INTRODUCTION

Individual surveys of sites are valuable as a starting point to understand the development of a woodland. However, bringing together different types of survey evidence with historical research enables a full and often detailed picture to emerge. Sites where documentary and landscape evidence can be integrated are more valuable still and can provide a biography of the landscape over several centuries. This helps to identify different phases and types of usage which can be set in context of the landscape and historical changes which took place over a wider area.

The following kinds of information can emerge from the documentary study of a landscape:

- Status or designation and changes in ownership. (Can it be classified as ancient?)
- The significance of boundaries and internal earthworks. (What phases of landscape use and management do they relate to? Are they related to management of a woodland/ parkland or of a non-woodland phase?)
- Has the shape and function of the areas changed? e.g. Woodland clearance(s) and woodland extension(s).
- Past management practices
- Clarification of the status of different tree species (Are they ‘exotic’ species for the area; has any planting taken place and of what species?).
- Markets for the wood, timber and other woodland products. (Who used them, what were they used for and where?).
- Other land-uses of parts of the study area. (Is there evidence for quarrying or mining; mill sites; or other settlements/ farms?)
- The relationship of trackways, routeways and settlements around and through the landscape. (Are they directly related to management and functions or incidental to these?)

PLANNING THE RESEARCH

It is worth contacting the landowner if historical research is planned as they could have details of where any estate archives are held. Below are some basic steps to help provide a structure for conducting the research. It is important to plan the research due to the wide range of sources which may be available and the key questions that you need to address to build up the biography.

Decide on the amount of time which can be spent on documentary research and what the budget might be. Depending on the location of the sources of information, there may be travel costs and, or costs for copying material.

Look on a modern map and note the nearest village and any place names or prominent features. These will help when looking through references and carrying out archival searches.

Consult the local library for any relevant publications, or guide books. The books may give sources of information which can be used as a starting point and some local libraries have their own
Choose a couple of types of information to focus on initially. Maps are an easy starting point as the series of Ordnance Survey maps go back to the mid-nineteenth century. Enclosure Award and Tithe maps may be available as may maps made for land surveys of estates or when railways, roads and canals were built.

Decide on a filing system and cross-reference to the survey evidence. Plan the visit to a library, archive centre or even the internet. Note opening times, membership and any rules or restrictions.

Finally try to stay focused on addressing your initial set of questions but note any points of interest for future investigation.

SOURCES OF RESEARCH MATERIAL

Archives and Record Offices are the official repositories for administrative, legal and estate records for counties or other large administrative districts. Records can include detailed estate accounts of woodland management over long periods.

Local Historic Environment Record Centres (H.E.R.) or County Archaeological Services should be able to provide records of archaeological finds within or near your woodland. They may also have some historical information or reports that have been compiled about the area. Biological Records Centres should hold some information about the wildlife and biodiversity within or near the woodland. These centres may be run by the Local Authority, a museum or another body.

Local Studies and reference sections in libraries are sources of printed materials such as books, pamphlets, newspapers and trade directories. They often also have maps, photographs and records such as for the population census.

Local authority planning or countryside departments may have management or conservation area plans which include historical, archaeological and ecological information. They may also have reports which give the results of specialist surveys. Local History, Archaeology, or Natural History Societies and Groups may provide a good starting point for finding out what is available as they may already have been gathering information which is relevant.

Local people and their personal recollections may be able to provide local knowledge about the history which has not been recorded because it is thought to be commonplace. They may also have photographs or documents which are part of their family collection but have added significance when researching woodland history.

Searching for information using the internet and specific websites has opened up the research possibilities. More collections of material can be used directly and organisations advertise what they have available on a visit.

USING THE INFORMATION

The first stage in using the information from documentary research and survey work is to collate the data and make an assessment of its reliability. This means looking at all the evidence gathered in a critical way, perhaps discarding some and putting a question mark against others for further investigation. It is good practice to get into the habit of doing this at an early stage, as is reviewing the information when new material comes to light. There will be a high degree of reliability in surveys where factual measurements and basic descriptions are involved. Where features are being interpreted initial reliability may be less without some background work.

Documentary and historical records may need to be interpreted cautiously. The documents were created for a particular purpose at a particular time with a meaning and significance which may not now be apparent and in language which is no longer familiar. Therefore, it is always better to have two or three different sources which can be cross-referenced and to think about the context in which the documents were compiled. It is important to understand the difference between primary and secondary sources and to try to use the former where possible.