

Selsdon Wood Nature Reserve history

Throughout the centuries, Selsdon Woods and Selsdon Farm have been linked together as one land holding, at one time, being church lands in the Croydon Hundred.

On Rocque's map of Surrey, dated 1762, Selsdon Farm is shown with its buildings occupying the present Selsdon Park Hotel site, whilst the bulk of the Nature Reserve and surrounding areas are indicated as woodland. By about 1815, Selsdon Farm had been rebuilt on the site fronting Addington Road. At this time the estate, comprising Selsdon Park, Selsdon Farm and Selsdon Woods, passed into the ownership of the Smith family, whose tenure was to hold sway until 1890.

Details of how the woods were managed in the 19th century are scant but certainly they would have been used for shooting purposes, being laid out with clearings and rides which can still be seen today. In 1890, Selsdon Park and farmlands, totalling 679 acres, was bought by W. Stevens and on his death it was sold to a W. Noakes, who was a brewer. It is well recorded that every year in November there was a grand shoot held on the occasion of Noakes' birthday and to keep the woodlands well stocked a game keeper was employed. There was a pheasantry nearby where the keeper would have raised the young birds prior to stocking the woodland.

On Noakes' death in 1923, the Selsdon Park Estate, as one entity, began to break up. The parkland and Selsdon Park buildings were sold as one lot to A.D Sanderson in 1925, and became a hotel in the same year. The remaining land, comprising Selsdon Farm and woodlands, appears to have been split up into several holdings. In 1924 much of the land was bought in several lots by A.E Cresswell and included Selsdon Wood, Hillocks Wood, Broom Wood, Broom Shaw. The Gorse, Stevens Larch and four parcels of arable land which represented most of the present Nature Reserve.

In May 1920, the Surrey Garden Village Trust Ltd. was registered and by 1924 had acquired Ashen Vale and Selsdon Vale Estates, comprising approximately 300 acres. The aim was to divide the land into small-holdings of half acre upwards for eventual sale as leasehold property. The target group was ex-servicemen, who having served King and Country, were entitled to a plot where they could make a living off the land. In practise the plots were too small, and the land unsuitable for growing crops.

In 1925 it was reported that "All principal timber, both in Lady Grove and Court Wood, had been removed...". Therefore moves were quickly made to protect the remaining area before the whole area was developed. It was not easy to raise the interest and funds needed and a lot of publicity was necessary to promote the campaign. Letters were sent to the local and national press and an appeal brochure was produced, enclosing a donation slip. Organised guided tours of the Wood were advertised and donations came in from all sources.

Although originally aimed at preserving 16 acres, the success of the original appeal quickly raised the ambitions of the committee, to a total of just under the 200 acres held today. Having raised enough support to buy the land the committee then had to consider its future survival as an open space and its maintenance. One obvious custodian was "The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty". However, being voluntarily supported, The National Trust was unwilling to accept further responsibilities without appropriate endowment funds to cater for future maintenance.

The dilemma was resolved by the maintenance becoming the joint responsibility of the Croydon Corporation and the Urban District Council of Coulsdon and Purley, with ownership being vested in The National Trust.

It was agreed that the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Percy Vincent who lived in Purley, should be asked to perform an official opening. The Lord Mayor attended the opening on 5th June 1936 and while making his speech said how much pleasure it gave him to open the reserve, which formed a link in the Green Belt encircling London and he congratulated the public-spirited people who had made it possible. The Lord Mayor then planted a tree in commemoration of the day.

Having successfully preserved the Woods the next priority was the management of the area, a Management Committee was formed and two keepers were appointed. Fencing construction, path repairs, water supplies and coppicing were gradually put in order.

The First World War did not greatly effect the woods, unfortunately the same cannot be said of the Second World War. The demand for wartime timber took its toll and these effects lasted well after the war had finished. Post war building-needs continued to eat into the reserves of standing timber, leaving many areas as scrubby thicket which was neither rich in trees nor wildlife.

In 1965 Local Government was re-organised and the two Councils amalgamated into the London Borough of Croydon. Following this change a complete survey was carried out by the Head Forester of the Parks Department with recommendations on suitable replanting, section by section. The proposals were accepted by the anagement committee and the first section was replanted in 1969.

Across the site there is considerable soil variation, with clay predominating over a chalk subsoil. A variety of trees have been planted in the woods including Beech, Oak, Sweet Chestnut, Larch and Norway Spruce. Growing amongst these trees there is also a great variety of other plants and in the spring the woods are well known for the carpet of Bluebells which cover the ground.

On the edge of one of the meadows is a shelter in memory of Malcolm Sharpe who was one of the main campaigners for the preservation of the woods (as well as several others such as Croham Hurst, Purley Beeches and Littleheath Woods).

Visitors to the site, once away from the main entrance, can easily forget that they are close to a town of over 320,000 inhabitants. The size of the area has also helped to retain the wildlife in the wood; nests and holes have be made amongst the vegetation away from the main footpaths.

Continued careful management of the site will ensure that the original aims of the people who purchased the Woods are fulfilled, to "...preserve for all time some of the glory of the Surrey countryside..."