

ANCIENT WOODLAND

Contrary to common belief, much of the wooded areas of England had already been cleared when the Saxons arrived. In fact, only about 12% of Norfolk was woodland at that time. However, the name Wootton (Wood town) suggests that the area around Castle Rising may have been still heavily wooded. This is borne out by the Domesday Book, which records the parish of Babingley having woodland to support 60 pigs (a large number for that period). Since pigs fed largely on acorns, when available, this too suggests the area had extensive oak woods.

Woodlands provided timber for building material, firewood for heating and “underwood” for smaller pieces of wood for making tools, laths and fencing. Parishes guarded their woodlands carefully for they provided many raw materials for everyday life. Woodlands were carefully managed on a “Coppice with Standards” regime. The standards were the large trees, often oak or ash, whereas the coppices were cut on a regular basis to provide a continuing supply of thinner branches. The standards provided the large beams that can be seen today in some of the older houses and barns in the parish (see Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Beams in Number 21 Castle Rising.

Trees like the oak could be grown to produce a large central trunk and numerous coppiced basal branches which could be cropped on a regular basis.

There are two ancient woods in the parish - the **Alder (now Wootton) Carr** and the **Great Mill (now Castle Rising) Wood**. Both are of great antiquity and neither was destroyed in the twentieth century, unlike so many similar woods throughout England.

Both of these woods are bounded by a strong bank and an external ditch (see Fig. 2). The photograph also shows both standard trees and coppiced trees with smaller branches coming from their base. These woods are now somewhat degraded and valued mainly as pheasant cover.



Figure 2. Edge of Alder Carr, showing ditch, coppice and standards.

The **Alder Carr** is in the north-west corner of the parish, near to the gamekeeper's cottage. It is shared with the parish of North Wootton, and - as its name implies - it has a large number of alder trees.

It is mentioned as early as the 13th century: *"a grant by Thomas son of Adam le Porter of Rising to Godfrey Sefrey of North Wootton of 2.5 acres of land in field called Colstan abutting on the Lord's Alder Carr. Rent one pair of gloves price 1d. Dated N. Wootton 27 Jun 1294."*

Both alder and hazel are mentioned in documents as growing in the Alder Carr. However oak was also harvested there, as an item in the 1883 Estate Account Book reports: *"James Page for jankering (i.e removing with the aid of a wheeled contraption) Oak trees from Car wood £1. 15. 0d."*

The other wood, **the Great Mill Wood**, is north-east of the village along the old highway with Onion Corner at its north-west edge. It is smaller now than it once was but still retains much of its original shape and many features of an ancient woodland. An inventory of the Manor in 1720 reported *"120 Timber Trees in Millwood at 4s per tree"*. A timber yard formerly stood at the top of Nightmare Lane, close to this wood.

The above-mentioned 1883 Estate Account Book shows that both woods and the more recently developed Fowler's Plantation {beyond the present bypass and on the former Goose Moor} were being actively worked in the late 19th century. Entries included *"Clearing out drains in Car and Rising Woods."* *"Preparing firewood. Carting chips and billet [logs for fire] from Car."* *"Repairing hedges in Rising Wood."* *"Cutting Hazel in Car."* *"Cross cutting trees in Mill Wood and Fowlers Wood."* *"clearing out Car and Mill Woods."*

Both woodlands are shown on the 1588 and the 1732 maps. They must have been just beyond the reach of the highest tides in Saxon times, prior to the building of the old sea wall.

Woodlands were very valuable and there are several references to the need to protect them. In 1706, in an inventory the Howards of Ashted were advised that the Millwood *"should be carefully preserved and must be fenced against cattle and horses"*. But animals were not the only danger. An entry in the Castle Rising Parish Book of 1766 reminded the

villagers that there were serious penalties (including transportation or prison) for anyone “*who shall willfully cut, burn, damage or destroy, or carry away any Timber trees, or trees likely to become timber or any part thereof without the consent of the owner* [i.e. the Lord of the Manor]”. Even entering the woods and damaging the underwoods had serious consequences.

The woods still have remnants of the rich flora and fauna for which the ancient woods were famous, including bluebells, primroses and wild garlic. Sadly, the nightingales, which could be found in the parish in 2005, have now abandoned these ancient woodlands.