

The Kidderminster heaths – a land-use history.

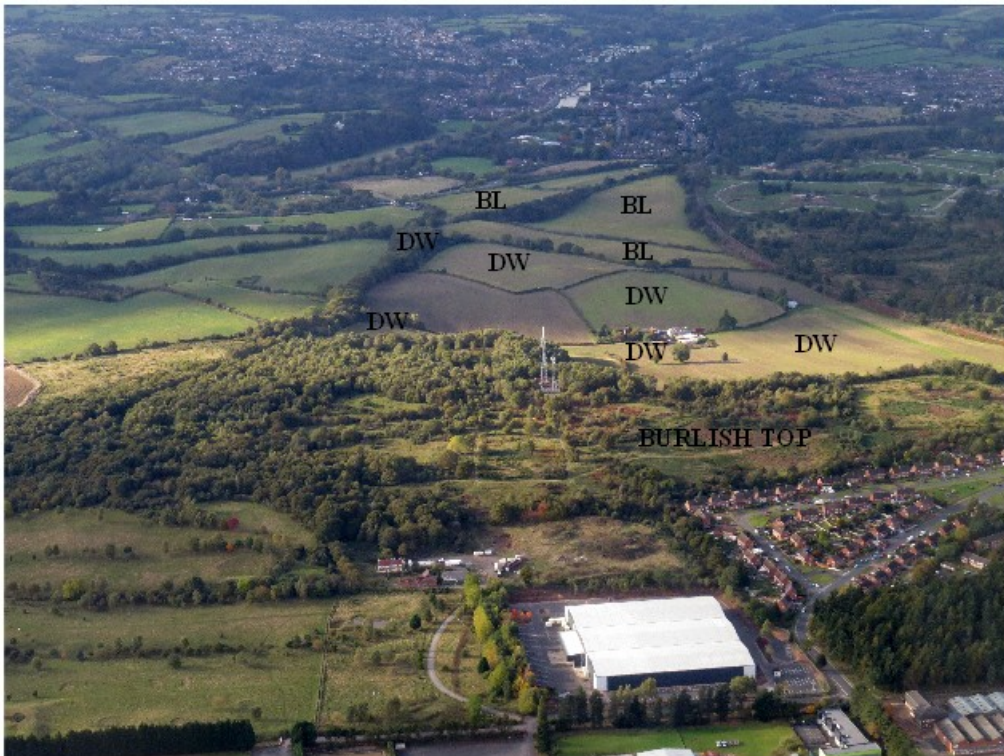
Clive Chatters

The recent decision of Worcestershire Wildlife Trust to purchase Dropping Well Farm was informed by a series of studies into the character of the heathland landscapes near Kidderminster. This brief

article summarises one of those studies, which considered recent historical changes in land-use. Understanding the historical ecology of an area is useful in appreciating the qualities which give a landscape its local distinctiveness, if you like, its natural history *gout de terroir*. Historical studies also help us understand what species and habitats may have been lost, which in turn informs us as to what we may expect to return, should historical land-uses be restored. 01 and 03 show the extent of Dropping Well and adjacent reserves.



DW = Dropping Well Farm. BL = Blackstone Fields reserve



01. The top photograph shows the nature reserves of Dropping Well Farm (DW), Blackstone Fields (BL), Devil's Spittleful and Burlish Top. The bottom photograph is a similar but more distant view showing more of Burlish Top and the edge of Kidderminster in the foreground. Aerial photographs by Andy Young 21st October 2019..

Dropping Well Farm and the adjoining nature reserves can be seen as part of a much more extensive series of heathy landscapes that run alongside the eastern terraces of the Severn. Today these habitats are concentrated in the green spaces that separate Bewdley, Kidderminster and Stourport-on-Severn, but historically they extended over a much wider range including Kinver (Staffordshire) and northwards to Prees (Shropshire). The shared character of these heaths is the seasonally parched qualities of superfine wind-blown sands of peri-glacial origin, together with a history of periodic cultivation. As such, this suite of heaths in the West Midlands share characteristics of the heaths of East Anglia and the Coversands of Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire (Chatters 2021).

There is a paucity of evidence to indicate prehistoric land-use in this part of the Severn Valley. Archaeological studies suggest some prehistoric cultivation for cereals with agricultural settlements becoming established in the Romano-British Iron Age. Peat deposits are valuable in preserving sub-fossil plant remains, both macro-fossils and pollen. Regrettably, drainage and the localised lowering of the water table has prejudiced against the survival of such evidence in the former wetlands of Hartlebury Common and the Devil's Spittleful.

Historically, in the medieval period - up until the advent of the industrial revolution- the dry rolling hills between Kidderminster and the Severn supported a complex heathland landscape, characterised by dwarf-shrub heaths with an abundance of bare ground, including habitats associated with wind-blown sands, along with a style of shifting cultivation and grazed fallows more commonly associated with the heaths of East Anglia's 'Breckland'. Descriptions of these agricultural systems can be found in accounts by Robert Plot in neighbouring Staffordshire (Plot 1686) together with William Pitt's report on agriculture in Worcestershire (Pitt 1810), which describe periodic ploughing and fallowing of heaths from the late seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries.

Early history

Reverend Burton's *History of Kidderminster* (Burton 1890) drew on medieval documents which describe the landscape around his parish in the medieval period. Amongst the surviving documents Burton cites is an Inquisition of 1393 which describes the economy of the area as supporting the rearing of sheep for wool, along with raising cattle and pigs. There was arable land, with Rye being the majority crop, followed by Barley and Beans and Oats; the minority crops of cultivation included Garlic, Onions and Flax. The Inquisition gave a tithable cash value for natural products of the parish including hawks and game, along with inferences of the commonable use of heather, which had no cash value as it was subject to Housebot, a common right that allowed people to take material from the heath for the repair of buildings, presumably for thatching.

There appears to have been piecemeal attrition to the commons of Kidderminster and Burlish over the centuries which concluded in the Parliamentary enclosures of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Court proceedings relating to disputes arising from those enclosures describe the long-established practice of commoners' livestock being free to graze unimpeded across the boundaries of neighbouring parishes, together with the practice of communal grazing of the aftermath and fallows of commonable arable fields (Anon 1826).

By the early twenty-first century, the fragments of Kidderminster's medieval landscapes had been reduced to a scatter of dwarf-shrub heaths centred on the Devil's Spittleful, the Rifle Ranges and Burlish Top. These surviving heaths are now mostly owned by the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust and Wyre Forest District Council and are managed as nature reserves.

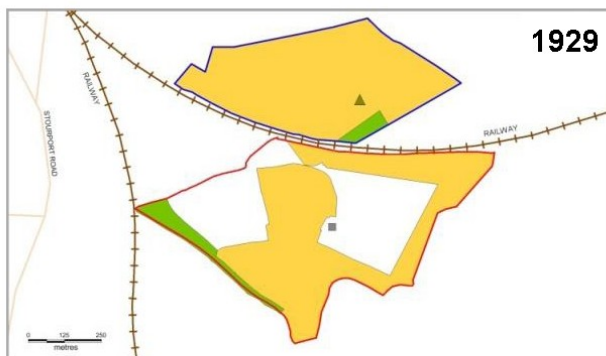
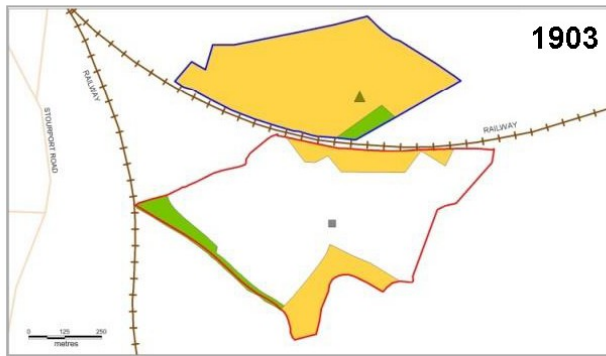
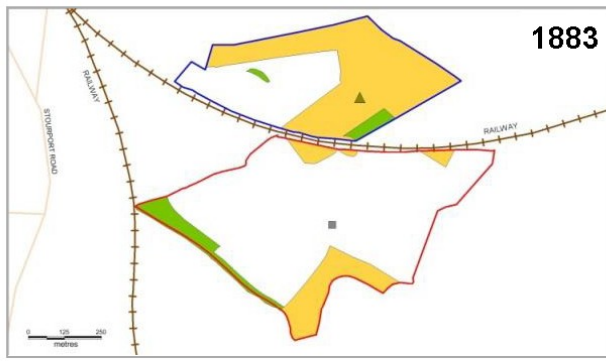
The landscape following enclosure.

There is a sequence of maps of the area, dating from the 1820s, which indicate the changing extent of heathland vegetation following the enclosure of the commons. The earliest of these maps is Christopher Greenwood's 1822 map of Worcestershire which clearly shows Burlish Common as a heath, with features of fine detail such as a settlement-edge green, but does not extend those symbols into the valley of what is now Dropping Well Farm or around the outcrop of the Devil's Spittleful. Such maps need to be interpreted with caution as cartographers were mapping the roughness of the vegetation rather than the habitat. A closely-cropped heath, or a heathy fallow, would not have been mapped in the same way as a stand of taller heathers.

The military origin of the Ordnance Survey is reflected in their interest in open country and the adoption of a standardised approach to mapping any feature which may be of interest to the army. Up until the 1970s, the Ordnance Survey identified specific types of vegetation and mapped their distribution using standardised symbols. Of particular interest in heathland landscapes are '*rough and heathy pasture*' along with '*Furze of Whins*' together with the convention of mapping unfenced roads across open country as pecked lines. The figures (02) illustrate an interpretation of a sequence of maps produced for the First Series (c.1832), First Edition (c.1882/3) and later revisions of the Ordnance Survey. To these may be added a map interpreting aerial photography undertaken by the Royal Air Force in 1947-48 which is held in the Public Records Office in Worcester.

These figures collectively summarise the cartographical and photographic evidence for the changing land-use of Dropping Well Farm and the adjacent Devil's Spittleful nature reserve. The key feature to note is the shifting nature of the rough vegetation of the heaths. The sequence of maps opens in the late nineteenth century when arable husbandry in Worcestershire was at a low ebb due to the world price of grain suppressing local markets. Despite the depressed state of agriculture, there is less heath illustrated for this period than from any of the following seven decades. The greatest extent of heathland appears some forty years later in the depression years of the 1920s. Interestingly, the 'Dig for Victory' campaign of the Second World War had little impact on the extent of heathland; presumably, the use of neighbouring land by the military, combined with the desperately poor soils, mitigated against investing in intensifying the farming regime. The RAF images illustrate the area just before post-war support for intensifying agriculture reduced the perennial heathland to scraps on the steepest slopes and poorest soils. We know from the first-hand memories of the farmer at Dropping Well how post-war investment of public funds into agriculture supported the progressive clearance of heath and scrubby vegetation and its conversion into a modern farm.

Elsewhere in England, maps showing the changing extent of heathland vegetation, as mapped by the Ordnance Survey, have been used as evidence of habitat loss. (Moore 1962). Such an interpretation should be applied with caution to landscapes such as Dropping Well where periodic cultivation and fallowing are an essential element in supporting the heath's natural history. The serendipitous farming regimes at Dropping Well over recent decades, including 'Barley-Beef' and the production of high-quality horse feeds, has supported the persistence of habitats exhibiting early-stage ecological successions. When viewed through the perspective of deep ecological history, arable and fallow regimes have provided the continuity of bare-ground habitats previously supported by natural processes driven by large wild herbivores and the 'blow away' nature of the local soils.



- Dropping Well Farm Boundary
 - Dropping Well Farm
 - Devil's Spittleful Nature Reserve
 - Devil's Spittleful
- Habitats**
- Heath
 - Trees

02. Changes in the extent of heathland at the Devil's Spittleful and Dropping Well Farm.

It is beyond the scope of this article to summarise the natural history of the Kidderminster heaths and the dependence of those species on historical land-uses. This relationship is explored in a recent article in British Wildlife ‘By a fayre down’, the breck heaths of the West Midlands. (Chatters 2020) which was based on an unpublished review of 2018, commissioned by the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust. There is still a great deal to be discovered in the Kidderminster heaths, each year naturalists describe new species which add nuances to our understanding of the region’s distinct character. As with most British heaths, it is the spaces between the heather bushes which are host to diversity and natural wonders. The challenge for the future of Dropping Well as a nature reserve is now best to rejuvenate the heathland landscape through finding modern successors to historical land-use practices.

Acknowledgements

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03. Burlish Top, Dropping Well Farm and the Devil's Spittleful looking West. Flight 21October 2019. Bewdley town is at the top of the photograph and the Safari Park beyond the Devil’s Spittleful. Andy Young.