

Before Daeda's Wood

We know from the 1793 Richard Davis map of the parish that Deddington was cleared of woodland as the agricultural history of the 19th century began. After 1808 Act of Enclosure, hedges began to appear in great number. Mature trees were a feature of lanes and field boundaries by the time of the 1830 OS map of Oxfordshire, but never is there a large woodland. Nevertheless, parish woods, such as we have, and wooded edges, ornament the landscape, provide cover for deer, rabbit, pheasant, and crow, and create the feeling that time stands still.

'Ancient woods' are 'those which have had a continuous woodland cover since at least AD 1600 and have only been cleared for understorey or timber production'. In 'the Cherwell Valley ... no wood at all is recorded for most of the villages except on the east of the river from Islip down'. There is 'relict ancient woodland', as it has been described by English Nature, in Worton Wood (20 ha) in Worton parish; but Deddington is more typical of Cherwell Valley villages, a landscape from which trees were felled and pastures grazed long before the 1808. Yet wooded places add a picturesque quality to parish fields and hills.

Daeda's Wood has reversed this trend. The Woodland Trust sponsored the planting of 3,500 trees in 1996 on a 3.68 ha field by the River Swere, part of the Woods-On-Your-Doorstep project. Daeda's Wood exemplifies the new values of late 20th-century plantations: trees are planted independently of commercial value. The new wood is managed in the new way: fallen limbs are left for the processes of degradation by fungi and invertebrate organisms, returning cellulose to soil. Values of landscape beauty and public amenity satisfy the short-term needs of an urban people. But what was there before Daeda's Wood?

In his words, and with his wife Daphne's help as scribe, Ronald Canning remembers: 'When I was a boy in the 1930s, my grandfather and his sons farmed the two water meadows where the Millennium Wood known as Daeda's Wood has now been developed. The barn, which is now a private house and the field around it, on the other side of the Mill road, was also part of his farm. The meadows, although very wet, did not have any great depth of water but could only be used for grazing and haymaking in the summer. During periods of heavy rain the river used to flood but most of the water lay in Mr Lovell's fields to the west of Daeda's Wood.

The trees along the bank of the river were crack willows which were cut back during the winter to provide materials for post and rails and for making hurdles which were used for penning sheep. It was very precarious to pollard the willows, because, true to their names, the trunks would sometimes split and fall to the ground so woe betide anyone who was in the way.'

500 words @ 2/12/02