

## **Living With Trees - Case Study**

**Fingle Wood** <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/visiting-woods/wood/5663/fingle-woods/>

### **Part 1 – Forest Heritage (info from Dave Rickwood, WT)**

The tides of history have swept across the landscape of South Devon bringing a constant procession of tribes, hunters, farmers, knights, lords, monks, craftspeople and visionaries. Fingle Woods have provided a stage for these historical dramas over thousands of years and offered the players a rich resource of timber, bark, fuel, coppice, grazing and shelter.

The latest tribes to enjoy Fingle's timeless bounty are the Woodland Trust (WT) and National Trust. WT's Site Manager Dave Rickwood reflects on Fingle's special qualities:

“The thread of human connection from the Bronze Age to the present and how important the woodland landscape has been to people's lives, is the key for me.



During the Bronze and Iron ages people settled and sought protection on the high promontories of Fingle and hunted and foraged the woodlands to sustain themselves. This was followed by the development of complex land ownership and rights exercised for livestock, fuel, and building materials, some of which is recorded in the Domesday Book. Over a thousand years there are glimpses into the lives of local people utilising the woodland for timber, coppice, tan bark, fish and feeding livestock.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the rural economy changed and woodlands slowly lost their role as a cornerstone of the rural economy, embodied by the term used to map areas of moribund coppice as “waste”.

This decline was followed by a sense of renewal following the first world war and key to this was the role of the philanthropist and visionary Leonard Elmhirst and the Dartington Estate. He acquired the woodlands in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and set about the conversion of the “waste” under the guidance of renowned forestry academic Wilfred Hiley to a more productive conifer silviculture. Their plan was to revive the rural economy from the post war depression of the 1930s and to create employment, a vision that is still greatly appreciated by the people of Moretonhampstead.

However, despite their drive and passion the “Forestry Venture” fell into decline in the 1960s just as the immense timber resource of the woodlands was beginning to mature. The woodlands were sold and it was the pension funds that benefited from that earlier philanthropic vision. Much of the remaining mature conifer succumbed to the storms of the 1990s. The woods were replanted, but they faced the combined challenges of “making it pay” with young crops, faltering markets and the cyclical nature of clearfell silviculture.



With some good fortune, the Woodland Trust and National Trust were able to acquire the site in 2013 with the support of local people. In some respects the charities see the restoration of this ‘plantation on ancient woodland site’ (PAWS) as a continuation of the philanthropy of the Elmhirsts, creating local employment, opportunities for peaceful recreation and remaining relevant to the lives of local people and visitors alike.

However, tree disease, the observed loss of species on Dartmoor and the emerging impacts of the changing climate are now ever present. These deep valley woodlands provide a stable refugia where some of our most iconic but most threatened woodland species might continue to thrive. The future of these magnificent woodlands has perhaps never been more important.”