilchard cellars at Gunwalloe on the Lizard states: ‘Main hearth flue adapted for iron copper for barking nets probably at the same time and further barking cauldron fitted to former workroom of building circa 1920s’. It adds that the seine nets themselves were said to last up to 60 years if barked and repaired annually (NHLE 1311695). Canvas sails were also steeped in a liquid made from boiled bark, and it was this that gave sails their red colour (Fig 5).

## Rinding around the Fal

Coppicing the local oak woods continued on the Fal until the late 1970s. It was part of a cycle which provided employment throughout the year. During the summer months, the men would be fishing. During August and September they were occupied with the plum harvest, first the Kea reds and then the more famous Kea black plums. From October through to the end of March they would be dredging for oysters. And as soon as the dredging season ended ‘rinding’ began. The author is grateful to the late Gerald Gunn and his son Tony, both of Coombe, for the following information. Note that though spelled ‘rinding’ it was always pronounced as ‘rending’.

Rinding was done at two different times during the spring. The first was ‘on the bud’ and lasted about four weeks. Then there was a break of a couple of weeks or so. The second period was ‘on the leaf’ and was much shorter, generally about two weeks. In May the sap goes up the bark and in June it comes down the tree.

With a ‘patch hook’ a cut would be made four feet up the tree, the length of a faggot. The bark would be ripped from top to bottom to make a split. The ‘ripper’ would then be used to open up the split and separate the bark from the tree. The ripper would be worked using your thumb and you would wear a leather finger guard to protect your little finger. There were two types of ‘ripper’, a ‘footer’ or ‘bottomer’ which was longer than the



*Fig 5 Charles Napier Hemy (1841–1917) showed barking the nets taking place at St Mawes in this 1913 painting. The fisherman on the right can be seen feeding the net into the heated mix of bark and water in a cauldron. The fisherman on the left is guiding the net from what is known as a ‘gurrie’, a handled wooden box for carrying pilchards. (Private Collection.)*

'topper'. The trees would then be cut down in four foot lengths and the branches trimmed off. The trimmings were made into a 'perch', a line of toppings, and the bark would be propped on that to dry out for one or two weeks dependent on the weather. The faggots of oak bark would then be piled into a rick which would be built against a standing tree and left for a few days.

Before rinding started men would spend a couple of days going round cutting 'binds', hazel sticks, and several hundred of these would be needed. A good place for cutting 'binds' was Mill Creek up the Ruan River. Several of the Coombe orchards had hazel planted on the hedges, which was used for 'binds' as well as for bean poles and pea sticks. The hazel binds would be made up into bundles and secured



*Fig 6 A 'patch hook' belonging to the author; 40 cms long (15.75ins), the maker's mark is illegible. It is very light, made of the finest steel and very rarely requires sharpening. (Photograph: Nigel Baker.)*



*Fig 7 Rippers used for rinding. The top ripper is approximately 30 cms (12 ins) long. (Rippers courtesy of Tony Gunn. Photograph: Nigel Baker.)*

with a bind. They would be kept in the shade to keep them green. Sometimes they would then be placed on end in the creek, often in the bight past Roseville, with their ends in the tide to keep them green and pliable. The binds were used to tie the bark up into faggots. Two binds would be used for each faggot and each faggot would contain forty pounds of bark.

The faggots would either be taken from the woods directly to Grampound or first taken by boat to Coombe and then put onto a lorry. One load would be made up of six rings (the ring was the name used for a bound faggot of bark) in height across the lorry, the total amount would vary according to the length of the lorry. They would be pushed up a plank and one man would be on the lorry building them up.

The large amount of wood produced would originally have been turned into charcoal but in more recent times it was cut up for firewood. The coppice oak would be sawn up with a bow saw or crosscut saws. If the wood being coppiced lay next to a river the wood was carried downhill and the oak billets thrown over the cliff into the boats, the boats would be rowed or towed (often using a motorboat) into Coombe and moored on the half tide mud for the night and each boat would hold 12 to 15 hundredweight. The boats would then be rowed to – for example – St Mawes, the billets thrown up onto the quay and loaded onto a pony and cart which had been hired. The men would then have to row home. Some of the oak was not cut up in the woods but formed into rafts and towed into Coombe. There the rafts were laid up along the foreshore until they were cut up at the head of the

creek in front of the Reading Room. As late as the 1960s Gerald and Tony Gunn used cross cut saws or bow saws to cut up the wood by hand there. This whole process usually ended in August.

In the 1990s, the author and his teenage son borrowed the crosscut saw shown in Figure 8 from Tony Gunn. The crosscut when in use makes a ‘singing sound’, so distinctive that Randolph Gunn – who lived in the orchard below the author’s – called up with a note of wonder in his voice, ‘Are you using a crosscut?’. Certainly, a much more pleasant sound than the clatter of a modern chain saw.

Craft larger than the local oyster punts were also sometimes used for moving timber. Evelyn and Gerald Gunn once used the barge *Queen* to move wood; she now lies as a wreck in Devoran creek. In the 1950s Len Baker (the author’s father, who had been a Royal Navy officer during the Second World War) and Ken Gunn bought the coppice from Philleigh creek on the Ruan river and used an old Second World War landing craft to bring oak timber back from the Ruan river. For some years the landing craft was laid up below *The Brake* cottage but ended up on the foreshore at *Tolverne* cottage where it decayed.

In some years there was little wood on the Fal to be coppiced, so local men would travel farther afield. Gerald Gunn’s father, Evelyn, would sometimes employ 10 to 12 men, hire a bus and take them to work in Idless woods. They would rind the wood, sell off the bark and then have a local auctioneer sell off the lengths of wood without it being sawn up for firewood. Groups of Coombe



*Fig 8 Left to right, Gerald, Randolph and Bert Gunn sawing wood at Coombe, October 1932. (Source: Nigel Baker.)*

men would also rind woods near Grampound; they would lodge two to three in a house and spend most of their evenings in the pub and so never made much money. Evelyn Gunn told a story of William Henry Gunn, known as Henry, being in the pub (though teetotal) and one of the locals came up to him and because Henry was wearing a Guernsey sweater – many of the locals wore hand-knitted ones – presumed he was a fisherman and said ‘I’ve always wanted to meet a fisherman’. They shook hands and spent the rest of the evening continually shaking hands. One early morning Henry, who of course was teetotal, found a bell and went up and down the Grampound streets imitating the Truro town crier and shouting ‘The Queen of the Fal will be leaving in an hour’.

Occasionally men rinding coppice oak would have to deal with a larger tree. Evelyn Gunn was rinding Chapel Wood (below Tolverne) and in the middle of the coppice oaks was one elm. Lord Falmouth’s forester, Tommy Rowe, said it would look odd if one tree was left when all the others were being felled so it too was cut down. Horses dragged the trunk down to Tolverne foreshore and then Evelyn’s sons, Gerald and Randolph, rowing a punt with a pair of oars each, towed it up to Malpas to Drew’s boatyard. Drew later towed it up to Harvey’s at Truro where it was planked up. It would have made a lot of keels. When large oak trees were

blown down in one of the Tregothnan woods the trunks would usually be thrown over the cliff into the water; one would be tied either side of a boat and on the flood tide they would be taken up to Truro to the Fox Stanton sawmills (in the centre of Truro, past Old Bridge Street and opposite the Boys’ Club).

The last man who went rinding from Coombe was Gerald Gunn who in 1978 or 1979 did a small patch near the Tolverne road, but he never took away the wood. The last large section, between Penperth and Turnaware, had been completed three or four years earlier.

Some traditions were associated with ‘rinding’. In the coppiced woods near Lerryn, a young boy at the start of his first season in the woods had to undergo an initiation ceremony, to be ‘shoed’. ‘After crib on the first day, an area of ground was carefully cleared. The boy was taken and brought to the ground by three or four men who held him down while another beat the soles of his boots. An oak branch was bent down from a tree and the budding leaves dipped into his cider which he was then ‘forced’ to drink so that he could ‘taste the oak bud’. Once this ceremony was complete it was cider all round and not much work for the rest of the day’ (Todd 1992, 16–7).

A similar custom was followed in the Fal woods, but here the boot soles were beaten with the rippers, and the young boy would be expected to provide



*Fig 9 Coppicing gang, Grampound c 1900. (Photograph: courtesy of Grampound with Creed Heritage Project.)*



*Fig 10 Gerald Gunn rinding above King Harry in the 1970s. (Photograph courtesy of Tony Gunn.)*



*Fig 11 Tony Gunn rinding above King Harry in 1970s. (Photograph courtesy of Tony Gunn.)*

a gallon of cider for the initiation ceremony (Tony Gunn, pers comm, November 2024).

## Coppice woods around the Fal and Truro Rivers

### The history of Cowlands Wood

The closest coppice wood to the author's home in Coombe is Cowlands Wood, and it was the examination of an RAF aerial photograph from 1946 which led to a more detailed investigation of the history of this as an example of the evolution of a coppice wood (Fig 13).

Tony Gunn was a 'toddler' in 1946, but clearly remembers being taken up to Cowlands Wood and allowed a ride in a lorry which was being used to take away the bark. His grandfather, Evelyn Gunn, had taken the contract and his father Gerald also

worked there. It is also likely that John Old and Archie Kean, who both lived in Coombe also helped (Tony Gunn, pers comm, 2022).

Three footpaths lead through Cowlands Wood, the modern name for what was generally referred to as Lanner Wood. It may be a remnant of a much older forest in the western half of Kea parish, an area which forms the Manor of Landegay and which has a close association with the legend of St Kea.

The manuscript of the late medieval religious play *Bewnans Ke*, or the Life of St Kea, was discovered in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth in 2000 (Thomas and Williams 2007). The play was probably written by one of the canons at Glasney College in Penryn and the manuscript was created in the second half of the sixteenth century by a scribe copying a document dating to around 1500 (Padel 2021). When Glasney was founded in 1265 Bishop Bronescombe gave the livings and great tithes of grain of six parishes

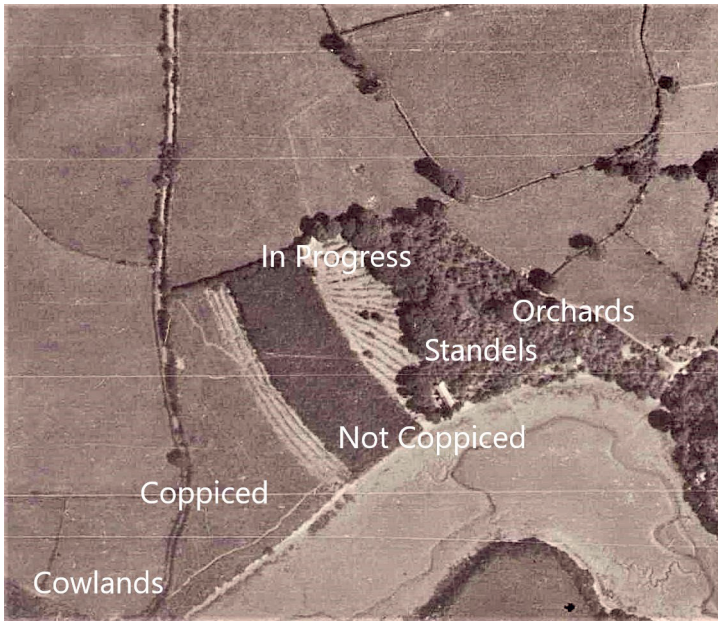
to support the College, and one of these was Kea (or *Landege*), together with its chapels of Kenwyn and Tregavethan. In 1291, Kea was the most valuable of these returning £8 6s 8d (Orme 2010, 147–8)

A detailed knowledge of the Kea area is reflected in several aspects of the text, a play

that was intended for performance locally in the *plen-an-gwari* which gave its name to the modern village of Playing Place (Coleman 2021). One of the most dramatic episodes concerned the wicked tyrant Teudar falling into a long sleep, having been given a potion by the hero Ke. He has promised the saint that he would be entitled to all the land



*Fig 12 Modern aerial photograph showing woods referred to in the text. Cowlands Wood was coppiced in the mid-1940s; Philleigh Wood in the early 1950s; Penpoll and Lambe Wood in the late 1950s; King Harry Wood – parts known as Chapel Wood and Tolcarne Wood – in the 1960s and 1970s; and Calenick Wood was probably coppiced at the end of the nineteenth century. (Google Maps Images ©2022 Airbus, Maxar Technologies Map Data 2022.)*



*Fig 13 This valuable 1946 RAF aerial photograph shows the various stages in the coppicing of the wood. 'Cowlands' is the hamlet of Cowlands; 'Coppiced' is the area already cleared, possibly in the previous year; 'Not coppiced' is the area of oak coppice which remains to be coppiced; 'In progress' shows where work is going on and the lines of toppings can clearly be seen; 'Standels' is the area of mature trees which will be left standing; and 'Orchards' are the orchards of apple and Kea plum surrounding the smallholding known as Turn-a-penny. Just below Standels are two cottages. North is to the top. (Ref 106G/UK, 1663, exposure 4083, 12 July 1946.)*



*Fig 14 Cowlands or Lanner Wood in 2025. The wood was last coppiced about 80 years previously. (Photograph: Nigel Baker.)*

that he could enclose whilst Teudar was asleep, but due to Teudar's prolonged sleep Ke was able to enclose a considerable area. Teudar awoke to be told that *'Me a wor gwyer hag a'n crys / bos ke thothe drehevys / theworth Kewnans an Velyn /bys in Tremustel Penpol/ a'n mor the gela cowl'* –'I know truly and believe it / that he has built a hedge / from Kewnans an Velyn / to Tremustel by

Penpol / wholly from one sea to the other' (Thomas and Williams 124–25). The land Ke managed to enclose by a hedge is said to have extended from *Kewnans an Velyn* to *Tremustell* by *Penpol*, from sea to sea. *Kewnans* is the present day Cowlands, first documented – as Lanner – in a series of records of manorial courts held there in 1458–60 (Berkeley Castle GCR 188 H3/5/2).



Fig 15 In 2025, the artist Kurt Jackson completed a study of the River Fal and many of his paintings were set around Cowlands and Coombe. This image from his 'River Fal' exhibition is titled 'Winter rainforest, creekside oak coppice. Cowlands Wood 2025'. (© Kurt Jackson 2025.)

Penpol (more recently Penpoll), the head of an inlet, is mentioned in the form '*Penpol woeles juxta Landege*' in a document dated by Henderson to 1309 (Royal Institution of Cornwall, Courtney Library: Henderson MSS, Assize Roll; The National Archives (TNA) Just 1/1349), and as 'Penpolwartha' or Upper Penpol in documents of 1464 and 1646 (Gover 1948, 460). Unfortunately, the recent edition and translation of *Bewnans Ke* by Graham Thomas and Nicholas Williams (2007) confuses the Penpoll in Kea with the

Penpol in Feock. This influences their argument about the location of Tremustel which they believe lay in Feock parish. The *Tremustel* mentioned in *Bewnans Ke* is certainly the present Trevaster: it was spelled *Trevalwester* in 1416, *Trevalwyster* in 1446 and *Trewaster* in 1577 but *Tremustell* in *Bewnans Ke*. The spelling is certainly at odds with that of *Bewnans Ke* but its identification is not in doubt, as Tremustell clearly lay close to Penpoll (Oliver Padel, pers comm, February 2025).

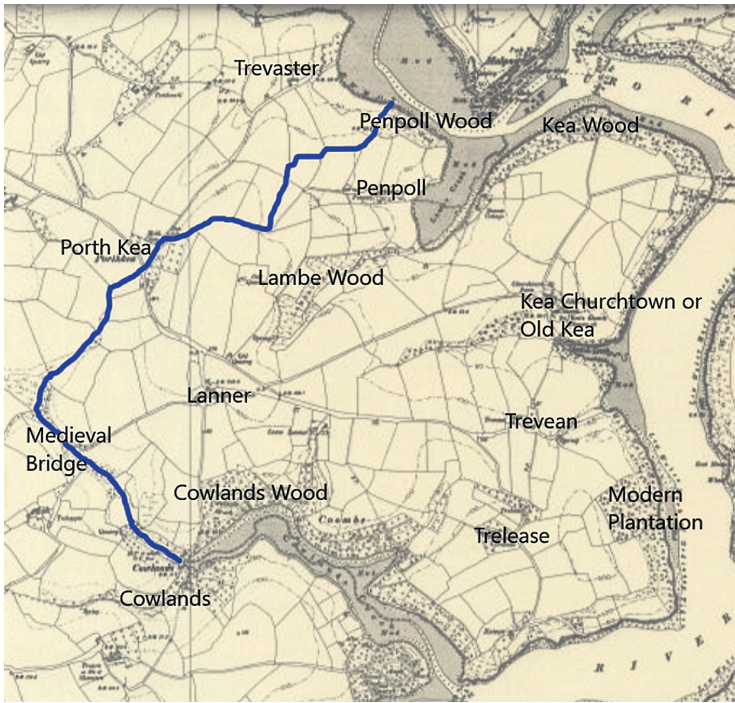


Fig 16 This map, based on the Ordnance Survey 6 in: 1 mile map (1878–9) shows in dark blue a likely route taken by the hedge referred to in *Bewnans Ke*. Porth Kea probably refers to the entrance to Kea’s land – later the Manor of Landegay, the bounds of which in c 1770 remained largely unchanged from the medieval period. The route south from Porth Kea follows a small stream valley south west which then runs into the stream flowing down to the head of Cowlands Creek. The route north of Porth Kea is less clear and there is no obviously direct route to the river. The route shown in blue is speculative and follows field boundaries which likely date from a later period. (Creative Commons Attribution licence. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.)

The name Lanner is the modern version of *Lannergh*, first recorded in 1299 (Gover 1948, 460). Lanner has a claim to have been the most important tenement within the Manor of Landegay. Manorial courts were held there in October and November 1459, on four occasions in 1460 and on four occasions in 1461 (Berkeley Castle GCR 188 H3/5/2). It was shown as the site of the manorial pound on a map of the ‘manor of Landy Gay’ made c 1770 (KK CY/6673). It was also the site of a sizeable house which in the Hearth Tax returns of 1664 had five hearths, which made it the fourth-largest house in Kea parish. In 1667 it was occupied by a Thomas Cartwright, described in his will of that date as a gentleman and possessing considerable property in London (TNA PROB 11/340/322; PROB 4/9285). No trace of the house now exists. *Lannergh* means ‘a clearing’ (Padel 1985, 142) and may well have referred to a clearing in the extensive woodland which covered this part of Kea, of which Cowlands Wood is a remnant.

Oliver Padel suggests that the whole peninsula east of the line described from Cowlands to Trevaster was wooded, except around the *tre*-settlements of Trelease and Trevean and Kea churchtown itself. As well as Lanner, ‘There are

several quite woodland-suggestive names on the peninsula, including Woodbury (first attested 1748, that I know of), the lost Voundergoose (1613 Terrier; later Vounder, part of Lower Lanner tenement), and the mysterious ‘forest of Rosewa’ which appears both in *Bewnans Ke* and also in Le Grand’s account of St Kea (1637), though corrupted there to ‘a forest de Rosené’ (Oliver Padel, pers comm, July 2023). ‘The name *Rosewa* is not otherwise known. In the play it is described as a *forest*, presumably in the sense ‘extensive tract of woodland’, though its other sense of ‘royal game reserve’ may also have been present, since it belonged to the wicked King Teudar. The name presumably contains Cornish *ros* meaning ‘promontory’... also seen in nearby Mylor parish with the ancient name Restronguet (originally *Ros-tronget*, ‘nosewood point’)’ (Oliver Padel, pers comm, February 2025).

The eastern side of the Kea peninsula was shown as wooded, and woodlands were shown more generally elsewhere around the Fal estuary on the detailed map made in 1597 by Baptista Boazio (Jeffery 1886–9, following p164; KK G/1888). Two hundred and fifty years later, at the time of the Kea tithe survey (1842), the land use ‘coppice’ was recorded for Lanner (that is, Cowlands) Wood, and also for Nansavallan, Hugoe’s,

Calenick, Trethowell, Penpoll, Church Town and Lamb Woods; the apportionment formally noted an area of 90 acres ‘cultivated as Wood Land’ in the parish at this date (KK TA/97). The extensive woodlands still seen today on the eastern side of the Fal estuary (parishes of Merther, St Michael Penkevil and Philleigh) probably give a good idea of how the western side also looked until modern development took its toll.

## Surviving evidence of charcoal burning in Cowlands Wood

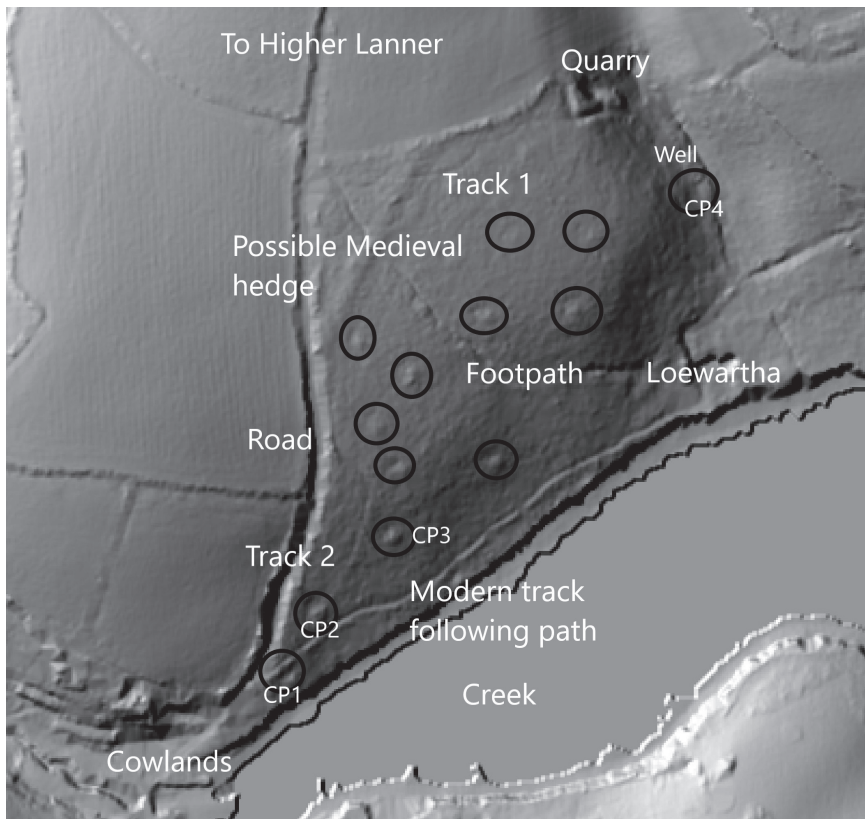
LiDAR imagery shows clear evidence of charcoal burning having taken place in Cowlands Wood, with charcoal burning platforms scattered throughout its extent (Fig 17 and Fig 21).

Four charcoal platforms are easily accessible, marked CP1 to CP4 on the LiDAR (Fig 17). CP1 measures 4m by 5m, though the widening of the

path has probably reduced its width. CP2 measures 3m by 6m, and CP3 measures 4m by 6m. In all these the longer side is parallel to the slope. CP4 is on flatter ground near the stream and measures 6m by 7m, and here the narrower side is parallel to the slope.

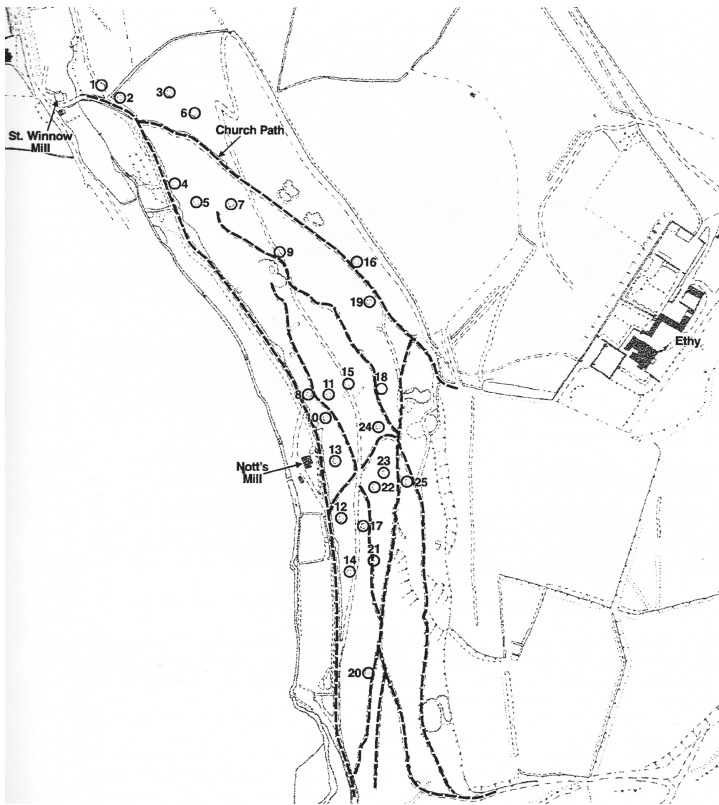
The charcoal platforms are scattered throughout the wood. Charcoal was lighter to move than wood so wood would have been burnt in situ and then the lighter charcoal moved either by boat or by road. Clear tracks lead to Cowlands where there was a small quay, and also to Loewartha where evidence of a small quay exists. Faggots of bark would probably have been rolled into the local oyster punts at high tide when the boats would have been almost at the level of the wood.

The pattern of charcoal platforms in Cowlands Wood shows many similarities to that of charcoal platforms and associated woodsmen’s tracks surveyed in Ethy Wood, near Lerryn (Fig 18). It is typical of what lies hidden below the leaf mould in many Cornish woods.



*Fig 17 LiDAR image of earthworks surviving in Cowlands Wood, including several charcoal burning platforms. Track 1 possibly links to a quarry, track 2 possibly to charcoal burning sites. The footpath running north north west – south south east across the wood is a hollow way. A possible medieval hedge to the north is hardly apparent on the ground. (LiDARFinder <https://lidarfinder.com>. © Environment Agency copyright and/or database right 2022. All rights reserved.)*

COPPICING AROUND THE FAL ESTUARY



*Fig 18 The pattern of charcoal platforms in Cowlands Wood shows many similarities to the pattern of charcoal platforms and associated woodmen's tracks surveyed in Ethy Wood near Lerryn. (from Herring 1998, fig 88.)*



*Fig 19 This photograph taken in 2023 shows how much oak stools have grown since the wood was coppiced in 1946. The author is shown for scale. (Photograph: Nigel Baker.)*



*Fig 20 Here can clearly be seen the standels noted in the 1946 aerial photo of Cowlands Wood. They lie in a steep area which would have been difficult to coppice. Trees like these might well have provided timber for the many boatyards which existed on the Fal estuary, including the well-known one half a mile away at Roundwood Quay and the smaller one at Cowlands, just a quarter of a mile (0.4 km) away. The track, which is not a public footpath, leads to the remains of a well which would have been the main source of drinking water for the cottages adjacent to the wood. (Photograph: Nigel Baker.)*



*Fig 21 Charcoal Platform CP1 on Figure 17. Spoil from the widening of the path has reduced the width of this platform. It is easily visible when exiting the wood to join the highway at Cowlands. (Photograph: Nigel Baker.)*



*Fig 22 Hollow Way marked as Footpath on Figure 17. It runs diagonally through the wood. (Photograph: Nigel Baker.)*

## Current management of coppice oak woods along the Fal

Most of the land along the banks of the Fal and Truro rivers is owned by Lord Falmouth's Tregothnan estate or by the National Trust's Trelissick property. No coppicing has taken place since the 1970s and the woods are seen as having such amenity value that there would be much opposition to a resumption of coppicing. Both estates do have a policy of woodland management and some very limited felling and replanting has taken place in areas of the Tregothnan estate adjacent to the Truro River. Forestry areas towards the eastern part of the Tregothnan Home Estate, and just off the right-hand side of the aerial

photograph (Fig 12), have very limited public access and considerable felling and replanting has taken place, but not coppicing.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Pete Herring for first suggesting this topic might provide a paper for Cornish Archaeology, and for all his help and advice over many years. Oliver Padel has been generous with his time in discussing the history of Cowlands Wood and I am indebted to him for the reference to the Baptista Boazio map. Nick Johnson read through the paper at an early stage and provided the photo of Carnon Creek, I am grateful to him for drawing to my attention the List entry for the

pilchard cellars at Gunwalloe.. The late Gerald Gunn's stories of 'rending' brought the past to life for the author.

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