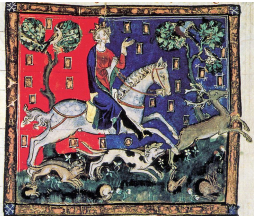


# Gillingham Royal Forest project takes root

Rachel Loos / 27th February 2017 / 0



King John hunting

In the early years of the 13th century King John was rather fond of hunting deer there and had a moated hunting lodge known as King's Court built to accommodate his visits. Meanwhile its mighty oak trees were used to build castles and monasteries right across the West country. Now within a few years the historic Gillingham Royal Forest may be restored to at least some of its former glory. A new plan by local conservation and community groups and planners aims to reconnect the area with its rich history and provide a location full of great rural walks, wildlife, trees and ponds on Gillingham's doorstep. The hope is that it will also bring in more visitors to the area and provide a boost for the rural economy.

The ancient Royal Forest lies to the east of the town and includes Motcombe and reaches the northern outskirts of Shaftesbury. To the north it stretches as far as White Hill, just below Mere, while to the south it goes down to the Sherborne Causeway on the A 30.

Emma Tomlin, a conservation officer at the Dorset Wildlife Trust, which is the lead organisation behind the project, says they hope to work with local landowners to plant new trees and perhaps new copses and even in some cases change the use of the land. 'Historically the landscape changed from medieval forest, and there were a lot more orchards in Dorset – they have been lost over time. If someone has a field and says they want to convert it into an orchard there are old orchards we can look at,' she says.

But she stresses that the aim is to work hand in hand with the landowners – most of whom are local farmers – to see what they would like. 'It's early days yet. It depends on the landowners, we need to go and talk to them to see what their aspirations are.'

We don't think it's going to be a tree to tree landscape like it was historically.'

The report proposing the Royal Forest project focusses on the different areas of benefit it could bring. One is the 'health, social and cultural well-being' that it will deliver to Gillingham's growing population as a destination for walks and perhaps, too, a bridal path circuit. 'As the population of Gillingham grows access to the countryside will become an important asset for improving public health in Gillingham,' says the report, which has been presented to Gillingham Town Council.

Royal Forest attractions could include venues and sports events, and there could be tie-ups with local schools on educational projects covering art, history, geography and biology.

Another area is the environment itself; the area is already home to otters, water voles, great crested newts and several species of bat. The Trust would also look at planting new trees to replace ash trees lost to disease and in places extending the woodland. Another potential objective is to improve water quality or reduce the run-off of nitrates and sediment by planting tree 'screens' that will act as a natural filter near the banks of streams and rivers, and also control the flow of water through the land to improve biodiversity.

A third aim is to help boost economic activity both for landowners and the wider rural community. 'For example, there could be people out there coppicing, creating bean poles. And if you make the area more important for countryside walks, for example, then you are bringing in people to see the area and landscape so you are supporting local cafés and coffee shops,' says Emma Tomlin. 'And if you do create an orchard then you might get in a bee-keeper.'

The project is being backed by local planning officials and at a meeting last month of the Gillingham Town Council's planning committee Robert Lennis, the district council's Senior Planning Officer (Major Projects), said that on his 'wish list' for the project were better screening along rivers and streams, extending copses in the landscape and potentially developing woodland pasture.

But he stressed there was more to the project than trying to get more trees into the landscape. 'It's also about trying to connect with the historical past and what was here, and trying to help the rural economy.'

Crucially, the supporters of the project know that for it to succeed they need to be able to get the cooperation of the people who own and farm the land. 'We have to work with them,' says Emma Tomlin, who says that at the end of March they will be holding a meeting in Motcombe to which they have invited local landowners in order to discuss their ideas for the forest project.

'King's Court and the Royal Forest may have faded into the rural scenery of north Dorset, but at the time of King John it featured prominently in the journeys made by itinerant monarchs across the south of England,' says Dr John Porter, the author of

books on the subject.

### **Royal Forest – a potted history**

- \* The Royal Forest in Gillingham was established after the Norman Conquest in 1066
- \* The forest measured 13.7 square miles or 8,800 acres
- \* Its boundaries were regularly surveyed and monitored in official ‘perambulations’
- \* The three official deer ‘walks’ were The Lawn Walk, The Clear Walk and The Woods End Walk
- \* King John was particularly fond of hunting in the forest and visited three times in one year
- \* Its oaks were used in many local buildings including Corfe Castle and Blackfriars priory in Gloucester
- \* Edward I is the last known monarch to have visited the forest
- \* The Royal residence, King’s Court, was demolished in the 14th century
- \* A map was drawn up of the forest in 1624
- \* In 1625 the area was ‘disafforested’ – meaning it was enclosed for use by private landowners – leading to local riots

For more information see ‘Gillingham’s Royal Forest: Discontent and Riot’ and ‘Gillingham’s Royal Forest – The Medieval Centuries’ by Dr John Porter or visit Gillingham Museum