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Writtle Forest

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Writtle is the twin sister to Hatfield Forest. The two have closely parallel histories. Both are compartmental Forests, with the same physical fabric of coppice-woods, plains, pollard trees, and adjacent parks, purlieu woods and wod-pasture commons. They had the same social fabric of Forestal, landowning and common-rights.

The two Forests, however, are in very different environments. Hatfield is in the boulder-clay country of north Essex. Writtle Forest is on the sands and gravels of the south Essex hilltops, with their strongly acidic soils. Its setting is not unlike that of Epping Forest, which is a different, non-compartmental, type of Forest.

Writtle *versus* Hatfield Forests therefore illustrate the same cultural landscape developed in contrasting environments. Writtle *versus* Epping Forests illustrate contrasting types of Forest in similar environments.

I remind the reader that a Forest was a place in which the king had the right to keep deer, to take and eat them, and to set up special by-laws and a special officialdom ostensibly for protecting the deer. A Forest was not necessarily wooded, though Writtle was. Nor did the land of a Forest necessarily belong to the king, though here it did at first. Writtle, like most Forests, had been a common before it became a Forest. There were, therefore, three parties in the Forest: the king, as owner of the Forestal rights; the landowner, who also owned the trees; and the commoners. (The complications at Hatfield, where the hereditary woodwards became strong enough to be a fourth party in the Forest, did not arise here.)

Writtle Forest is compartmental, like Hatfield but unlike Epping Forest. It consists of eight coppice-woods called *springs*, corresponding to the coppices of Hatfield. Between and around these were a number of small commons with pollard trees. In the middle is a small farm where a hermit once dwelt. The Forest is divided in two by Writtle Park, which ran for some 700 years, one of the longest histories of any park. The six springs to the west of the park are collectively called Highwood, a rationalization of the ancient name Heghwode or Heywode, a name sometimes applied to the Forest itself. The two springs east of the park are called Edney. Other woods adjoin on the SE, which are not part of the Forest.

The principle (as at Hatfield) was to fell each spring in turn and then to fence out the commoners' animals until the new growth had grown big enough not to be harmed by them. Where this could not be done, the trees were not coppiced near ground level, but pollarded so that the livestock could not reach the regrowth.

By Writtle parish I mean the vast ancient parish, before Roxwell and Highwood parishes were split off. At 13,568 acres it was the biggest parish in Essex, even bigger than Hatfield.

Areas of Writtle Forest, its constituent parts, and the adjacent woods

	Original area, acres	
Edney:		
Little Edney Wood	50	Half of wood grubbed *c*1971 after replanting *c*1870
Great Edney Wood	54	One-third grubbed *c*1970
Edney Common	67	20 ac. now remain, all secondary woodland
Writtle Park	420	Now mainly farmland with some woods
Highwood:		
Ellis (Hilly) Spring	70	One-fifth grubbed *c*1968
Coppice (Copy) Spring	59	Three-quarters grubbed *c*1968
Deerslade Wood	54	Nearly half grubbed *c*1968
Barrow Spring	78	
Birch Spring	112	
Parson's Spring	68	
Highwood Common	37	6 ac. remain, all secondary woodland
Bedemansberg	40	Farmland and hermitage
Horsefrith Park	334	Including Horsefrith Park Wood 15 ac., the rest now farmland
Total of Forest springs	545	427 ac. remain
Total of Forest commons and plains	144	
Associated parks	754	
Grand total	**1443 acres**	

Woods and commons to south:		
Baker's Spring	18	
Furnees Spring and Bosmore Wood	53	
Chatterbox Wood	8	
Finches Spring	8	
Great Stoneymore Wood	40	
Little Stoneymore Wood	29	
College Wood	73	I cannot discover which college was involved. Now mostly attempted replanting
Mill Green	50	Now mostly secondary woodland

The Writtle Area Before the Forest

The known evidence for prehistoric activity in the Writtle Forest area is sparse, although the Chelmsford area, four miles away, has been settled since the Neolithic. The scatter of Mesolithic to Bronze Age finds, and of Iron Age settlement, found in the Hatfield Forest area has so far not been repeated here, though this may be because of less activity by archaeologists. It has, however, been claimed that Bedemansberg, the hermitage in the midst of the Forest, was founded on a barrow – some pre-existing earthwork is implied in the 12th-century name (see later).

In the Roman period, Chelmsford was a small town, with a semi-regular field system extending to the south, though not (so far as it is known) towards the Forest. A Roman villa is reported from Writtle itself, two miles from the Forest, and another from Fryerning just to the south of the Forest. It has been claimed that Mapletree Lane is part of a Roman road bisecting the Forest. It passes by Bedemansberg, where Roman tile has been found reused in the fabric of the hermitage. I have not so far been able to trace its course through the Forest woods.

Domesday Book This is the first written record of Writtle, as of Hatfield. Bothe places were royal manors, taken over by William the Conqueror from the estates of King Harold. Writtle in 1086 was almost the biggest manor in Essex, even bigger than Hatfield. The manor was apparently roughly coterminous with the later parish; two small manors, Newland on the western edge and an estate belonging to the Bishop of Hereford, had recently been carved out of it. Writtle was a place of administrative importance, and had probably begun to acquire the status of a small country town which it had in the middle ages.

Writtle had had a total of 83½ ploughs in 1066, implying over 10,000 acres of arable land. The recorded population of 194 in 1066 implies an actual population of over 1000, one of the biggest in Essex. Ploughs had diminished considerably, and population slightly, by 1086.

The main manor of Writtle had had 'woodland for 1500 swine' in 1066, reduced to 'for 1200 swine' by 1086. These figures should be compared with the 'woodland for 800 swine' which is the Domesday entry corresponding to what is now Hatfield Forest. They might imply that Writtle had considerably more woodland than Hatfield in 1066, or than Writtle has had in recent centuries. However, it is likely that the Writtle woods would have contained more oak and much more beech, and would therefore have been more suitable for swine than those of Hatfield. If the swine assessment bore any relation to reality it is unlikely that the Writtle woods were much more extensive in 1086 than in later centuries. The decline in the assessment between 1066 and 1086, at a time when cultivation was diminishing, suggests that less use was being made of the woods for pannage, perhaps because they were being coppiced instead.

Further particulars of Domesday woodland in this area are summarized in this table

Domesday Book swine-entries for the woodland of Writtle and neighbouring places to the south and east

Writtle:	main manor	1500	1200
	Bishop of Hereford	[100]	100
	Newland	[100]	100
Fryerning:	three manors	[400 + 40 + 100]	400 + 40 + 100
Ingatestone		[500]	500
Margaretting		[300]	300
Fristling in Stock		[200]	200
Chelmsford		[300]	300

Of the 13,600 acres or so of Writtle, the great bulk was undoubtedly arable land in the eleventh century. At most about one-eighth was woodland in the eleventh century – a lesser proportion than in Essex as a whole. The Newland wood is probably to be identified with Skreens Wood in the N.W. corner of Writtle. The main woods (plus those of the Bishop, if E.C. Newton located this manor correctly in his book on Writtle) were in the south of the parish and became the later Writtle Forest. They were rather more extensive than the present Writtle woods, including Writtle Park and some woodland to the east of the Forest.

To the south, the Writtle woods abutted on an area of woodland of similar extent – indeed probably greater, since an aggregate of small swine-entries probably implies a greater area of woodland than one large entry. These woods would have taken up much of the space between the present Writtle woods and the A10 road. Unlike the Writtle woods, only a fraction remains – Fryerning Wood, Stoneymore Wood in Ingatestone, Chapel and King Woods in Margaretting, and Southwood in Chelmsford.

A scatter of 'clearing' place-names (Lee Farm, Handley Green, Redindyke) testifies to woodland settlements in this area before, or soon after, Domesday Book. The original name of the Forest, Hegwode or Heywode, probably means 'hedge wood', the form High Wood is probably a corruption, though it appears (as the Latin *Altus Boscus*) as early as 1274 (PNEx). (The wood is on high ground.)

Writtle Forest plus the woods to the south would have amounted to something like 3000 acres of continuous woodland – the fourth or fifth biggest concentration in the county. The location of these woods, as we shall see, corresponds closely to a major geological boundary.

Writtle as a Royal Forest

The origin of the Forest The earliest allusion to a Forest anywhere in

Essex is in the Domesday entry for Writtle:

> In [King Harold's] time there was one pigman (porcarius) ... sitting on (4) acres of land but after king [William] came Robert [Gernon] took him from the manor & made him forester of the king's wood.

This has sometimes been taken to refer to the establishment of Writtle Forest itself, although more likely 'the king's wood' might mean Kingswood Forest near Colchester. From this modest beginning the Forest of Essex was developed, probably by Henry I.

Hatfield and Writtle were made Forests, presumably because each was a big royal estate. They acquired both fallow deer and the apparatus of Forest bureaucracy during the course of the twelfth century. For Writtle this can be no later than c1150, from King Stephen's grant of a hermitage 'in my forest of Writela' (see later).

Writtle was a small Forest; at about 1000 acres, it was even smaller than Hatfield.

The king's deer and Forestal rights The king undoubtedly put fallow deer into Writtle Forest, as into Hatfield. He might have hunted them, although (as in all Forests) this aspect should not be emphasized. Writtle has a 'King John's Palace' two miles from the Forest. Kings, at least down to Edward II, stayed there for short periods, but not particularly at times when they would be likely to hunt (for example there are letters dated from Writtle on 17 April 1277, 26 May 1238, 28 July to 1 August 1325, 22 August 1239, 27 and 28 August 1305, and 27 November 1235).

Kings, especially Henry III, made much use of the deer in Hatfield, Hainault, and to a lesser extent Epping Forest: they sent for deer for the table, gave carcases or permissions to hunt to favoured subjects, and gave live deer for starting parks. I have found not a single example for Writtle; deer are mentioned only in a few poaching cases or inquests on the bodies of dead deer (see examples in *The Last Forest*). It looks as though deer were not a very important consideration in this Forest. It did, however, have a Forester, Roger de Weulaveston, riding round it in 1242. This office was hereditary and carried a sub-manor with it. However, the family of Weulaveston or Wallexton never attained to the grandeur or longevity of the Barringtons, their counterparts at Hatfield.

Writtle Park was founded at some time before 1230. Uniquely, unlike (for example) Hatfield Park, which abutted its Forest at one side, this park was in the middle of the Forest. Possibly it was intended as a device for corralling deer out of the Forest when needed.

In 1280 the king gave 12 live fallow deer to Robert the Bruce VI (its then tenant) for a new park. They were brought from Hatfield.

Landowners At first the king had the landowning interest in the forest, including the right to the trees. At Hatfield the king used trees out of the

Forest for his own works (often at a distance), or gave them away. The trees were in small numbers, and probably very large; they can represent only a small fraction of all the woodcutting in Hatfield Forest. The similar records for Writtle are few:

1223 6 oaks in Writtle Park, felled by the assault of the wind, to repair the king's gaol at Writtle; to be supplied by the sellers of the king's windfall wood (*cablecium*) in Essex.

1223 2 oaks from the outwood (*forinsecus boscus*, the wood outside the park) of Writtle, to Robert de Crevecoeur, for burning.

1224 4 dry *robora* (dead pollards) from the outwood of Writtle, to Robert de Crevecoeur, for burning.

1225 4 crooked posts (*postes torti*) to W. de Mandeville, Earl of Essex, to build his house at Pleshey.

1226 2 oaks in the outwood and 2 in the park, to Roger le Veile.

1232 10 oaks to the Prior of Hatfield to repair church and buildings after a fire. The Bishop of Chichester, tenant of Writtle, was ordered to let him have them in the outwood. [Why not from Hatfield Forest, which would have been much nearer?]

1237 3 oaks to Silvester de Everdon from the king's wood of Horsfrith, to make shingles.

Most of the trees in the Forest are likely to have been ordinary ones (coppice, pollards, normal-sized standard trees) which were used on the estate, or sold, in the ordinary course of estate management, of which records do not survive.

In 1222 the king allowed the Earl of Salisbury to have 100 pigs in the mast season (*ad pessonam*).

Henry III in 1230 had leased the Writtle estate – including the woods and park, but not the Forestal rights – to the Bishop of Chichester at an annual rent of £100. This is probably why there are only two grants of trees after this date. Eight years later he disposed of the landowning interest altogether.

In 1238 the king intervened to deprive Isabel the Bruce of half an earldom, which her father had bequeathed her. In temporary compensation (until something better should turn up, which it never did) the king bestowed on her the landowning rights of Writtle and Hatfield. The terms of the grant expressly gave Isabel the woods, and the right to cut them whenever she wished, but did not give her the deer or the Forestal rights. Nevertheless, as at Hatfield, the king four years later ordered the chief Forester of Essex to keep an eye on Isabel lest she destroy the woods to the prejudice of the deer. The same year she was suspected in a poaching case.

Richard the Bruce VI, Isabel's son, made a second park around what had been Horsefrith, a detached wood to the NW (mentioned in 1242; the wood, or part of it, is still extant). In the 14th century there were also two

rabbit-warrens, one of them near the manor-house.

At Writtle, as at Hatfield, the park was created early enough for the duty of maintaining the pale to have been assigned as a service to the tenants of particular lands (Newton p.107–8). At a later period the two professional palers of the parks were paid bushels of wheat by certain tenants, evidently a commutation of such a service.

Isabel's great-grandson was the illustrious Robert the Bruce VIII. In 1306 he became king of Scotland, which was high treason in England. He thereby forfeited his English estates; his wife, however, was allowed to retain a life interest in one-third of Writtle. In 1310 Edward II bestowed Hatfield and Writtle on his brother-in-law, Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford and Essex. Writtle remained in the hands of this powerful and turbulent family, with intermissions through high treason, until the third Duke of Buckingham lost his head and lands in 1521.

The last reference that I can find to the king taking an interest in the Forestal rights is in 1336, when the king confiscated the woods of Writtle and Hatfield for the lifetime of the then Earl, who had

> wasted and altogether destroyed his wood called 'le Heghwode' in the town of Writtle to the harm of the king and his beasts.
>
> *Cal. Close Rolls*

Earlier that year there had been a *post-mortem* valuation of the previous Earl's estate. There is no mention of the Forest. In Writtle Park there was no underwood; the pasture would have been worth £7 3*s* 8*d* per annum 'if the deer were not there'; pannage was worth 13*s* 4*d* 'when it happens'; windfall-wood was worth 3*s* 4*d* per annum (PRO: C135/48(2)).

Earlier, the *post-mortem* valuation of Eleanor the Bruce's one-third of the manor in 1331 had included the pasture and underwood of Writtle Park, worth £6 per annum 'besides the sustaining of the deer' (PRO: C135/28(6)).

The perambulation Writtle has a magnificent perambulation describing the bounds of the legal Forest, made in 1358 but probably repeating a perambulation of 1297 (ERO: D/DP M1325). It resembles the 1299 perambulation for Hatfield (*The Last Forest* p.62–6), but is much longer. As at Hatfield, the legal Forest coincided closely with the modern parish, the physical Forest being in a corner. The value of both perambulations is that they describe transects of ordinary Essex countryside.

The boundary points include many lanes, ditches and hedges. There are many isolated houses, with their names and occupiers; some of them are easily identified today, for example Copifold Hall and Abbas Reden (now Redindyke) in Margaretting. As at Hatfield, the perambulation passes beside the physical Forest without mentioning it directly; it does, however, record several horns (projections where the Forest, like any other common, funnelled out from the roads that crossed it) and hatches (gates on roads into the Forest). It mentions the parks of Writtle (which had a 'Saltern' – a salt-lick?) and Horsefrith.

The hermitage In the twelfth century one Robert the Monk set up a hermitage in the Forest. King Stephen in a charter confirmed to him an enclosure with a great ditch, and rights to timber, firewood, and pasturage for his animals. He was an official hermit, like those in Hainault Forest and at Hermitage in Blackmore Forest (Dorset). Later he joined St John's Abbey, Colchester, and was made Prior, with a second monk under him. By a charter of Henry II the 'Hermitagium de Bedemannesberga' was comfortably endowed. It was to have

> two monks, priests, forever staying in the same hermitage, always praying the mercy of God for the salvation of the living king and form the souls of dead kings.

They were to have 4d a day pocket-money, and the right to have 'their men gathering nuts in the surrounding forest as long as the gathering season lasts' (*Cartularium . . . de Colecestria* I 68).

The site became Monk's-at-Barrow (now corrupted to 'Monks and Barrows') Farm. Various antiquities of medieval and earlier date have been found, including, it is claimed, a holy well, a chapel, and fishponds.

The Later Middle Ages

The landscape E.C. Newton, author of *The Manor of Writtle*, has constructed a series of maps of Writtle as inferred from 14th- and 16th-century documents. The lord's demesne lands were gathered in great fields filling the landscape north of Writtle town and Roxwell. The lands of tenants – some three-quarters of the parish – were in small enclosures, rarely over 20 acres and often only an acre or two. There was very little permanent pasture, and at times of high farming this would have increased pressure on the common-land, most of which was in or adjacent to the Forest.

The rolls of the manorial courts often record disputes concerning hedges or the trees growing in them.

The Forest, like other commons, had houses scattered round its edges. Several people are reported as living in 'Hetwood'. The hermit was still active; in 1398–9 he was encroaching on the common.

Newton emphasizes the lack of evidence of change, especially of diminution of the woods, in this period. It is quite clear that the landscape of Writtle, which survived, in a thinned-out form, into modern times, was already established no later than the Black Death.

Management of trees I have seen court rolls, including woodsale accounts, for 1396–7, 1397–8, 1398–9, 1406–7 and 1425–6 (ERO D/DP M200, 201, 210, 1422). (For the first three of these years the de Bohuns

were under a cloud: Eleanor de Bohun's husband had disappeared for high treason against Richard II.) These are records of the manorial, not Forest, courts, the ones I have read are only a small sample of the whole.

For these years, sales of wood are recorded for 'Helwood', Writtle Park, and Horsfrith, and also from the warren. There are numerous mentions of trees and bushes elsewhere, including pollard oaks and willows in hedges, and poplars in farmland and in a road.

The most remarkable items are sales of pollard beeches in the park and Highwood. These are referred to as *lopp' fagorum*, 'lops of beeches', or *capita fagorum* 'heads [or ends] of beeches'. A typical entry is:

> To John Howchin [of the noted mid-Essex family] in Heywode for five *capita fagorum* 15*d*.

119 beeches were pollarded in 1397–8, realizing £2 16*s* 6*d* and smaller numbers in other years. Those in the Park averaged 5.4*d* per tree, but in Highwood only 2.5*d*. These were evidently beeches pollarded on a long rotation. The Park also contained underwood, which sold for 13*s* 4*d* per acre, equivalent to thirty Park beeches. The large size of the pollard beeches is confirmed by a dispute, in 1396–7, between John Bachelor, who had bought eight lops, and John Borell, who (he claimed) had not turned up to transport them as promised. Bachelor brought a counter-claim for 3*s* 4*d* in lost time, alleging that Bachelor

> should have faggotted up the topmost branches of the aforesaid lops and should have split with wedges (*racwaccer*) all the great underwood ready to load on the cart according to contract, which was not duly done; so that the aforesaid John Borell took 3 days longer to carry the aforesaid wood than if it had been faggoted and split.

Although the main sales were from pollards, there were also sales of underwood by the acre from the Park and Highwood. For example, in 1399, six quarter- and half-acre plots of underwood were sold in 'HelWod' at 12*s* the acre. In Horsefrith the only sales were by area: 6 1/4 acres in 1396–7 and again in 1397–8 at 13*s* 4*d* the acre. These, too, were to a multitude of small buyers in half-, quarter- and eighth-acre plots. Further, there were sales of branchwood (*cropp' defrondacio*) from trees felled for timber or for repairing the park pale. Beeches (an unsuitable timber) were used on the pale in 1396–9.

From all three places, there were sales of underwood in 1397–8 'felled by the rage of the wind happening this November'.

One of the few mentions of specific trees is 37 ashes felled in Horsfrith for making hoops in 1406–7, their branchwood was sold.

There are occasional mentions of groves not part of the Forest. The de Bohun valuation in 1336 had included a wood called Horseyheg, of which 1 acre was sold annually for 3*s*. There was no pasture 'because of the density of thorns'.

The court rolls include many small 'fines' levied on people for 'stealing'

branches and wood from Highwood and elsewhere. As often with medieval fines, these seem mostly to have been by way of payment rather than penalty. Examples from the early sixteenth century (quoted in the 1663 court case, see below) include the cutting of '10 small beeches of the bigness of hoppoles in the Lords Wood' (fine 6*s*), and 'cutting a small Sallowe in the Lords Wood called Highwood'.

Pasturage 'Heiwod' and 'Edenhey' (Edney) are mentioned as commons, but the ordinary operation of the common-rights is not recorded. Pasturage appears mainly in the form of 'fines' – never deterrent – for animals, probably by outsiders or others who had no rights. For example, in 1397–8 there was a fine for 'overburdening the common in HeWod' with 30 sheep.

Pannage and avesage These appear in the court rolls in much the same terms as at Hatfield. Avesage was a tax on pigs, apparently in return for the right to take pigs into the Forest to feed on acorns, though it was still due if the right was not used or if there were no acorns that year. The records indicate that pigs were not kept in such numbers as at Hatfield – for instance, in 1397 there were 327 pigs avesaged at Writtle. Pannage at Writtle comes in the form of 'fines' levied on dozens of people for trespassing with pigs in Highwood and the warrens (but also in stubble-fields) at pannage time. The fines were sometimes the same as avesage dues and sometimes double, and were probably not meant as a penalty.

Acorns were the lord's property: in 1397 six people were 'fined' up to a shilling each for gathering them in the Forest and warren.

Minerals There were prosecutions for digging clay in Highwood. For example, John Syghe was fined 3*d* for making two pits for clay by night. There is also a mention of a sandpit. On one occasion the pit was said to have been a nuisance to the animals; pits would have infringed the lord's mineral rights.

There was apparently peat in Edney. In 1397–8

> John Deighe of Heiwod dug a turbary in Edenhey & dug turves thence & took & removed them to the damage of the common pasture [fined 3*d*]

The Petre Centuries

The Duke of Buckingham's decapitation by Henry VIII in 1521 was permanent and his lands stayed confiscated. Hatfield and Writtle eventually went to two of the king's ministers: Hatfield to Lord Rich of infamous memory; Writtle to Sir William Petre, the king's secretary, who bought it in 1554 and whose descendants still have it. The Petres, as lords of Ingatestone, already owned many of the woods abutting the Forest on the south. By 1800

they were probably the biggest woodland owners in Essex; their estates included Norsey Wood and many others away from Writtle.

An account-roll of 1523 refers to 'fforesta de highewood' (PNEx), but it is unlikely that anything still remained of the Forest as an institution.

Woods High Wood and Edney Wood had reached at least approximately their modern area by 1564 (Newton).

As in the middle ages, references to conventional underwood are infrequent (maybe because it was commonplace and taken for granted). The 1564 accounts include £24 worth of underwood sold in small lots 'out of the new Spring in Edney'. The account for 1571 includes £125 for the sale of a spring on the SE side of Horsefrith. These sales, however, were probably only a small part of the operation: Petre's men included a 'cosier' or charcoal-maker (Emmison, *Home, Work & Land* 228).

Occasionally the trees are specified: 'one small lode of Asshewoodd' in 1564; 12½ loads of aspen in 1564 and 1571. These latter sold for from 4*s* 8*d* to 7*s* 4*d* the load, which seems expensive.

In 1639 Petre ordered the felling of 1500 timber trees in Writtle

> very many of them groweinge to[o] thicke in coppice woods doe spoile & hinder the growth of the underwoods & many of them doted and decayed.

William, now Lord, Petre, got into political trouble during the Civil War, though not so deeply as Lord Morley did at Hatfield. In 1644 his lands fell under the local Parliamentary Committee for Delinquency, who let him off with a fine of £3000, to be raised by the sale of underwoods and decayed trees. Throughout the Commonwealth period he was complaining, for example, that 'the said 3000[li] is satisfied with a great overplus'; 'the destrucion already made in the said woods hath bin very great'; but a Parliamentary commissioner, a member of the Committee, was continuing to fell yet more underwood and not properly accounting for the money.

After the Commonwealth was over, Lord Petre prosecuted one John Wallis for taking half a load of underwood from Parson's Spring, for digging clay on one of the plains, and for putting a mare and some hogs to feed in the woods. The defendant claimed that there was a custom

> That all the Tennents of the Mannor may cutt & take away sufficient splinters & Withes of the underwood in all the Lords Woods . . . for repairing the walls and thatching the houses . . . as often as shalbe. And that his said dwelling house Barne & Porch being in decay [he had helped himself]

Lord Petre, however, contended

> All the underwoods w[ch] in the Manor are Common woods that were inclosed by the Statiute] of Hen[ry]7 and are att 7 yeares groweth laid open for the Tennts to feed. And before that Stat. they were noe woods, But Commons & then sowne for woods, So that there is not likelyhood of any such Custome . . .
>
> [Now] under pretence of cutting Thatching Stuff & Splinters All the

pilein Hill & Woods that are about 600 acres are mangled & spoiled.

This is a first reference (for Writtle) to the principle of compartmentation. In a survey of 1781 it was spelt out thus:

> In the Woods . . . after the cutting of the Copse Wood, Lord Petre has a Right to inclose them for the Space of 7 Years, after which it is thrown open to the Tenants of the Manor for the further Space of 10 years when it is again cut down as Lord Petre's Property.

Lord Petre presumably had in mind the Statute of Woods of 1543, although he was mistaken in claiming that the Forest woods had originated then. (He himself quoted examples from the court rolls which prove the opposite.) Like many who have quoted that statute since, he was wrong in supposing that it had caused a radical change in the status or management of woods; least of all could it have done so in Writtle, languishing in royal hands at the time. However, he was probably right in asserting that compartmentation was then a long-established custom. The right to 'splinters and withes' – the horizontal and vertical components of wattle-and-daub panels in timber-framed buildings – may have been part of the manorial custom of housebote.

By the late 17th century we hear the names of all the springs, and a normal rotation for cutting them, as follows:

	Present name	*Years in which cut**
Hilly Spring	Ellis	1688 & 89, 1700 & 01
Parsons Spring	Parson's	1691, 1703
Edney Spring	Great Edney	1691, 1703, 1711
Barrow Spring	Barrow	1691, 1705
Dearslade	Deerslade	1693, 1706
Coppy Spring	Coppice Wood	1696, 1708
Birchwood	Birch Spring	1698
Edney Common Wood	Little Edney?	1709

*A note says: Severall of the springs were cutt in 2 yeares altho the same are not so exactly distinguisht, neither is ye yeare punctually observed in w^ch^ they were cutt, but generally the yeare following in w^ch^ they were measured & paid for is putt downe.

There is an attempt at a 12- to 16-year rotation. This included numerous other Petre woods; hence there were years in which nothing was cut in Writtle.

Similar information, accompanied by maps of the springs, continues through the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century; it includes the woods, such as Great and Little Stoneymore, which adjoined the Forest on the south. Usually a whole spring was cut all at once. Coppice rotations, which should have been 15 years according to the 1781 survey, in practice varied from 12 to 17, with a tendency to lengthen in later decades.

Prices of underwood from 1690 to 1710 work out at between £0.07 and

£0.20 per acre per year of growth, not dissimilar from values at Hatfield Forest, and well under the average for Essex at the time. In the 1720s and again in the 1780s they were around £0.20 per acre per year; they then rose to an average of about £0.45 from 1805 to 1830, after which there was a slight fall. These changes are largely accounted for by inflation, but there had been a real rise in the price of wood at Writtle, in relation both to the value of money and to the value of other woods. By 1810 the Writtle springs were similar in value to the average for Essex coppices; they had not, however, increased in value as much as those of Hatfield Forest.

Most of the underwood was sold by the acre, but small amounts of particular kinds are specified: rake handles, pea sticks, tit faggots, brash faggots, rails, crotches etc.

In the 1790s there were large sales of bark from the felling of oaks in the springs, as well as from Writtle Park, Edney Common and Mill Green. We also hear of oak faggots, stackwoode and other by-products. Sales of oak timber do not always correspond: the biggest was of 170 loads – either 6800 or 8500 cubic feet – from Coppice Wood in 1802.

Expenses of the woods were mainly limited to small amounts of work on the boundaries. The biggest item was the purchase and setting of 20,000 hawthorns for a new 'fence' on the enlarging of the Stoneymoor Woods in 1799.

Plains and pollards Sales of pollards continued in the early Petre years. In 1564–70 we find sales of 'loppes' and 'crownes' of unspecified trees, at prices of from 2*s* to 8*s* per lop; the difference from *c* 1400 cannot all be due to rising prices, and suggests that by then the pollards were even bigger trees. The 1570 account includes '12 loppes and one tree which was felled for bees', a rare allusion (for England) to bees accumulating honey in hollow trees. The last reference to 'lopinge of beach in the parke' was in 1653–4.

The plains were tree'd in the 18th century, as shown, for example, on the Writtle map of 1783 (*Catalogue of Maps in the ERO* 1 Plate XXI). Oak and elm timber were felled.

Pollarding is still occasionally mentioned in the 1790s. In 1794 there were '625 pollards fall'd off Edney Common' – about ten pollards per acre. This was the end of a long-standing and characteristic feature of the Forest, then becoming very unfashionable.

The Writtle commons themselves were destroyed in 1871, under one of the last Enclosure Acts. Only Mill Green in Ingatestone remained, and narrow strips between woods and roads.

Parks Sir William Petre took over the estate when parks were back in fashion. He kept up both parks, and had a paler for each (Emmison, *Home, Work & Land* 228). Deer appear in Elizabethan poaching cases (Emmison, *Disorder*, 240).

The upkeep of Writtle Park included much hedging and ditching.

Already in 1554 there was a payment to

> Nicolas Marshe & his company ffor makyng the new diche in Writell Park conteynyng 6 score roodde [nearly half a mile] being 3 ffoote deppe & 6 foote brodde, ffynding all quyckesettes of white bushe themselfes.

In 1563 he leased to Thomas Weld a meadow in the park which had become 'much overgrowen w^th^ busshes brakes and Roots of trees', which Weld was to reclaim.(ERO. D/DP E24).

Horsefrith Park was apparently dissolved by 1634. From this year onwards the site was leased to Symon Breakneck, who was to

> sett plant and maynteyne to growe and Continue for fier woode in and for ev'y pfer ich in length in and upon the bankes of the ditches of all such hedges as shalbee cutt and newe made one younge sale [sallow?] sche or elme.

The lease included a 16-acre wood – presumably the present Horsefrith Park Wood – and specifies the number of acres of each year's growth, up to 8 years', in which the wood was to be left at the end of the lease (ERO. D/DP E26)

Writtle Park continued even during the Commonwealth, many 'asshen plants' and 'quicke' were set in it (or more likely its hedges) in 1653–4. The pasture was agisted with horses and cattle. After the Restoration three men who had killed a doe in the park were convicted of riot, and sentenced to 3 months and to pay £6 compensation – an exceptionally severe punishment for poaching (ERO. Q/SR 420/106)

From 1703 onwards the park was leased. The leases specify the numbers and ages of the fallow deer (237 in 1726), and also of the carp, and even the tench and perch, in the ponds. At first there were rabbits, but by 1726 the lessees

> shall not keep any Rabbetts within the said Park, but on the Contrary shall use their utmost Endeavours to prevent any Rabbetts from burrowing in the said Park that may come from the Woods or other neighbouring grounds.

Later in the century the park was much reduced in size, but it was still shown as a 'Deer Park' on the Ordnance Survey of 1918.

The Twentieth Century

The Writtle woods continued with remarkably little change. An air photograph taken by the Germans on 31 August 1940 shows the whole of the Highwood woods and Fryerning Wood actively coppiced, with large areas recently cut. On field evidence, coppicing ceased abruptly after this time, there has been some revival since.

The woods largely escaped Victorian planting fashions and big fellings of timber between 1914 and 1945, except for the felling of most of the timber in Ellis Spring after 1940. There was some attempt at replanting in Great

Edney. In the late 1960s, as was then customary, about one-fifth of the Forest woods was grubbed out and made into arable land.

The Stoneymoor Woods, in contrast, were last coppiced *c* 1860, and since then have suffered several attempts to convert them to timber only. There are remains of Victorian conifer planting and of a small plantation, likewise unsuccessful, which began *c* 1940.

The surviving fragments of common are now mostly wooded. What is left of Edney Common was evidently planted with a mixture of trees and then abandoned. Mill Green, however, is natural oakwood of various ages up to at least a century; much of it has been felled once.

The Forest As It Is Now

Environment The Forest, and the woods and commons to the south, lie on hills of sandy and gravelly deposits overlying clay. There is a sequence from London Clay at the bottom, through Claygate and Bagshot Beds, to pebble gravels and Head on the hilltops. Much of this is overlain by thin deposits of loess (windblown dust).

This is like most of the wooded areas of south Essex, for example Epping Forest and the Rochford-Southend area. It produces a characteristic sequence of soils, from silty clays in the valleys to silty gravels on the hilltops, all of them very acid, mostly ill-drained, and infertile or very infertile. (For further details see *Woods of South-East Essex*)

The Forest is thus a typically South Essex landscape; but it lies right against the edge of this type of country. The rest of Writtle belongs to the north Essex boulder-clay plateau. Horsfrith Park was on boulder-clay (with overlying loess). Towards Writtle town the early-medieval prolongation of Edney Wood ran on to boulder-clay; Southwood still survives on an outlier of boulder-clay.

The woods Most of the woods are ancient coppices, with big stools and standard oak-trees. They are surrounded by woodbanks, exactly corresponding to the compartmentation system within the Forest, and to the ancient boundaries of woods outside it. The banks also record historical changes, such as a piece being added to the Stoneymoor Woods at the expense of Mill Green. Usually the woodbanks face outwards, with the ditch on the side of the adjacent common or road.

Much of the oak, as in other South Essex hilltop woods, is of the sessile species rather than the common pedunculate oak. The underwood includes chestnut, an ancient introduction to Essex. How it got here is not known; it was encouraged, and in places planted, by the Petres, but there are also ancient stools. It behaves as if it were a native tree.

As in the SE Essex woods, there is a sequence of woodland types, from oakwood on the very acid and infertile hilltops, through chestnut- and

hornbeam-woods, to ashwood on the clayey lower slopes, with ribbons of alder-wood along streams. Most of the area is hornbeam-wood, followed by chestnut-wood.

There is a tendency for the oak to be sessile on the infertile hilltops (as in the Stoneymoor Woods) and pedunculate in the less extreme kinds of woodland (as in the Edney Woods). Birch Spring illustrates the transition between the two well-known types of hornbeam-wood: Pure Hornbeam (with comparatively few oaks, mainly pedunculate) in the NW and Oak-Hornbeam (with many oaks, mainly sessile) in the SE. Rowan and holly are commonly interspersed in the more acid woods.

The woods are generally well preserved. In the Stoneymoors, little of the original woodland structure survives (although enough to establish their history and position in the sequence). Ellis Spring has been much invaded by birch, following the establishment, and then felling, of many standard oaks. The replanting of part of Great Edney has also ended in birch invasion.

The flora, although generally poor, includes some uncommon plants such as alder-buckthorn and the fern *Blechnum spicant*. Service is less common than in the SE Essex woods, but has been reported from some of the eastern woods and outliers.

Great Stoneymoor Wood has one of the most remarkable floras of a wet, acid, very infertile hilltop wood. There is the characteristic moss of such places, *Leucobryum glaucum*, and the characteristic grass *Deschampsia flexuosa*. Heather and the wet-heath grass *Molinia* occur in Great Stoneymoor, doubtless as relicts of the coppicing flora.

A feature of the woods are the many valleys, some with alder, others with willow, with ash and hazel along their flanks and a rich flora.

The parks Of Writtle Park little now remains except the outline and the site of the park lodge. The park still has some woodland in it, partly derived from plantations, though it is possible that some of the woods go back to the deer-park period. There are beeches in the park, but these seem to be planted trees, or descendants of such, rather than ancient pollards. It is unlikely that native beech survives at Writtle, either in the park or on the commons.

Of Horsefrith Park most of the outline survives as hedges. Horsefrith Park Wood may well be the original Horsefrith Wood, dating from before the park, or a fragment of it.

The commons Mill Green is rich in both woodland and non-woodland plants. It ranges from well-established woodland to remnants of wet heath. The woodland includes a patch of lily-of-the-valley, which is remarkable for a new wood; presumably it has spread from Stoneymoor Wood adjacent. The heath includes heather and the *Molinia*; there are records of *Sphagnum*.

The fragment of Edney Common, though an old plantation, also retains swamps and other considerable remains of the original vegetation.

I have not found any pollards on the plains. The only survivors are in the hedges of the Bedemansberg enclave, and a few on woodbanks.