

Six Acres field at Beech Oasts, Sedlescombe, East Sussex

A report by Patrick Roper, 29 March 2010

The centre of an area of ancient woodland about a kilometre north of Sedlescombe village church and to the west of the B2244 was, until just after World War II, an open field known as Six Acres (19th C tithe map). The Ordnance Survey grid reference is TQ774199. This field is mapped in more or less its mid-20th century shape as far back as the late 18th century (Yeakell and Gardner, 1778-1783). It is not shown as 'ancient woodland' on modern maps (e.g. the government's Magic interactive map) and from its irregular shape and well-preserved banks around the borders it would appear to have been assarted from woodland at an early date.

Six Acres is just over 60 metres above sea level and lies largely on Wadhurst Clay with a small area of Tunbridge Wells Sand to the east. The land slopes north west and, on the further side of Long Wood, into the valley of the Rusty Brook, a tributary of the river Brede. As well as Long Wood, Six Acres is bounded by Beech Wood to the south, Oast House Shaw to the east and Cinderbank Shaw to the north. The last name indicates the long history of Wealden iron working associated with this valley. Various maps showing its position are included at the end of this document.

After World War II much of the area was planted with Norway spruce for Christmas trees, but not harvested. The remainder was allowed to scrub over and had until recent felling developed into secondary broadleaved woodland by natural regeneration, with much ash among other tree species.

The southern part of Six Acres is owned by William Trelawney-Vernon of Beech Oasts, a property that lies about 200 metres east of the 'field'. He has currently cleared the regenerated area on part of Six Acres under a felling licence from the Forestry Commission (No. 019/187/08-09). He would now like to keep 0.83 hectares (2 acres) of Six Acres as open grassland, as was historically the case, and would manage it for its wildlife interest alongside the surrounding woodlands under a professionally drawn up management plan. The 0.83 hectares consists of compartments 1 and 2 on the Forestry Commission's felling licence.

The Rusty Brook valley is of considerable historic and landscape interest. In the Combe Wood area, a short distance south of the site under discussion (see map at the end of this document) Mesolithic flints and Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts have been found. There were Iron Age, Roman and medieval iron works in the valley and the field lies between two Roman roads (Lucey, 1978). The ancient assart of Six Acres within the woodlands is very much part of this historic fabric.

On the western side of the valley across Rusty Brook and the valley bottom fields lies Footlands Wood. This Forestry Commission property is a mixture of conifer and broadleaf plantations and there are several open spaces of comparable size to Six Acres that have been maintained as open by the Commission and are important in the context of the whole area for wildlife and amenity reasons. Similar open spaces have also been recently created on former farmland in Brede High Woods owned by the Woodland Trust and lying a short distance to the east.

There is continuous tree cover from the woods on the east of the Rusty Brook valley to Footlands Wood on the west via a narrow strip of wet woodland running across the valley (TQ770196).

This western end of what has been named the 'Rother Woods' where Six Acres lies is rich in biodiversity, much of it dependent on the pattern of ancient woodlands and unimproved grasslands distributed in the traditional Wealden manner of small farms, once with orchards, hop gardens, coppice, areas of heath and common grazing. A report obtained in March 2010 from the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre on the Six Acres area shows that some 46 Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species have been recorded within 1 kilometre of the site and even more species from the Sussex Rare Species Inventory.

Much of this biodiversity flourishes as a result of the mixed habitats that occur locally, especially along the ecotones between woodland and open grass or heath. Species that thrive in such habitats have much better long-term prospects if they can move about across a wider area such as Rother Woods as dictated by the dynamic between species and their various predators and diseases.

Six Acres can become of much greater biological importance locally and across the wider area if it is returned to flower-rich grassland with a carefully managed interface around the ancient woodland edges. There is likely to be a number of surviving grassland plants both on the ground and in the subsurface seed bank which would be of great importance in restoring the open grassland and edge habitats. This will not only improve matters so far as Six Acres itself is concerned, it will act in synergy with the ancient woodlands themselves so that their biodiversity is also enhanced and given additional long-term stability.

Baseline ecological surveys will be carried out during the warmer months of 2010 and, should part of Six Acres be returned to permanent grassland, it will be carefully monitored and the results reported in writing.

It should be stressed that what is proposed is a conservation and amenity operation, as is the case with the spaces in Footlands Wood and neighbouring Brede High Woods, and not an agricultural or development one. It is a splendid opportunity to enrich the natural environment in this local area as a contribution to the International Year of Biodiversity 2010 declared by the United Nations.

It is also in accord with the Woodlands and Forestry Work Programme 2006-2010 in the government's England Biodiversity Strategy where the anticipated outcome is "A significant contribution to the restoration and re-creation targets for open ground priority habitats through removal of trees from appropriate sites." (Driver, 2008) Under this rubric, the cleared area of Six Acres would be restored as a Lowland Meadow Neutral Grassland UK Biodiversity Action Plan Habitat.

REFERENCES

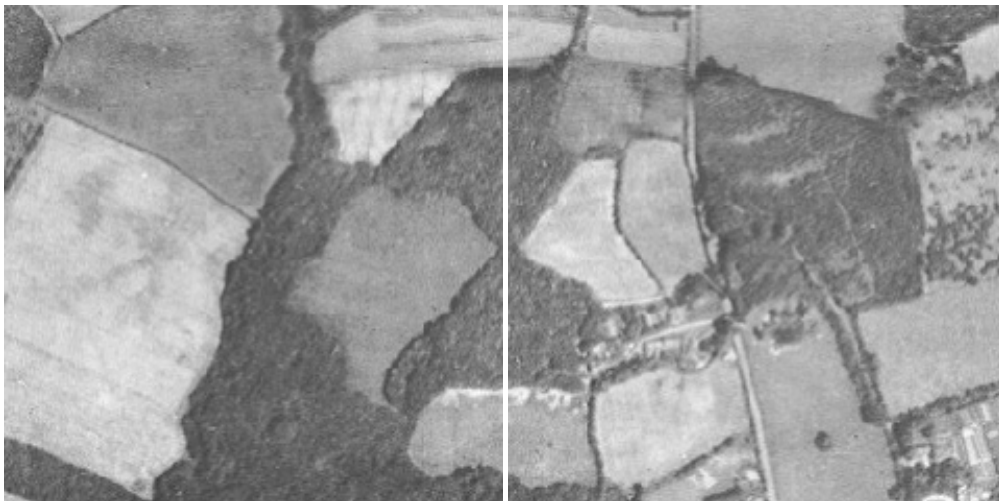
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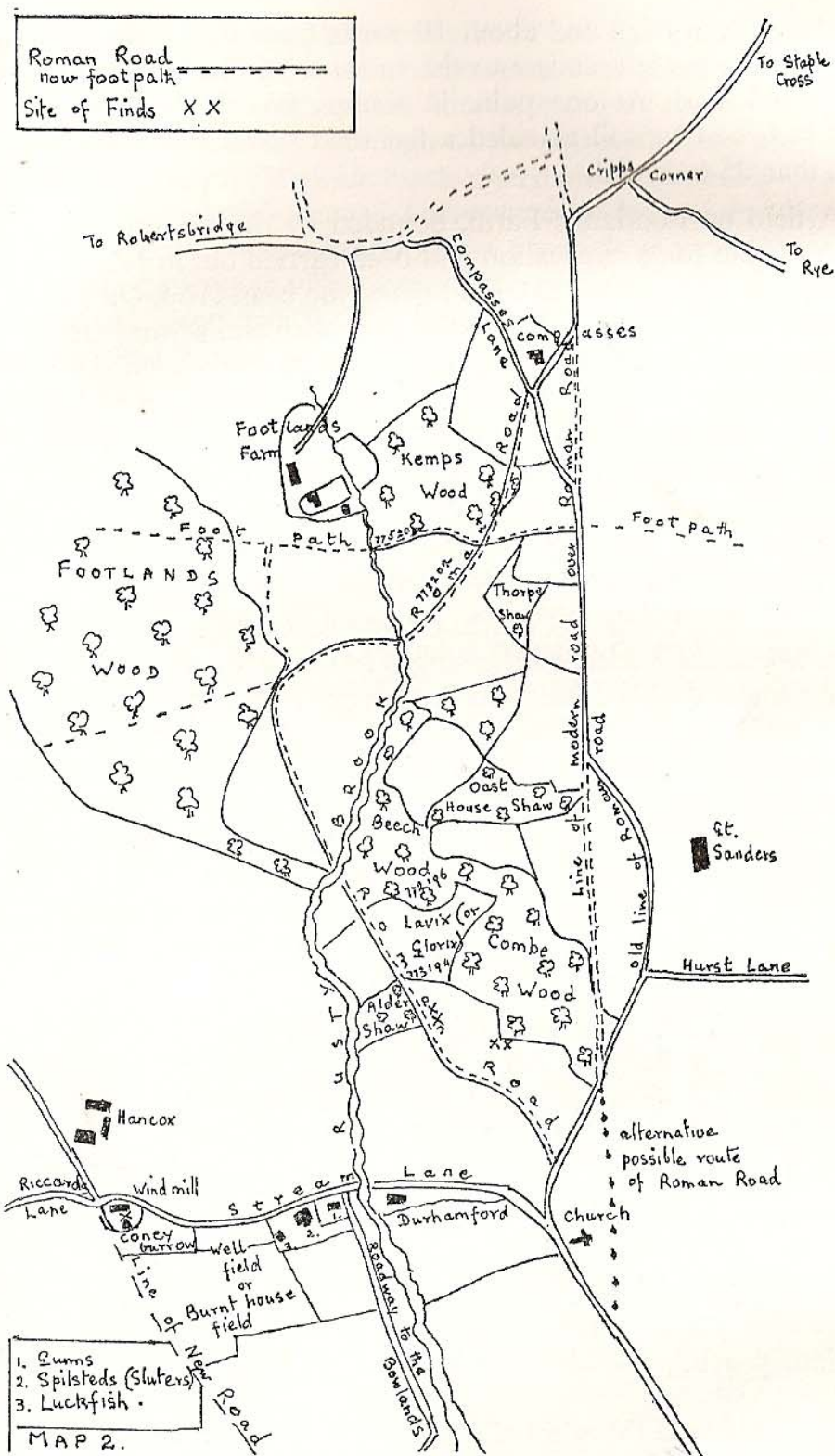
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Yeakell and Gardner 1778-1783. Six Acres is almost in centre surrounded by woodland.



1945-1949. Six acres is immediately left of white vertical stripe almost in centre.



MAP 2. Sketch Map showing Footlands and Roman Road.

Rusty Brook valley. Six Acres field lies immediately to the west of Oast House Shaw

Patrick Roper - some background information

Patrick Roper has worked as a consultant ecologist since 1993 within his own business, Patrick Roper Associates, based in Sedlescombe, East Sussex. He is a doctor of business administration, an elected fellow of the Linnean Society and of the Royal Entomological Society and an elected member of the British Ecological Society. He was on the council of the British Entomological & Natural History Society from 2002 to 2004 and was a director of Butterfly Conservation and editor of its journal from 1990-1998. He is also on the council of the Sussex Amphibian & Reptile Group, edits their newsletter and has a great crested newt handling licence from Natural England (formerly English Nature).

He manages the Rare Species Inventory for the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre in a professional capacity and edits *Adastra*, their annual review of wildlife recording in Sussex. He has given expert ecological evidence to recent public inquiries on major developments in East and West Sussex. He is a listed surveyor for Farm Environment Plans with Natural England's Rural Development Service.

He works closely with the Woodland Trust, both professionally and as a volunteer, on management plans and environmental statements for a number of conservation areas in East Sussex including the recently acquired Brede High Woods, one of their largest properties. He was chosen as their Volunteer of the Year for South East England in 2008.

Dr Roper is the recorder for two-winged flies (Diptera) in East and West Sussex. He has also studied the wild service tree, *Sorbus torminalis*, for over 30 years during which time he coordinated the national survey of the species for the Botanical Society of the British Isles and the Biological Records Centre. He is author of a book on the tree published in May 2004 and a member of the Sussex Botanical Recording Society.

He is co-author of *Wooded Heaths in the High Weald*, a research report published by the Sussex Record Centre Survey Unit on behalf of the Weald Heathland Initiative (2004) and the subsequent paper *Ancient woodland or ancient heath? Re-examining the importance of wooded heaths in the Weald* (Proceedings of the 8th National Heathland Conference, 2004).

He runs courses and lectures on a variety of ecological and wildlife topics, has contributed refereed papers to a number of scientific journals and contributes to the Rye and Battle Observer newspapers. He was a member of the working party that revised the national Country Code in 1981 and a member of the committee for the establishment of Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs) in East Sussex.

He has appeared on wildlife programmes on radio and television on many occasions including the national 2007, 2008 and 2009 Springwatches on BBC television and The One Show.

Clients for ecological work have included: Beauport Park Hotel, BdR Engineering, Brighton City Council, Bullens, Calverley Park Association, Canopy, CCM, Earthscapes Ltd., Ecology Consultancy Ltd., Edburton Contractors, David I. Leigh Architects, G & F Pooke, Gemselect Ltd., Hastings Borough Council, Hawkins Brown, Hayland Developments Ltd., Helionix Designs, High Weald AoNB Unit, J & J Design, Kent Design Partnership, Lseed Ltd., National Trust, Oakdene Homes, Park Lane Homes (South East) Ltd., Robert D. Stokes, ROI Projects, Rother District Council, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Rye Harbour Nature Reserve, Simon Jones Associates Ltd., Southern Water, Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre, Sussex Wildlife Trust, Wardell Armstrong, Wealden District Council, Weekes Consulting, Westridge Construction Ltd., West Sussex County Council, The Wetland Trust, The Woodland Trust and WoodNet.

Many of these clients have returned several times with new commissions.

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